



# The Per Niente



Per Niente Club

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He was "The Romeo of Song," "The Singing Valentino," and "Radio's Revelation." From 1931 until 1934, he, Bing Crosby, and Rudy Vallee were crooning rivals for the public's attention. His incredible talent encompassed recordings as a violinist and vocalist, radio, and ultimately the brink of film stardom. His records are considered musical standards of the 1930s. He was romantically linked to a former Miss Universe, a screwball comedienne, and the older sister of one of Hollywood's top stars. He was a comet in the entertainment industry for a three-year period, illuminating Los Angeles' Cocoanut

Grove nightclub, Brooklyn's Paramount Theater, Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and entertainment giants NBC, RCA, and Universal Pictures. But like a comet, he passed through our universe all too quickly.

## From Camden to Hollywood

Russ Columbo was born January 14, 1908, in Camden, New Jersey, the twelfth child of Italian immigrants Nicola and Giulia (aka Nicholas and Julia). He was christened Ruggiero Eugenio di Rodolpho Colombo. Legend places his birth in San Francisco or Philadelphia, but his death certificate states New Jersey. The Colombo family moved back to Philadelphia when Ruggiero was about five years old, and when he was eight headed west to California, residing in the San Francisco and Calistoga areas before moving to Los Angeles. All news accounts identify the young Ruggiero Colombo as a child prodigy, mastering the violin at the age of five, and his family's frequent movement was said to allow Ruggiero the opportunity to continue his violin studies under the tutelage of Alexander Bevani. At the age of 13, "Russ" made his professional debut at the Imperial Theater in San Francisco. The abbreviated "Russ" came from a childhood friend's inability to fully pronounce Italian. In 1931 the second "o" in his last name was replaced with the more phonetic "u." This gave rise to the legend that Russ was a direct descendant of Christopher Columbus.

In 1925, at the age of 17, Russ Columbo left Belmont High School in Los Angeles (where he had been first violinist in the school orchestra). He began traveling as a paid musician with various orchestras, as well as performing "atmospheric" music on the set of silent films. Russ met exotic film star Pola Negri in this fashion, and stated in an interview, "fell head over heels for her." Columbo traveled the local ballroom circuit, appearing at the Mayfair Hotel, opening the Hotel Roosevelt in Hollywood with the Professor Moore orchestra in 1927, and ultimately Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel where, in 1928, Columbo became a member of Gus Arnheim's Cocoanut Grove orchestra. Ironically, Russ Columbo would later replace Bing Crosby as the featured vocalist when the latter went to New York to pursue a radio and recording career. Russ Columbo would follow, but not until 1931.

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