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MAGAZINE

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The Greatest Stories NEVER TOLD

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just one of those things

by Bill Boggs

The inside story of how a New York talk-show host landed Frank Sinatra's first-ever television interview.

On the wall of my den there is a photograph taken in 1975 on the set of my show *Midday Live with Bill Boggs*. I'm with one of my all-time favorite entertainers. Because this guest, who was an international superstar and one of the twentieth century's cultural icons, had never before appeared on a talk show, his appearance on the program made news around the world. He was one of those types who didn't "do" interviews. So why did Ol' Blue Eyes agree to come on my show, a local gig on Channel 5 in New York?

The answer is quite simple. In my years on the air, some of the biggest stars I've interviewed came on my programs not because some talent coordinator hounded them, but because of my contact with them in a social setting.

John Belushi and I happened to be dancing next to one another at Studio 54 one night in 1977 when he asked me who was scheduled to be on my show the fol-

lowing day. I told him we had David Brenner, Michael O'Donoghue and Steve Allen. Belushi's jaw dropped. As it turned out, he loved Steve Allen. So I invited the *Saturday Night Live* actor to join us on the show, too. He gave me his number and said, "Call me in the morning, and keep calling no matter what." As requested, I called him the next day to wake him. After answering with a terse, groggy grunt, he hung up. We repeated this game several times in a row, with him cursing me out each time. I eventually gave up, but in the end, he surprised me and arrived on the set right before we went on the air. The show ended with him knocking over a table with plants on it and water flying in all directions. We all had a riotous time.

Meeting Sinatra was a dream, because I'd been a fan for years. I first saw him at the fabled 500 Club in Atlantic City, N.J., when I was a teenager. He was appearing in a wildly sold-out, one-week engagement. I was working as a



To get into Frank Sinatra's sold-out performance at the 500 Club in Atlantic City, a teenage Boggs dressed as a busboy and entered the Club through the exterior kitchen door. Once the show started, he ditched the duds and watched Ol' Blue Eyes with admiration and awe.



bellhop in nearby Ocean City and was fascinated by the near-hysteria that some of the hotel guests were displaying in their desire to get to see the show. On a dare, a friend and I—dressed as busboys—sneaked in through the rear of the 500 Club, via the kitchen door. We found our way to the right place and wedged through the crowd right into the showroom. People were starting to fill the room for the second show, so we moved around, stopping now and then pretending to set up tables. When the performance started, we took off our white busboy jackets, put on ties and stood by a column about twenty feet from the stage. Sinatra was mesmerizing. He was singing with real

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emotion and I could feel it. He seemed to be the quintessentially confident man who magically had all those smoking and drinking adults fixated on him. The songs he was singing seemed to be a preview of what adult life might be like. He and his music became very important to me. That's how I got hooked on Frank Sinatra.

Many years later, in April 1975, four months into my career as a talk-show host in New York, I was at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas when I bumped into Sinatra's close friend Jilly Rizzo. When Jilly asked me if I wanted to meet Frank, I jumped at the chance. He told me to swing by the lounge around 4 a.m.

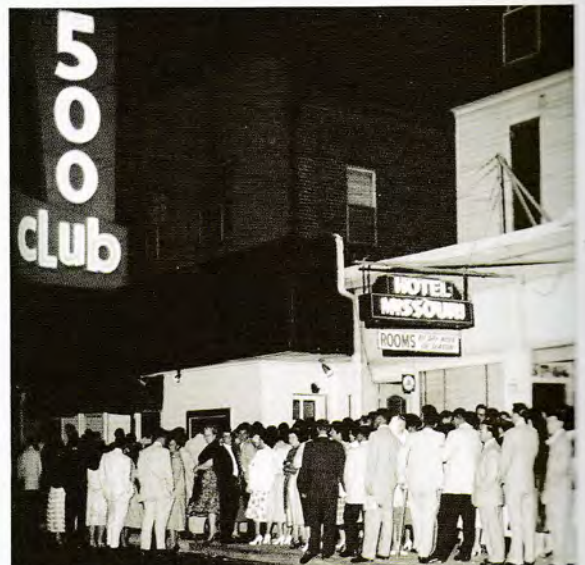
Frank and I made an immediate connection. I told him all about my night at the 500 Club, that my mother had been a bobby-soxer outside New York's Paramount Theater, and how much his music meant to me. After we were together for about ten minutes, Frank said, "Jilly tells me you have a show in New York on five. I'm going to be at the Uris [now the George Gershwin Theatre] in September with Ella and Basie. I don't want to promise anything, but maybe I'll

drop by and do your show."

My immediate reaction was to tell him I never expected him to make such an offer and that I wouldn't feel badly if it didn't work out. Frank looked at me with real warmth in his eyes and said, "I know, Bill. I know. You're not asking for anything. But maybe I'll come by. We'll see."

The months passed. He played the Uris. I saw a few of the shows and one day his office called with the message that he wanted to come by to do my

The wait for entry at the 500 Club could be lengthy, but the entertainment was always worth it. Among the performers who graced the stage were Sammy Davis, Jr., Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis and, of course, Sinatra.



program, but that the live time was too early. (Sinatra was a night owl and liked to stay up to watch the sun rise before turning in.) Could our interview be taped, they wondered? I said yes immediately. As it happened, he wound up giving *Midday* the longest television interview he would ever do. (He later appeared on the *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and on *Larry King Live*, but those interviews were shorter.)

During the sit-down, we talked about his leaving home after a tiff with his father and packing a suitcase for New York. He discussed his breath control, and how he swam underwater to develop his lung power and how even at age 60 he was still swimming primarily underwater. He talked at length about how he prepared a piece of music, using "Send in the Clowns" as an example. He explained that he approached lyrics like he would the verses of a poem and then tried to place himself in the mind of a person who was actually experiencing what the song was about.

When the interview was said and done, I reflected on the fact that Frank


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had given me a gift by coming to do the show. He had met me, liked me, felt comfortable with me and saw me as somebody who appreciated him. The hour-long interview reflected that, according to people who knew Frank well. "You got him talking," they said, "He was relaxed." His newsmaking appearance helped establish me—in my first year in New York—as a successful television interviewer.

My show ran for another eleven years. We had the requisite visiting

celebrities plugging movies—Jack Lemmon, Christopher Reeve, Jane Fonda, Sean Connery, Natalie Wood; the singers promoting shows—Bing Crosby, Peggy Lee, Sammy Davis, Jr.; rock stars—Little Richard, Santana, Frank Zappa, David Bowie; and some of the greatest chefs in the world. But my favorite among them and among the thousands I've interviewed was Sinatra.

Beyond all the excitement surrounding Frank's visit to my show, the real reason that he's my favorite guest is that in the years after the interview, I continued to get to know him. In spending time with him, I found that he always had something to say that had real meaning for me.

Most notably, in recalling the drastic down period in his life and career, when most people thought he was washed up, he said, "you know, maybe sometimes in life you have to scrape bottom in order to understand how really wonderful life can be." Next time you're in a crisis, hold on to those words from Frank; I've found them to be right for me every time. 



In 1975, Sinatra sat down with Bill Boggs for his first-ever (and ultimately, his longest) talk-show interview. No word on what he thought of the shag wall-hanging that adorned the set.