

Teen Idol

BY ROBERT
KIENER

The pompadour may be long gone, but the megawatt smile still dazzles and the voice still thrills. Paul Anka, the Ottawa-born superstar, racked up his first number one hit record with “Diana”—a song he wrote in 20 minutes—when he was just 16. More than half a century later, he is one of the highest-paid entertainers on the nightclub circuit. Unique among his fellow teen legends—the Frankies, the Bobbys, the Fabians—Anka made the difficult transition from bobby-soxer crooner to Las Vegas superstar.

WALDY MARTENS



As a singer-songwriter, Anka has few peers. In addition to a slew of teen hits, he also wrote Frank Sinatra's theme song, "My Way," the 1970s hits "(You're) Having My Baby" and "I Don't Like to Sleep Alone," as well as the theme for *The Tonight Show* ("It put my five kids through college," he jokes).

At last count Anka has recorded more than 124 albums and written over 900 songs. Not bad for a pudgy Ottawa kid who hit it big, thanks to what he calls "stupid little teenage songs."

RD | How have you survived so long?

Anka | Part of it is an enigma. You can work hard and you can be dedicated—and a lot of artists are—and if you stay tuned to an audience, the rest is really up to them. I believe and I trust my audience. But if it goes, what a ride!

RD | Does it take a while before you feel you've "got" the audience when you're on stage?

Anka | No. My whole theory is that I have to get a sense of them in three minutes. I walk in through the back door, right down into the audience. I want to get a feel for their enthusiasm, to know who's got the biggest smile. It's the quickest form of communication. I'm not the guy who has 20 bodyguards and is hiding, and all that stuff. I want them to know me; I want to be accessible to them, as my music has been.

RD | I notice you always touch people

when you go through the audience.

Anka | Oh, all the time. It's the polite thing to do. If you walk through an audience, you shake their hands. You have to have a human connection with people. The turnover in society is just so rapid! There's no longevity in anything anymore. If you don't become a franchised item that they feel they know, it's over! So it's very important to communicate.

RD | You once said "Diana" will always be a number one hit for you because you are performing it every night.

Anka | I don't retire the songs, I change the arrangements. The audience still hears what they've heard through the years, but it makes it fresher for us.

RD | You wrote "Diana" when you were 15?

Anka | Right, I was a teenager. I had a talent for writing. I kind of dabbled at the local newspaper because my neighbour was one of the editors—Mr. Finn, at *The Ottawa Citizen*. I wrote some short stories. Then I took piano and I'm writing these poems and I'm getting a little better at the piano. I took a poem about this girl I had a crush on, and started putting a melody to it. I started singing it at parties, at the choir and in stage productions, and saying, "Dammit, I like this thing."

I'm impersonating Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray and Elvis Presley. Someone says, "Get up" and I get up

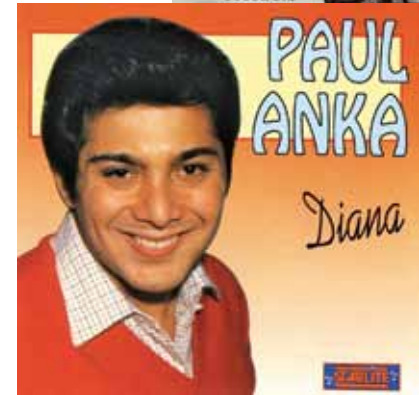
and they start applauding, and I think, Wow! I'm getting accepted.

RD | You knew, as a teen, that you had to look more like a "star," so you got plastic surgery on your nose.

Anka | I had a hockey-puck nose; it was busted. I started realizing that to last, you had to have a hit, but you also had to look good. I realized these kids wanted to look at something. I was overweight, so I started working out at the gym with a wrestler.

RD | What did growing up in Canada, having Canadian roots, give you?

Anka | There was a different empha-



“It's funny: No matter who you are and where you are in your career, you would always love to have another hit.”

sis on education, family, values and the growing-up process. It was a totally different environment than anywhere else. And I benefited from it. Our community was a tight community.

RD | You're just a teenager, you're touring America on a bus with other musicians, and some are doing heroin. But you didn't self-destruct. Was that linked to your upbringing?

Anka | Absolutely. No question about it. We were travelling eight, nine, 11

hours. These were not luxury buses like today. It was me sleeping in a luggage rack. There were individuals who conducted their lives very differently than I would conduct mine. There were choices: My God, do I want to be one of them? Do I want to do that stuff? Back then it was well hidden. But you saw people totally whacked out. I thought, People are liking my music and I'm not going to mess this up! And I'm not going to mess it up because I didn't mess up in Canada. I wasn't doing any stuff in

(DIANA ALBUM) STARTLITE RECORDS; (PAUL ANKA ALBUM) COLUMBIA RECORDS

Canada; I didn't know what that was! It wasn't around me. It wasn't in my school. My friends and I didn't do that on the weekend.

RD | Tell me about the night you saw someone knock out Frank Sinatra's teeth.

Anka | One night at the Sands Hotel, Frank wanted money to gamble. When he asked the casino for chips, someone told him, "Frank we can't give them to you. You haven't paid for the ones you took earlier." He freaks. He gets up on the blackjack table and starts shouting, "I made this place. I'll destroy this place! It was

Carl says, "Frank, you know we can't do it anymore." With that, Frank picks up this round table and he pours it onto Carl Cohen. Carl gets up and punches him right in the mouth, and Sinatra's teeth go flying all over the floor. They rush him out; they've got a private plane at the airport. They fly him to a dentist in L.A. to get new teeth. [Laughs.]

RD | Do you ever consider yourself the last of a breed?

Anka | Last of a breed? Hmm. I'd like to know what that breed is. [Laughs.]

Am I a breed? I'm an entertainer. A songwriter.

“I'm not the guy who has 20 bodyguards. I want my fans to know me; I want to be accessible to them, as my music has been.”

sand before you built it, and it will be sand when I'm through with it!"

I'm sitting there, going, "That's my boy. Oh, man, do I like this guy! This guy has no fear! I love this man."

So finally they get him to come off the table. Remember, this is in the middle of the casino, and Jilly Rizzo, who worked with him, said, "Carl Cohen wants to talk to you, Frank." Carl Cohen, the casino manager, was the most mild-mannered, sweetest guy you'd ever want to meet. Frank starts with, "I want money, I want my markers..."

RD | Could Paul Anka make it today as a teenage recording artist?

Anka | Why not? I think about it all the time. What would Paul Anka write if he were 17 today, with the same kind of energy and drive?

RD | What *would* Paul Anka be writing today? Rap?

Anka | No, he'd be like Justin Timberlake if he were starting today.

RD | What about today's music? Who appeals to you?

Anka | The music industry today is a



FERENC SZELEPCSENYI/GETSTOCK

Paul Anka: Advice for Justin Bieber



PAUL ANKA



JUSTIN BIEBER

You've often been compared with our newest Canadian teen idol, Justin Bieber. Do you have any advice for him?

"I would tell him to be very, very careful about whom he is listening to, and not get involved with drugs or any kind of bad habits; they will ultimately overtake you. That's something he has to stay very clear of. My Canadian upbringing helped me, and I hope it's instilled in him. So as his success grows and broadens, he should try to stay close to that centre line in life, remembering where he came from and keeping his nose to the grindstone. It's a question of longevity."

What do you mean by longevity?

"Justin has to have his antenna up and be really careful of whom he trusts and, importantly, the schedule they make him keep. You cannot succumb to pushing yourself too

hard, to the point that it infringes on your throat, your health, all of that stuff that comes into play when people are greedy and it's push-push-push. You have to have time off to stay in tune with your body. Remember, you are a product, a brand name, and you have to protect it. Your asset is that little two- or three-square-inch area under your chin: your vocal cords."

What about girls?

"What about girls! Relationships are tough in our industry. It's tough to weed out why the girls are there, what they're there for, what they're attracted to. They have to discover you, who you are, and not what the name is. At his age, he has to go through a lot of experiences to get to 'the one.'"

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

A look at the two pop sensations, then and now

BY BRUCE WARD

JUSTIN BIEBER	PAUL ANKA
SHOW ME THE MONEY	
By the end of his 2010 "My World" tour, Justin Bieber had grossed tens of millions from ticket sales and merchandise, including CD and digital sales, and concert revenues.	Paul Anka grossed \$1.5 million in 1959, making him one of the most successful singer-songwriters in showbiz. By the age of 18, he had sold 12 million records.
STAR QUALITY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE	
Bieber has a "swagger coach," who "kind of teaches me; he helps me to stay swaggerific," the singer says.	Anka found his own coach. Tony Bennett once told an interviewer about a nervy kid who was at every show he gave at a Hull hotel in the mid-1950s. It was Anka. "I want to learn from you, because I'm going to be a singer," he told Bennett.
ON THE ROAD	
Bieber's gear is transported by nine transport trucks. Tour personnel travel on 11 buses.	When Anka was on tour in the 1950s, he travelled with suitcases packed with stage clothes and toiletries.
THE HAIR	
Bieber's former side-swept hairstyle was widely copied by teenage boys. Bieber kept it looking puffy and perfect with the help of top stylists armed with hair dryers and gel products.	Anka wore his hair in a pompadour, swept straight back from his forehead—sort of like John Travolta in <i>Grease</i> , sans the furry sideburns. It was held in place with Brylcreem.
THE BIG BREAK	
At 12, Bieber uploaded a video of himself singing in a local talent contest onto YouTube. Music marketer Scooter Braun stumbled upon him—along with millions of young girls—and signed him immediately.	Paul Anka left for New York with "a hundred bucks and tons of Brylcreem," he once joked. With a bottomless belief in himself and four songs he had written, he got a contract with ABC-Paramount Records.
PR SAVVY VS. TECH SMARTS	
Bieber has 9.4 million Twitter followers. "He's talking to millions of girls," says manager Scooter Braun. "What other way is a teenage boy going to talk to girls?"	After he hit the big time, Anka sent Christmas cards to influential DJs. He also kept in touch by phone, chatting up columnists. He figured journalists were the best way to keep in touch with his fans.

(ANKA) ARCHIVES DU 7ÈME ART/GETSTOCK; (BIEBER) MICHAEL BUCKNER/GETTY

little different than it was. It's in two parts for me. There's what I call "the entertainment abuse of capitalism noncontent side of it." What I mean is that there's a marketing of sexuality, navels, busts—form over content, with so-so singers. Out of that group, Christina Aguilera can sing. And I'll stop at that.

And then there's the other part, where you have good content, where you have talented people such as Sting, Elton John, Whitney Houston, Sade, Billy Joel, Creed, Limp Bizkit. Even some rap, if you can look at it as a musician, has some quality to it. Some Eminem is brilliantly done. Dr. Dre. Some of that—it may not be your cup of tea—but you can respect its content and what's put into it, the musicality of it.

RD | Have artists come to you for advice?

Anka | I worked with Michael Bublé, John Prine and Steve Goodman. You want to pass it on and help young performers. You want to give them knowledge like it was given to you.

RD | Looking back, was there a useful lesson you learned?

Anka | I learned early in life not to be afraid to fail. It's been a philosophical guideline for me throughout my life.



readersdigest.ca/july

Bieber Fever or Beatlemania: How do today's young people and their obsession with pop culture compare with the previous generation's admiration for teen idols?

Absolutely. You cannot be afraid to fail.

Once I got my arms around that as a youngster and for about three or four years in my career, I wasn't afraid to make choices. I wasn't afraid to make changes. I wasn't afraid to say, "This teenage thing has got to end, and I'm not afraid to do a nightclub act and go into nightclubs. I'm not afraid to compete with those guys in Vegas. We're not creating a cure for cancer here. This is show business. It has to be fun; it has to be a business. But don't be afraid to fail; take those chances. Find out who you are.

RD | Do you still desire another big hit, another number one?

Anka | Sinatra and I always used to talk about that. It's funny: No matter who you are and where you are in your career, you would always love to have another hit.

I can make a lot of money, but I'll still sit there and in the back of my mind, think, I gotta make one more record.

HENCE, THE PROBLEM

I showed my wife a newspaper article about how getting plenty of rest can improve one's memory. She remarked sadly, "I can't remember the last time I had a good night's sleep."

R. Cheetham