

IN MEMORY

KEELY SMITH / 1928-2017

Vocalist was deadpan half of Louis Prima's lounge act

By Richard Sandomir
New York Times

Keely Smith, a smoky-voiced singer with a pageboy bob who emerged in the early 1950s as the deadpan half of a Grammy Award-winning lounge act with Louis Prima, the ebullient, frenzied bandleader who became her husband, died Saturday in Palm Springs, Calif. She was 89.

Her publicist, Bob Merlis, said the cause was probably heart failure.

Smith began singing with Prima in 1948, but it was not until a few years later, when they were appearing at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas, that they began to perfect their chemistry: Smith played the straight woman, offering little reaction except for rolling her eyes at Prima's exuberant singing, dancing and gesticulations.

Her coolness amid Prima's chaos cemented them as one of Las Vegas' premier attrac-

tions and foreshadowed the style of Sonny and Cher in the 1960s.

"Their act," Will Friedwald wrote in The New York Sun in 2005, "was a brilliant juxtaposition of maximalism and minimalism."

Smith explained that her stoicism came naturally; when she was not singing, she said, she had nothing to do but watch the gravel-voiced Prima's antics or the people entering and leaving the room.

There was some sassiness to her onstage persona. During a 1958 television appearance with Prima on the short-lived "The Frank Sinatra Show," Sinatra asked her what they were going to sing. "We?" Smith responded, having already jokingly told Sinatra that she did not need Prima.

"You and me," Sinatra said. "Oh, please," she said, "I work alone."

She would work alone after her divorce from Prima in

1961, but during their partnership they recorded three singles that reached the Billboard Hot 100: "That Old Black Magic," which rose to No. 18 in 1958 and won a Grammy Award for best performance by a pop vocal group or chorus; and, in 1959, "Bei Mir Bist Du Schon," which peaked at No. 69, and "I've Got You Under My Skin," which reached No. 95.

Dorothy Jacqueline Keely was born March 9, 1928, in Norfolk, Va., to Howard Keely and the former Fannie Stevens.

She began singing at age 11 on a children's radio show in Norfolk, and as a teenager she was singing with big bands for servicemen at local military bases. In summer 1947, on a trip to Atlantic City, N.J., with her stepfather and her brother, Norman, she saw a sign advertising an appearance by Prima and his orchestra.

She was mesmerized by

The green sea turtle can be found in oceans worldwide. They are strong swimmers that "fly" through the water using powerful paddle-like foreflippers and hindflippers. The average weight of an adult sea turtle is 330 lbs., with the length averaging 37 inches. Each year the female turtles leave the ocean and crawl on land to lay their eggs deep in the sand where they incubate. After about two months, up to 100 baby turtles hatch simultaneously and head directly for the ocean.

Paul Brent is an internationally recognized artist who is best known for his watercolors of coastal scenes and nature. His work is a reflection and reinterpretation of the environment from underwater scenes to backyard wonders. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, he is a member of the National Watercolor Society and currently resides with his family in Panama City, Florida.

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Keely Smith presents an award at the 50th Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. Smith, a pop and jazz singer known for her solo recordings of jazz standards, died Saturday.

his energy, humor and almost primitive charm. The next year, Prima and his orchestra performed at the Surf Club in Virginia Beach, where he announced that he was looking for a new female singer.

When it was Smith's turn to audition — as Dot Keely — she was barefoot and wearing a borrowed skirt.

"I started shaking," she said on the website of the Concord Music Group, for whom she recorded in her later years. "I said, 'No, no —

I can't do this.' But he talked me into doing it. I sang 'Embraceable You' and 'Sleepy-Time Gal,' and he hired me on the spot."

Smith wed Prima five years later, in 1953. He was nearly 20 years her senior and had been married three times.

They came to Las Vegas in its early years as an entertainment mecca. Big bands were fading. Smith and Prima were playing small clubs, barely making money, when the entertainment director of

the Sahara Hotel offered them a two-week engagement.

They opened in November 1954 (Smith was pregnant with their first child at the time), along with Sam Butera, a high-energy tenor saxophonist who arranged many of the band's songs.

They became a long-running Las Vegas success and made regular appearances on television and in nightclubs.

Smith had begun a solo career during their marriage when she recorded the album "I Wish You Love" (1957), arranged by Nelson Riddle. It began in earnest after their divorce, although it was interrupted for an extended period to raise her daughters. Sinatra signed her to his label, Reprise Records, and they recorded the duet "So in Love" in 1963, also arranged by Riddle.

Smith became a regular at Manhattan cabarets in the 1980s, singing selections from her years with Prima and from the songbooks of Sinatra, Count Basie, James Taylor and the songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

In addition to her brother, Smith is survived by daughters Toni and LuAnne Prima, and stepbrother Stephen Smith.