



That Old Black Magic: Louis Prima, Keely Smith, and the Golden Age of Las Vegas

Tom Clavin

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Both a love story and a tribute to the entertainment mecca, this exploration shines a spotlight on one of the hottest acts in Las Vegas in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The illuminating depiction showcases the unlikely duo—a grizzled, veteran trumpeter and vocalist molded by Louis Armstrong and a meek singer in the church choir—who went on to invent “The Wildest.” Bringing together broad comedy and finger-snapping, foot-stomping music that included early forays into rock and roll, Prima and Smith’s act became wildly popular and attracted all kinds of star-studded attention. In addition to chronicling their relationships with Ed Sullivan, Frank Sinatra, Robert Mitchum, and other well-known entertainers of the day—and their performance of “That Old Black Magic” at President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration—the narrative also examines the couple’s ongoing influence in the entertainment world. Running concurrent with their personal tale is their role in transforming Las Vegas from a small resort town in the desert to a booming city where the biggest stars were paid tons of money to become even bigger stars on stage and television.

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