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Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture

PRAEGER

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Essays
on an
American
Icon

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A Kid in Line Who Made It Backstage

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Anse Chastanet Hotel, St. Lucia—I'm sitting on a lounge under a thatched hut looking at the sun sparkle on the sea. I've just removed the small Walkman speakers from my ears as the audience applause started to fade after Frank Sinatra's last number on the *December Down Under* CD, which was recorded on the evening of December 2, 1961, in Sydney, Australia. It's one of the best recordings of a Sinatra live performance I've ever heard.

The air here is sweet from the rain forest, and the blue sky is as cloudless today as it was yesterday. The only sound I hear is the quiet rhythm of the sea playing with sand. I'm in paradise, but, ironically, if I could be beamed up the way they do on *Star Trek*, I'd be happier to be in a smoke-filled saloon anywhere in the world . . . if I could see Frank Sinatra in person just one more time.

Not that I haven't witnessed my fair share of performances. By my best estimate, I figure I've seen about a hundred and fifty shows spread out from August of 1960 at the 500 Club in Atlantic City to one of Frank's final performances thirty-four years later at the Sands Hotel in the same town. To think I did all that.

I saw the swaggering, macho, intimidating Sinatra of the sixties—the one who snapped the microphone cord like a bullwhip—slowly evolve into the white-haired performer of the nineties—the one who held a golden wireless mike and expressed misty-eyed gratitude for the cheers at the close of his

shows. The audiences and Frank, I think, found it harder and harder to say goodbye. And why not?

Sinatra's audiences shared a collective loyalty, not unlike patriotism, from all the past individual associations with his songs. Whether he was singing about romping through the meadows picking flowers or losing love and sucking up the third drink too many, he brought the audience's energies to a common point. The Voice—sometimes a whisper, sometimes a territorial roar—held tender memories.

Seeing Frank Sinatra in person gave me a fix, like a junkie. I got high on all those autobiographical associations that I had with the songs and that Frank himself had with the songs. I needed that heart-pounding feeling before the start of a show. I craved the tingle from feeling the vibrations coming from the stage, because part of Sinatra's great success is that he exudes uncommonly powerful energy from his body. You can't get it by watching him on TV or listening to recordings. You have to be in his presence to feel it. The United States Marines call that quality "command posture." It's a term they reserve for the rare leader whose physical presence and personal authority dominate others in a group. When Frank Sinatra appeared on stage he conveyed all that concentrated power. He was a force, a hearable presence, even in silence. Combine the charisma with his voice, dramatic acting ability, a full orchestra, and some of the greatest songs of the twentieth century, and wowie! You're in for a show!

My love of seeing Frank Sinatra perform live started for me as a teenage caper, when I dressed as a busboy and sneaked into the "500 Club" in Atlantic City. Frank's show didn't start for an hour after I got in, so I set up tables and kept roaming around so as not to arouse suspicion. When Frank came on he transformed a rowdy group of drinkers and smokers into one utterly attentive audience. I watched from just a few feet away and fell in love with him, with his artistry and the feeling of being transported into the ebb and flow of the emotions in each song. I was happily hooked. Ever after, being right there in the same space with Frank always lifted my spirits. After watching some of the later-day shows of the early 1990s, I said that watching him perform was like going to church. My perceptions of Frank's life and the way he lived it became intermingled with my sheer love of the music.

As a young man I believed there were lessons to be learned from Frank. As an older man now, I know that his inspiration to me far transcends the music. I found a role model who was steamroller ambitious and a man who was in control of his own destiny. I needed the influence of someone who spoke his mind directly and appeared to be honest in his dealings with others. I liked the idea of a man who goes after the woman he wants. Frank was someone who'd known pain and used the experience to grow. That inspired me not to be too afraid of the darkness that entered my life at times. Frank is a man who will tell you that you have to scrape bottom

to really appreciate living. Knowing about his tenacity, his belief in himself and his comeback, I found a source of inspiration, especially when I was near the bottom a couple of times. Above all, I admired Frank Sinatra as a man who liked to have fun. He said, "Live each day like it might be the final day."

I can state, without hesitation, that some of the greatest fun I've had in my life came when I went to see Frank perform. I can assemble a mental montage of the shows and the venues over the years:

- Frank sharing the bill with Lena Horne at Carnegie Hall with Nelson Riddle conducting and Martin Luther King speaking at intermission.
- The balmy summer evening at the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium when the audience applauded his breath control at the beginning of the song "Don't Worry 'Bout Me."
- The wild night when I first saw Frank in Las Vegas. I sat ringside at Caesar's Palace with Ed McMahon and three marines in full dress uniforms whom Jilly Rizzo invited to the show at the pool that day. Ed outdrank all three marines.
- I remember many shows from Radio City Music Hall but particularly one with New York Governor Hugh Carey in the audience and Frank blasting "New York, New York" as his opening and getting a standing ovation at the top of the show.
- There was a long, cold night in the back of a limo when Sylvia Syms, television producer Richard Dubin, and I went from Manhattan to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to the Latin Casino to see Frank's late show. Frank was sensational, and he really turned up the heat when he spotted Sylvia ringside. She was on her feet cheering for half of the show.
- I'll never forget the Mother's Day Sunday afternoon when I took my mother (a former bobby-soxer) to the Valley Forge Music Fair and the beautiful Barbara Sinatra graciously introduced her to Frank in his dressing room. My mother said, "Thanks for the music; it's helped us over some of the hard times." Frank gave her a hug, and she squealed like a teenager. Afterward, when we took our seats, she said, "I'm one of the kids in line who made it backstage."
- Years later I took my mother and girlfriend Ishbel Burnet to London, where we saw Frank's opening night at Royal Albert Hall. It was an uncommonly hot spring evening, and, unfortunately, Frank was wearing a heavy three-piece tuxedo. During the show, my mother said that she felt sorry for the seventy-seven-year-old singer working in the heat. The next day one London newspaper ran a

large color picture of a dripping Sinatra with the caption “Heavy-weight Goes the Distance.”

- At Carnegie Hall, I watched three of my guests—jazz piano great Walter Bishop, Jr., rocker Ian Hunter, and fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields—sink back in their seats after giving Frank a standing ovation for a panoramic interpretation of the ballad “Autumn Leaves.”
- At the Uris Theater (now the Gershwin) with Count Basie in 1975, Frank sang a particularly rousing interpretation of “Nice ’n’ Easy.” I can vividly recall one person leaping to his feet and delivering a solo standing ovation. It was Elton John.
- After another performance at the Uris during that same gig, I went back to Frank’s dressing room and met Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who’d been in the audience as Sinatra’s guest. I said, “Wasn’t the show wonderful?” And she gave me a terrific, wide-eyed, little-girl reply: “Don’t you wish it was just starting all over again!”

I wish the whole adventure of seeing Frank was starting all over again for me. It’s been a thrilling ride. I went from being the kid who sneaked into a nightclub dressed as a busboy to being the first person ever to interview Sinatra on a daytime talk show.

But the first time I ever spoke to Frank Sinatra was several years before I even began my career as a television host and producer. The year was 1965, and Frank was to open at the Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach. This was to be his first appearance on the East Coast in a couple of years, in fact, the first since my friend Norman Steinberg and I had shaken hands at the end of the summer of 1963 and made a pact: “If Frank ever comes East, no matter where we are, we’ll go to see him.” After that, Norman and I went in different directions. By 1965, I’d finished college and was working as a writer in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Norman was in basic training for the Army someplace in the deep South. As soon as I heard about the show, I sent a letter to the maitre d’ at the hotel with some cash as a “tip” in an effort to get a reservation. Norman wrote to say that the date of Frank’s opening night coincided with his last day of basic training. We were going. The only problem was that, after sending even more “tips,” I’d gotten no answer from the hotel, and we had no reservation for the show. I called and was told that the engagement was sold out.

I packed two white busboy jackets just in case we’d need them. We wouldn’t. Norman and I got in the line for the early show. When the captain asked for our names, I told him I was the person who’d written him and mailed the tips. He said, “You came! And this is your friend who is just getting out of the Army.” “That’s it. We’re here,” I replied. He snapped his fingers and showed us to a ringside table. The show featured

Joe E. Lewis as the opening act, and young Quincy Jones served as Frank's conductor. How happy do you think we were? But it gets better.

After the performance, we learned from a couple of girls who were singers in the lounge that the man himself would be partying that night. Frank was set to host a small group in the Mona Lisa Room around two in the morning. "Was the room open to the public?" we asked. "Yes" was all we needed to hear. So a few minutes before two, Norman and I took seats at the bar. The only other people in the place were a honeymooning couple a few stools away. At two on the dot, Frank arrived with eight people including Bill Miller, his pianist. There was Frank having dinner, just a few feet away! Norman and I ordered two Jack Daniels mists and casually watched. The honeymoon couple stayed put. At one point, Jackie Gleason waltzed through the room, greeted Frank, and then headed off.

Around three-fifteen, the unimaginable happened. A baby grand piano was wheeled near the table and a lighted candelabra placed on it. Bill Miller got up and played. Then, a singer ambled over to the piano, and, with the candlelight glowing on the side of his face, Frank Sinatra closed his eyes and started "The Girl Next Door." The first thing that struck me was the muscularity of his voice, unamplified by a microphone. It seemed that he was singing to himself, not performing at all, and he was very intense. When the song was over and we applauded, he appeared slightly embarrassed that he'd become so wrapped up in his own feelings. He sang "Little Girl Blue" next, and at one point needed a line of the lyric. From my perch on the barstool, I gave it to him. He was singing brilliantly. Next he wove his way through "My Funny Valentine." His last song was "Violets for Your Furs," and again I pitched in a needed lyric.

Frank walked back to his seat at the table while we were still applauding. Norman and I shook hands again. The honeymoon couple had their mouths wide open. In a few minutes it was evident that the party was breaking up, and so Norman and I left the Mona Lisa Room to watch Frank and his guests depart. As Frank walked past me, I said, "Thanks for the singing." And he said, "That was fun, wasn't it?" And that's the first time I spoke to Frank Sinatra.

The next time was also around four in the morning. It was on Easter Sunday, ten years later, at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. How did I get to meet Frank Sinatra in Las Vegas? Well, I can say with certainty that I was introduced to Frank in the way I was that night because of events that took place at the University of Pennsylvania in the spring of 1967.

At the time I was Assistant Dean of Men at Penn, while also managing the comedy team of Tom Patchett and Jay Tarses. One afternoon, I had a phone call from Ken Roberts, who has since gone on to become a radio mogul. Back then, he'd created University Concert Productions, one of the first organizations to book big-time acts on university campuses. He called to see if there was interest in having Sammy Davis, Jr., at Penn. My fellow

deans and I agreed that Sammy would be an excellent attraction, but the student board wanted absolutely nothing to do with Sammy. They turned him down in favor of some white-bread folk act.

Now normally that would have been it—no Sammy Davis, Jr., at Penn. However, I pressed on because I thought it would be good for both the university and the city of Philadelphia to have Sammy come to town. To make it happen, I enlisted the help of another dean, Paul Hiller, and together we went to the Interfraternity Council to stage the show. The fraternity men loved the idea, particularly of having the opportunity to outshine the student board and their spring event. And even though the Interfraternity Council had never staged an event of this kind in its ninety-year history, they put up the money to book Sammy.

For my ground-breaking actions, I found myself in the middle of an ugly political battle with the student board and many of its patrons on the faculty. I stuck to my guns and the show was staged at the Palestra. It got rave reviews. Somehow, Ken Roberts got word of my strong stand for Sammy, and we became good friends. A couple of years later Ken introduced me to his and Frank Sinatra's mutual friend, Jilly Rizzo, and, a couple of years after that, it was Jilly who presented me to Frank.

There have been many seemingly mystical coincidences related to Frank and his music in my life. Certainly meeting him that Easter Sunday morning in Las Vegas and his subsequent appearance in 1975 on my television program was just one of them. By the time I met Frank, I was well established in my career on television, hosting a show called *Midday Live with Bill Boggs*, which aired on WNEW-TV in New York City. In fact, it is likely that I would not have gotten my job on that show in New York were it not for a coincidence related to one of my trips to see Sinatra perform. The previous year I was hosting and producing a show in High Point, North Carolina, called *Southern Exposure with Bill Boggs*. I heard that Frank was going to be appearing at the Spectrum in my hometown of Philadelphia, so I got tickets and flew up for the Saturday night show. That afternoon, while walking across Chestnut street, I bumped into Judy Licht, who worked at WNEW-TV. Judy told me to call a man named Noble to see if I could audition for the *Midday* show. I made the call, did the audition, and got the job. If I hadn't seen Judy on my way to see Frank, I would have taken an offer on the table to host a program in Miami, Florida.

I went to Las Vegas that Easter weekend at the suggestion of a girlfriend who lived in Los Angeles. She called to say that both Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley were performing in Vegas on the very weekend when she'd be celebrating her birthday. She wanted to meet there and see both shows on the same night, and we did.

Before I left on the trip, I told Paul Noble that I was going to meet Frank Sinatra over the weekend and that Frank would say he'd appear on *Midday*. I assume Paul thought I was nuts. But I'd been having recurring

dreams for years that I was sitting having a conversation with Frank, and, two days before leaving for Vegas, I had such a dream again. I took it to be an omen of things to come, and it was exactly that.

My friend and I saw Elvis in the early show and Frank at the late show. When my date retired at about two in the morning, I set out somehow to meet Frank. As I had ten years before at the Eden Roc, I'd heard that he was supposed to be hanging out at a particular lounge at Caesar's. At around 3:30 A.M., I saw Jilly, who'd been helpful in getting us excellent ringside seats for the show, and we talked for awhile. Jilly asked if I would like to say hello to Frank, and, of course, I said yes. He told me to come back at around four, and so I walked around for a little while, concentrating on my deep feelings for Frank. I remembered how I used to listen to him on *Your Hit Parade* on a tiny white Bendix radio when I was a little boy.

We met leaning over the rail of a lounge. And the first thing I said was, "Thanks for all the great music you've put in my life." I told him the busboy story. He told me how he felt he was doing on his way back from his retirement. "The whole thing dropped," he said, referring to his voice, "and now I'm fighting my way back." I told him how much I thought audiences liked the song "Cycles," and he said that they still had it in the performance book. We talked about other things, too, like the fact that my date had passed out from drinking too much and that I thought Elvis looked unwell.

After a little more conversation, he said, "Jilly tells me you've got a show on [channel] five in New York. I'm going to be in town this fall. I'm not promising anything, but maybe I can come by and do your show." I replied, "That would be great, but I'm not asking for anything." He looked me straight in the eye and said simply, "I know that."

We never discussed it any further. Seven months later, his lovely secretary Dorothy called to make the arrangements, and it happened! For me, the experience of sitting down and talking with Frank Sinatra on television was straight out of the song "Where or When," which addresses the idea that things that seem to have happened before were happening all over again.

For years people have asked me how I got Frank Sinatra to do my talk show. If I think they couldn't understand the real answer, or if I didn't like the way they asked me in the first place, I'd give a joke response like "I made him an offer he couldn't refuse . . . a year's free meals at Pizza Hut." Certain people would not appreciate the purity of the truth, and I didn't want to waste its intimacy on them. But since you have this book and are reading this article, I'll tell you clearly why it happened. It was quite simple. When he met me, he knew that I loved him.

On a Sunday in early November 1992, Frank Sinatra did a rare matinee performance at Radio City Music Hall. It was a make-up date for a show that had been canceled because of his illness. That afternoon, the audience

had a particularly interesting buzz—there were many children in attendance. Among them was my seven-year-old son Trevor.

After Shirley MacLaine finished the first half of the show, there was a racehorse-like rush by many people backstage to say hello to “Mr. S” before his performance. I joined the pack and somehow, together with Trevor’s mother, the actress Linda Thorson, made it over several hurdles to meet the man backstage. When we showed up, Frank was on his way to the stage but had stopped to have his picture taken with someone’s fluffy white dog. (It’s never exactly like you think it’s going to be backstage anywhere.) After the flash popped and Frank handed the startled dog back to its glowing owner, I had the opportunity to do something that was very important to me—introduce my son to Francis Albert Sinatra. I seized the moment and said, “Frank, Linda and I would like you to meet our son, Trevor.” Frank, wearing a dark suit and tangerine-colored shirt, studied Trevor and beamed at us, “He’s marvelous, just marvelous.” Then he slowly bent over, looked Trevor in the eye, and said, “Never get old. Never get old.”

With the gift of good health and some luck, I hope that my son will live a very long life. I see him near the end of the twenty-first century recalling that long-ago day when he met Frank Sinatra. He’s telling his children’s children about what Frank said to him at Radio City Music Hall. Then I’d like to think that he’d put on the CD of that live performance in Sydney, Australia, and say, “This was one of your great-grandfather’s favorites. It reminded him of all the times he saw Frank Sinatra perform. Let’s listen.”



Bill's mother, Helene and Frank "backstage", 1988.
Photo: B. Boggs