



# You Call It Madness: The Sensuous Song of the Croon

*Lenny Kaye*

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**Crosby, Vallee, Columbo. They are their own trinity. Bing is the universal dad. Rudy the misbehaving son. *That leaves Russ. The holy ghost.***

New York, 1931: The curtain falls on the Ziegfeld Follies, a victim of the rising popularity of talking pictures; Rudy Vallee, radio's wildly popular "Vagabond Lover," worries that increasingly sophisticated microphones and Hollywood-minted heartthrobs will make his megaphone-amplified vocals passé; a pugnacious, hard-drinking baritone named Bing Crosby cleans up his act, preparing to take America by storm on CBS radio; and handsome twenty-three-year-old Russ Columbo, a former violinist dating a Ziegfeld girl, makes his debut on NBC radio.

In an America poised to take its dominant place on the world stage, the Crooner points the way forward. With his heated core of sex appeal wrapped in well-tailored layers of cool distance and cigarette smoke, the Crooner brings something new to the country's self-image: this is no Yankee-Doodle Dandy, but a suave and seductive figure, sophisticated as any European, flush with youthful strength and energy. It's all there in his voice, his croon: a soft, intimate, sensual form of singing that combines jazz sensibilities with the smooth and danceable rhythms of the Big Band sound and Swing.

But who would embody the new archetype? Vallee crooned too soon. That left Crosby and Columbo to duel it out over the airwaves. Hailed as "The Romeo of Radio" and "The Valentino of Song," romantically linked to actresses Pola Negri and Carole Lombard, Columbo is all but forgotten today, his limitless promise cut short in a tragic and controversial accident as he stood on the verge of winning the stardom that Crosby, his great rival, would soon achieve.

In this impressionistic tour-de-force—a musical history combining the drama of a bestselling novel and a soundtrack from the Golden Age of Broadway and Hollywood—master musician and critic Lenny Kaye trains a spotlight on Columbo while crooning a love song to an earlier America—a pitch-perfect evocation of one of the most romantic, creatively exuberant periods of our past—an era whose influence still burns brightly in the music and popular culture of today.

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