

FRANK'S WORLD

Frank Sinatra was a World War One baby, born in 1915.¹ He became a popular music phenomenon during the Second World War. By his own account, audiences adopted and idolized him then not merely as an innovative and accomplished vocalist – his first popular sobriquet was “the Voice” – but also as an appealing symbolic surrogate for American troops fighting abroad. In the late 1940s his career suffered a precipitous decline. There were four reasons for this.

First, the public perception of Sinatra as a family man devoted to his wife, Nancy, and their children, Nancy, Frank Jr and Tina, was tarnished by his high-octane affair with the film star Ava Gardner. The public face of callow charm and steadfast moral virtue that Sinatra and his publicist George Evans concocted during his elevation to celebrity was damaged by his admitted adultery. Sinatra's reputation for possessing a violent temper – he punched the gossip columnist Lee Mortimer at Ciro's nightclub² and took to throwing tantrums and hurling abuse at other reporters when the line of questioning took a turn he disapproved of – became a public issue at this time.

Second, servicemen were understandably resentful of Sinatra's celebrity status. They regarded it as having been easily achieved while they fought, and their comrades died, overseas. Some members of the media stirred the pot by insinuating that Sinatra pulled strings to avoid the draft. During the war, like most entertainers, Sinatra made a virtue of his patriotism in his stage act and music/film output. For example, his film *The House I Live In* (1945), which won a special Academy Award in

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1946, was a short, ten-minute paean to racial tolerance and the virtues of civic harmony. Devised by Sinatra and the director Mervyn LeRoy, the film aimed to present a vision of American society cleansed of domestic bigotry and violence. In a key scene Sinatra, only 30 years old at the time, provides a rousing homily to a group of antisocial, dysfunctional boys on the evils of prejudice which would have been enough to make Abraham Lincoln weep:

Look fellas, religion makes no difference except maybe to a Nazi or somebody stupid. Why, people all over the world worship God in many different ways. God created everybody. He didn't create one people better than another . . . This wonderful country is made up of a hundred different kinds of people and a hundred different ways of talking and a hundred different ways of going to church. But they're all American ways.

Understandably many troops, and their parents, regarded Sinatra's patriotism, crafted and burnished thousands of miles from enemy gunfire, as a choice irony. The official explanation given for his absenteeism from the war is that he suffered a perforated eardrum and infection at birth, resulting in chronic mastoiditis that rendered him unfit for military service. At the time, this was widely treated with scepticism. In 1944, Walter Winchell, the popular syndicated newspaper columnist, received an anonymous letter alleging that Sinatra had paid \$40,000 to bribe doctors to classify him as medically unfit for service. However, an FBI investigation confirmed that the medical ruling was sound and that no influence was used to prevent him from going to war. Nonetheless, the suspicion that Sinatra's life was too easy and that his gilded status had been attained by devious means took root and diminished his public standing.

Third, rumours began to circulate that Sinatra was embroiled with the Mafia and was a communist infiltrator to boot. To some extent, the origin of these rumours was overtly racist. Sinatra was a first generation Italian-American born into an immigrant neighborhood in Hoboken, New Jersey. For much of middle America this constituted an inherently questionable background,

smacking of fancy manners, Mediterranean practices, and shady links with organized crime. During Sinatra's elevation as a celebrity in the late 1930s the controversial execution of two Italian-born anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, in 1927 was still relatively fresh in people's minds. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for murdering a clerk and guard in a shoe factory in Braintree, Massachusetts. The evidence against them was circumstantial and during the trial the prosecution focused on their political beliefs, immigrant status, and the fact that they had refused to register for military service under the terms of the Selective Service Act (1917). The episode fueled middle American prejudices that Italian immigrants were freeloaders, work-shy, untrustworthy, and a latent threat to national security. Sinatra himself complained that the charges against him amounted to harassment because his surname ended in a vowel.

But his bravado did not succeed in quelling allegations of links with the Mafia. Indeed, FBI investigations established that Sinatra associated with members of the Mafia in Hoboken, notably Willie Moretti, the *padrino* of New Jersey, and Joe and Rocco Fischetti, known to the FBI as members of Al Capone's Chicago gang. In his defense, Sinatra responded that members of the Mafia were a fixture of several nightclubs in the New Jersey/New York area. As such, it was impossible for entertainers to avoid socializing with them. He emphatically denied that he fraternized with them and dismissed the notion that they played a part in his success as idle conjecture. This did not terminate the rumors.

On some occasions his behavior significantly contributed to them. Most notoriously, Joe Fischetti invited Sinatra to Havana in 1947, ostensibly to entertain the legendary Mafioso Lucky Luciano. Apparently Sinatra failed to realize until too late that he was being lured as cover for the first major gathering of the American Mafia since 1932. Those attending included Frank Costello, Vito Genovese, Augie Pisano, Mike Miranda, Joe Adonis, Joe Profaci, Willie Moretti, Giuseppe "Joe the Fat Man" Magliocco, Albert "the Executioner" Anastasia, Santos Trafficante, Carlos Marcello, Tony Accardo, and Meyer Lansky. The purpose of the meeting was to declare Luciano the head of

the American crime syndicate, *capo di tutti capi*. The press fastened upon Sinatra's presence as evidence that he was complicit with the highest echelons of the Mafia machine. Following Luciano's arrest by Cuban officials a week after the meeting, frenzied media coverage was devoted to speculating on the *real* reason behind Sinatra's visit. The proposition emerged that he was carrying \$2 million in a suitcase as a tribute to Luciano. Sinatra always denied the charge and protested his innocence. However, the Havana affair sowed the first seeds of suspicion in the public mind that Sinatra's success was at some level fatally implicated with Mafia power.

Condensed with this was a converse set of allegations that painted Sinatra as a communist sympathizer. The late 1940s was the start of deep popular disquiet about the threat posed by the expansionist Soviet empire. Public anxieties about communist infiltration centered on government agencies that ran the country. But the entertainment industry was also scrutinized because it was recognized to be populated by influential figures who possessed the power to shape public opinion. Popular anxieties climaxed with the investigations of Senator McCarthy between 1952 and 1954. However, as early as the mid-1940s, Soviet incursions into Eastern Europe fueled public worries about the "Red Menace." In 1949 Californian Senator Jack B. Tenney released a list of Hollywood celebrities with "Communist leanings." Sinatra was named, together with John Garfield, Katherine Hepburn, Danny Kaye, Gregory Peck, and the *immigré* novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize, Thomas Mann. Senator Tenney's allegations against Sinatra were unparticularized. They reflected a public perception of him as an "immigrant" and a "liberal." He was known to have "advanced" views on full employment and the extension of public schooling through racial integration, and to identify with the civil rights movement. In 1946 he issued a public statement condemning the involvement of the Spanish dictator, Franco, with Hitler and Mussolini. In the same year he served as vice president of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (HIC-CASP). This was a broad coalition of pro-Roosevelt liberals and leftists, including Thomas Mann and Rita Hayworth.

These activities hardly amounted to a cast iron case proving Communist leanings.

However, his alleged support for opposition to Congressional contempt citations of the so-called "Hollywood Ten" was potentially more damning. These were screenwriters who, during hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947, refused, on First Amendment grounds, to answer questions about their political sympathies and associations. Still, even here support for the Hollywood Ten could be justified as an example of the traditional values of American liberalism inasmuch as it defended the principle of free political conscience. But many were quick to label it a symptom of incipient Trotskyism. In many conservative and middle American circles, Sinatra was guilty by association.

Sinatra's position in American popular culture at this time was far from unassailable. In these years, political and press mutterings about his left-wing views could have fatally damaged his career. However, not for the first or last time, he allowed conviction and hubris to dictate over calm mediation and reflection. He continued his highly public political involvement, as a sponsor, contributor and speaker, with many campaigning organizations, notably the Joint Anti-Fascist Committee, the Free Italy Society, the American Crusade to End Lynching, and the American Society for Cultural Relations with Italy (Meyer 2002: 316). Sinatra's desire to be recognized by the WASP establishment was always counterbalanced by a parvenu's disgust of the trappings of establishment power. It was a recurring tension in Sinatra's public life, and as we shall see, it led to many problems and setbacks in his career.

In a piece written in 1947, Lee Mortimer, a columnist for the Hearst newspaper chain, and nephew of the editor of the Hearst-owned *Mirror* in New York, an acknowledged foe of Sinatra, described *The House I Live In* as "class struggle or foreign *isms* posing as entertainment" (Weiner 1986: 21-2). Circumstantially, Mortimer's argument was reinforced when Albert Maltz, the screenwriter who wrote the script for *The House I Live In*, declined to answer HUAC questions about his association with Communism, and was blacklisted and jailed.

Sinatra's alleged Communist sympathies were also discussed in the columns of the influential show business gossip commentators, Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons, and Dorothy Kilgallen.

If Sinatra never declared sympathies with Communism, he was open about his support for the New Deal/one nation rhetoric of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the 1940s it was comparatively unusual for entertainers to declare their political sympathies. The Hollywood studio system sought to create a wholesome, apolitical image of its stable of stars on the calculation that this would maximize box-office appeal and corporate return on investment. From the first, Sinatra was an outspoken critic of class inequality, racism, and unemployment, and an advocate of New Deal politics. In 1943, when riots erupted in Harlem, he spoke to two local schools urging racial harmony and mutual tolerance. Both themes later figured prominently in *The House I Live In*. In 1943 he also travelled to a high school in Gary, Indiana, where disturbances had occurred after the introduction of racial integration policies. Again he condemned racial oppression and made a strong plea for harmony and tolerance.

The right-wing press responded to Sinatra's support for Roosevelt by pejoratively christening him the "New Deal Crooner" (Freedland 1997: 97). Sinatra reacted to right-wing attacks on his alleged political beliefs by writing a two-column letter published in the *New Republic* (Sinatra 1947) which repudiated any connection with Communism. HUAC never subpoenaed him. Furthermore, he was never blacklisted. However, he was cited 12 times in the HUAC hearings, which was more than enough to fuel the fears of the right-wing press that there was something in the notion that Sinatra was a Red (Weiner 1991: 263). In 1954 the Army denied him security clearance to entertain troops in Korea, citing his "Communist affiliations." A year later his application for a passport prompted a full-scale FBI investigation to determine if sufficient evidence existed to warrant prosecution. The 40-page document that emerged from this concluded that no credible evidence existed to connect Sinatra

with the Communist Party. Sinatra's protest of innocence and defiance against officialdom appeared to have carried the day.

Ironically, by 1972 any lingering suspicion that Sinatra was a man of the left was erased by his unambiguous identification with the Republican Party. Sinatra now socialized with Richard Nixon, Spiro T. Agnew, and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. At the height of the Red scare, the stage version of *The House I Live In*, initially written and performed as a left-leaning plea for racial tolerance and civil rights, was summarily dropped from his act. However, in 1973 President Nixon called for its reintroduction at a performance at the White House which brought Sinatra out of retirement. Sinatra duly obliged, but transformed the song from a critique of middle American conservative values into a patriotic show-stopper praising the idealized "mom and pop" verities of the American way. In 1991, at the age of 76, he performed it for American troops during the Gulf War. Sinatra's youthful idealistic collectivism had been supplanted by a heroic conservatism, symbolized above all by the prominence given in his repertoire to the song *My Way*, a hoary, sentimental tribute to heroic individualism.

The fourth reason for Sinatra's career slump between 1947 and 1953 is that his choice of music recordings and film performances during this time was often dismal. *The Kissing Bandit* (1948), *The Miracle of the Bells* (1948), *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949), *Double Dynamite* (1951), and *Meet Danny Wilson* (1951) amounted to a run of embarrassing, risible films only lightly punctuated by the relative success of *On The Town* (1949). His parallel recording career fared little better. By the early 1950s, in an attempt to revive his popularity, Mitch Miller, A&R Director of Columbia Records, persuaded Sinatra to record the novelty song *Mama Will Bark*, in which the Sinatra of *Everything Happens to Me* (1941), *I Fall in Love Too Easily* (1944), *Embraceable You* (1944), and *Night and Day* (1947) was required to bark like a dog with a B list, curvaceous comedienne-singer named Dagmar.³ It is embarrassing evidence of what had come to pass in Sinatra's career. Why was this desperate measure launched?

The early postwar years witnessed the emergence of a substantial, moneyed but temperamental youth market, which would become more powerful in the 1950s and 1960s under the impact of full employment. Music executives began to openly question Sinatra's staying power with the youth market. By the late 1940s, younger singers like Frankie Laine and Johnny Ray were comfortably outselling him. Many executives wondered if Sinatra had become *passé*.

In fact, Sinatra was squeezed between the generations on either side. Older fans regarded him as too young for them to switch allegiance from the hardy perennial Bing Crosby, who was releasing one record a week at this time. In addition, Al Jolson, the veteran white singer who made a fortune in the 1920s and 1930s by portraying himself as an African-American minstrel, experienced a triumphant comeback. His film *Jolson Sings Again* was 1949's most popular musical. Sinatra was stranded in no man's land – too young to be accepted by the middle-aged market and too old to be convincing as a pop idol for teenagers. In 1946 Sinatra had 15 hit singles. But this success was followed by a long period in the doldrums, which Sinatra later referred to as "the Dark Ages." Between 1947 and 1953 none of Sinatra's record releases reached the top five in the *Billboard* pop chart. Only four singles made the top ten in 1947, and the number plummeted to one in 1948. Between 1952 and 1953 nothing he released was a hit.

In 1950 the movie mogul Louis B. Mayer cancelled Sinatra's film contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Two years later Columbia Records officially ended his recording contract. By then some consolation must have been afforded by the inimitable Ava Gardner, whom Sinatra married in 1951. However, even this bounty could not disguise the fact that Sinatra's position in popular culture was in a tailspin. Rejected by MGM and Columbia Records, he sought a deal with RCA, only for the idea to be dispelled by the sales-people, who rejected him as a has-been. The music press portrayed the one-year contract he eventually secured with Capitol Records in 1953 on terribly unfavorable terms (he received no advance and was required to meet the cost of recordings from his own pocket) as Sinatra's Gettysburg.

He was 38 years old.

The Elevation of an American Legend

Between 1953 and 1965 Sinatra left behind all canards and innuendos that he was a mere flash in the pan or wartime hit wonder. In these 12 years he established himself as an enduring legend in twentieth-century American popular culture. Within 18 months of the cancellation of his recording contract with Columbia he reversed his career slump. With Ava's connivance he landed the role of the lower-class, victimized New Jersey soldier, Private Maggio, in *From Here to Eternity*. The role, which Sinatra maintained he was born to play, won him an Oscar and rehabilitated him in Hollywood. However, Sinatra regarded movies disparagingly as a sideline. His acting in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), *The Joker Is Wild* (1957), *Pal Joey* (1957) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) won a good measure of critical praise. But in general his attitude to movies was strictly instrumental. He regarded them as a lucrative bagatelle. His true vocation and forte lay in vocal performance.

Teamed with a series of fertile, imaginative arrangers at Capitol, above all Nelson Riddle, but also Billy May and Gordon Jenkins, he released a series of classic albums in the 1950s: *In the Wee Small Hours*, *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*, *A Swingin' Affair*, *Only the Lonely*, *Where Are You?*, *No One Cares*. More than any other performer, he captured the hedonism, confidence and vulnerability of American consumer culture released from the anxieties and privations of the war years. In songs like *Come Fly with Me*, *I've Got You Under My Skin*, and *Makin' Whoopee* he transmitted power, assurance, and insouciance. But in other recordings, for example *Lonely Town*, *One for My Baby*, *I'll Never Be the Same Again* and *I'm a Fool to Want You*, he radiated the high postwar metropolitan aura of loneliness, displacement, and neurosis.

The best of his Columbia Record releases with the arranger Alex Stordahl in the 1940s – *I Fall in Love Too Easily* (1944), *Saturday Night (Is the Loneliest Night of the Week)* (1945), *These Foolish Things Remind Me of You* (1945), *Day by Day* (1946), *How*

Deep Is the Ocean (1946), *Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry* (1946) – had had some claim to defining the era. In these songs Sinatra sang like a yearning, rejected, stranded character out of Edward Hopper's film noir masterpiece painting, *Nighthawks* (1942). Their impact was undoubtedly enhanced by Sinatra's unusual capacity to dramatize emotions, especially loneliness and sadness. Some commentators argue that he merely *performed* emotions, implying a fundamental falsity in his artistry (Witkin 2003: 171–2). Undoubtedly, his talents as an actor added distinction to his vocal performances. But there were unstable elements in Sinatra's personality, especially after his final split with Ava Gardner, which lend credence to the popular belief that his best work was from the heart.

Sinatra's lifelong sense of personal restlessness, pensiveness, and inner turmoil is well documented. In the memoir of her father, Sinatra's daughter Tina referred to his death as an "escape" (T. Sinatra 2000: 286). The paradox of an intense sense of dissatisfaction in the midst of outstanding artistic and commercial success is central to understanding Sinatra's relationship to celebrity. In spite of his artistic and material achievement, he never felt a real sense of belonging with the higher echelons of America, while his success cut him off from his roots. Sinatra was a narcissist who believed that his Italian-American background prohibited him from being fully acknowledged by WASP opinion, while his achievements separated him from the values of home. Much of the frustration and rage he displayed throughout his career derived from this painful sense of rejection at the hands of the establishment, twinned with estrangement from the small-town values of Hoboken.

It is also at the core of his violent love of power. Sinatra sought power over others through his involvement with the Mafia, the CIA, prominent politicians and presidents, notably John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. He is alleged to have attempted to destroy the career of his Italian-American, East Coast singing rival Jimmy Roselli (Evanier 2002), and also to employ organized crime to threaten and intimidate people. His violent outbursts, which included many physical attacks on people, lasted

well into his sixties. In his public forays he was often accompanied by a raucous tribe of male drinking companions who acted, in effect, as his unofficial bodyguards and gleeclub. The clanishness of this group was Sinatra's buffer between the circles of the Brahmin American power elite and the unsophisticated melting pot of Hoboken. The membership of this group went through many phases and changes after its first incarnation in the 1940s during Sinatra's days with the Harry James Orchestra and the Tommy Dorsey Band, when it was known as "the Varsity." By the 1950s and 1960s the main stalwarts were Hank Sanicola, Sinatra's manager; Bill Miller, his accompanist, who was known as Sun-Tan Charlie because of his sallow complexion; "Beans" Ponedell, Sinatra's makeup man; Don McGuire, a journalist; and Jimmy Van Heusen, a songwriter.

Sinatra was a man of immense paradoxes. He chased par-amours with seigniorial diligence, only to discard them with caddish abruptness, and often in circumstances that appeared to be designed to humiliate. He switched his allegiance from left-liberal politics to the Iron Age conservatism of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan when he judged that by doing so he might regain the gambling license that was stripped from him in the early 1960s by the Nevada Gaming Control Board. He relished his identification with pro-Jewish and black civil rights organizations, but punched Carl Cohen, the casino manager of Caesar's Palace, and called him a "kike," and "playfully" but nonetheless racially abused the long-suffering sole black member of the Rat Pack, Sammy Davis Jr (Taraborrelli 1997: 571; Levy 1998: 113–14). His sexual life, especially in the Rat Pack years, came close to debauchery, and his violent temper was the source of repeated public censure. Yet Murray Kempton called him "puritanical" (1998: 13), and he was easily embarrassed by public displays of bad behavior in others.

By the 1950s Sinatra was cultivating the public face of irrepressible assurance and masculine *joie de vivre* that defined the rest of his career until the early 1990s, when his health began to fail. Nowhere more so than in his triumphalist stage act with the Rat Pack (Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop) at the Sands Casino in Las Vegas, in which Sinatra

owned a 2 percent stake which eventually increased to 9 percent. Conversely, in recordings like *Angel Eyes*, *Willow Weep for Me* and *Mood Indigo*, he answered to America's sense of frailty and vigilance, which in politics was symbolized by Senator Joe McCarthy's crusade against Communism and by the arms race with the Soviets.

Indeed the 12-year span between 1953 and 1965 boasts an embarrassment of riches that left most of his fellow stars of the day in music and film nonplussed. Equally, the remarkable *auteur* albums released in the Capitol years, notably *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955), *Where Are You?* (1957), and *Only the Lonely* (1958), reconceptualized the long-playing record and set new standards in the creation of mood music. In this work Sinatra displayed an artistry and perfectionism that was without parallel in the period. It became the durable basis for the Sinatra legend, which would offset the relative, but highly public, artistic decline he was to suffer between 1973 and 1995. After the difficulties he encountered between 1947 and 1953 it amounted to one of the most remarkable comebacks in postwar American popular entertainment.

The Dark Ages

The period between 1947 and 1953 ranks along with his Italian-American origins as the key to explaining the odd mixture of insouciance and dedication, generosity and hauteur, probity and fraudulence in Sinatra's personality. Plaudits and honors were the preponderant themes in his 60 years as a performer. But the "Dark Ages" were the period in which he was engulfed by the fickle nature of public acclaim in all of its unutterable cruelty. At the peak of Sinatra's early success as a solo performer his presence regularly provoked mass hysteria. Over 30,000 youngsters were estimated to have brought midtown Manhattan to a standstill during the so-called "Columbus Day Riot" in 1944 when Sinatra performed at the Paramount theater. The pandemonium required the mobilization of 200 policemen, 20 policewomen, 421 police reserves, 20 radio cars, 2 emergency trucks, 4 lieuten-

ants, 6 sergeants, 2 captains, 2 assistant police inspectors, 2 inspectors, 70 patrolmen, 50 traffic cops, 12 mounted police, and 200 detectives. Yet only four years later, Sinatra had fallen so low that he was widely regarded as yesterday's man. In 1948, Sammy Davis Jr recalled bumping into Sinatra by chance in the center of Manhattan:

Frank was slowly walking down Broadway with no hat on and his collar up and not a soul was paying attention to him. This was the man who only a few years ago had tied up traffic all over Times Square . . . Now the same man was walking down the same street and nobody gave a damn. (Quoted in Shaw 1968: 122)

In the lives of celebrities, elevation is often the prologue to a fall from grace, contrition and a bid to gain public forgiveness. Arguably the most famous example in recent times was the late Princess Diana's television revelations about her relationships with Prince Charles and the rest of the royal family. But the phenomenon is quite general in the field of popular entertainment. For example, Judy Garland's battles with alcoholism and substance abuse were accompanied by heartfelt pleas for public understanding. Elizabeth Taylor, Roseanne Barr and Oprah Winfrey battled with weight problems and cited the glare of the spotlight as psychologically damaging. Boy George and Robert Downey Jr asked for public understanding for their struggles with drug addiction. Michael Jackson denied unsavory press allegations about his sexuality and went on record to plead for public understanding about the tensions of stardom. His 2003 interview with Martin Bashir was partly an attempt to rehabilitate his public image, but it went catastrophically wrong when Bashir's interview portrayed a deeply perplexed performer and raised new serious questions about his sexuality and infantilism. Robbie Williams went public with his alcohol and drug addictions in his autobiography *Somebody Someday* and the film *Nobody Someday*. The British variety entertainer Michael Barrymore agreed to a television interview in which he confessed to alcohol and drugs binges.

The conclusion is clear: entertainers who experience a fall from grace make highly public requests for absolution from their fans and the masses. Of course, they are not always successful in this regard. The plea alters the relationship between the celebrity and the public, especially if it is unsuccessful. For example, O. J. Simpson's attempt to rehabilitate himself after being cleared of murder, and Gary Glitter's entreaty for understanding when he was given a prison sentence on a child pornography conviction, fell on deaf ears.

During his career slump between 1947 and 1953 Sinatra reluctantly gave at least two high profile displays of public contrition. At the behest of his long-suffering publicist George Evans, after his brawl with the reporter Lee Mortimer, Sinatra sought public sympathy for his actions via the influential Hollywood gossip columnist, Louella Parsons. In 1947 Evans also persuaded Sinatra to write an open letter to his fans thanking them for support during the press allegations of his involvement with Communism and the Mafia. The letter was reprinted in many magazines and newspapers. Both concessions were out of character. Humility was not a stable feature of Sinatra's personality. In a famous thoughtful interview published in the February 1963 edition of *Playboy*, he described himself as "an 18-carat manic depressive" who "lived a life of violent emotional contradictions" which resulted in "an overacute capacity for sadness as well as elation." The appeals nettled his pride. His bravura code of masculinity, to say nothing of his narcissism, disposed him to be always more willing to offer, insinuate or demand forgiveness than to court it. Unquestionably, when he cultivated Louella Parsons, and solicited support from his fans, it was through gritted teeth.

After Evans's premature death in 1950, Sinatra maintained a relationship with the William Morris talent agency. But he was always a challenge for public relations personnel. His character was truculent, obsessive, imperious, and vain. He did not suffer fools gladly, but having left school early he was always vulnerable and sensitive about "educated" opinion. As he grew wealthier, he became less interested in professional advice and more disposed to follow his nose.

In truth, by the start of the 1960s his position in the entertainment industry appeared to be well-nigh impregnable. He was diversifying his interests from performance to production, through the creation of Reprise records, his investment in the Rat Pack films, and his shares in Nevada gambling casinos. Sinatra had started as an underestimated singer from unfashionable Hoboken. By his mid-forties he was recognized as a stellar artist in both popular music and cinema, and was adding the kudos of being a major budding entertainment tycoon to his hand. Influential publications of the day, such as *American Weekly*, *Playboy*, and even *Good Housekeeping*, portrayed him as the most powerful player in Hollywood. His vanity responded to the acclaim by slowly adopting a more statesmanlike attitude to achieved celebrity.

The reasons behind this are complex and will be dealt with in greater detail later in the book. To put it simply for the moment, in the incipient years of John F. Kennedy's campaign for the White House, and until 1961 or 1962, Sinatra reveled in the hedonism, iconoclasm and playboy *mien* of the Rat Pack. But by the late 1960s, the rupture in his relations with Kennedy, the rescinding of his Nevada gambling license, and the negative press regarding his dissolute, louche Rat Pack lifestyle produced a significant U-turn in his behavior.

As with much else in his public life, there was a degree of calculation behind this transformation. His attempt to regain his Nevada gambling license amounted to a two decades long campaign which required Sinatra to adopt new levels of decorum and restraint in his public behavior. His involvement in charity work intensified during this time. For example, in April 1962 he embarked on a two-month global charity and goodwill tour. He performed 30 concerts in Japan, Israel, Italy, the UK, Greece, France, and Monaco. The tour raised over a million dollars. Sinatra took it upon himself to pay for the traveling costs and living expenses of all the musicians and his entourage – a sum that is conservatively estimated to have amounted to \$200,000, a huge amount by the standards of the day. He also moved from being a prominent supporter of the Democrats to Republican fundraiser. As we shall see in more detail later, Sinatra never

mellowed. His character was too truculent and menacing for this to happen. But in the last 25 years of his career he consciously adopted a more statesmanlike persona in the entertainment industry.

“The Least Cooperative Star”

How might one describe Sinatra's behavior before the U-turn in the early 1960s? Throughout his career slump he possessed an extraordinary faith in his absolute uniqueness as a vocalist and in his popular star quality. The music critic Richard Williams (2000: 91) described Sinatra as “the voice of the twentieth century.” Sinatra's conviction that he had a unique talent left him impatient with many social conventions. Although this was a lifelong trait, it was especially prominent in his youth and middle age. For two decades after his extraordinary success as a solo performer in the early 1940s, he appears to have regarded his unprecedented artistic and commercial achievements as a license to behave just as he pleased without regard to social convention or, on occasion, legal restraint. For example, he habitually partied through the night, drank to excess, brawled, was intimidating, and was often late on set for filming. He was regularly either cavalier or rebarbative in his relations with directors, producers, and fellow actors. He made promises to the head of MGM, Louis B. Mayer, to entertain the Republican National Conference of State Governors in Sacramento, only to cancel unilaterally, apparently without offering an explanation or an apology. His unguarded and sarcastic comments about Mayer's mistress, Ginny Simms, seem to have been the catalyst behind the termination of his lucrative MGM contract. He was involved in fistfights with columnists and fans. He maintained publicly damaging contact with known members of the Mafia.

In truth, Sinatra exhibited signs of arrogance and contrariness long before the early 1950s. The Women's Press Club voted him “least cooperative star of the year” as early as 1946.⁴ The bonhomie that he dispensed to fans and the media during his years with the Harry James Orchestra and the Tommy Dorsey

Band seems to have been cynically contrived. It disguised an unpleasant character blend of excruciating narcissism and brittle intolerance of the prying eye of the public. This was balanced with a tremendous sense of generosity and respect for fellow musicians (Granata 1999). When pressed, Sinatra justified his bad behavior as a reaction to the pressures of stardom. In the 1940s his popularity was certainly phenomenal, and arguably unprecedented. His obituary in the *New York Times* (May 16, 1998) described him not only as "widely held to be the greatest singer in American pop history," but also as "the first modern pop superstar."

Rudy Vallee, Al Jolson and Bing Crosby may actually be considered to have prior claims for this status. Even so, the scale of Sinatra's popularity, especially among the youth audience, was astonishing and certainly brought with it psychological burdens that, in some measure, may account for his ill-judged behavior. With the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, and after 1942 in the first years of his solo career, Sinatra generated levels of mass hysteria that left major cities paralyzed and the police and press dumbfounded. Aside from the silent film idol Rudolf Valentino (1895–1926), no other popular entertainer before had attracted the same colossal level of female adoration. By degrees humble and insolent, imperious and approachable, sneering and starstruck, Sinatra's behavior provided the template for the later rock aristocracy: Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, James Brown, Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Robbie Williams, Prince, Tupac Shakur, Liam Gallagher, and Eminem. In the 1940s Sinatra established the role model for the modern pop idol.

During his career slump he displayed the first transparent signs of megalomania that symptomatized much of his later public behavior. Certainly in the conduct of his sexual life he seemed indifferent to either the press or the opinions of middle America. In the early years of Sinatra's elevation as a pop idol, George Evans connived to portray family life with Nancy and the children in the genre of a Norman Rockwell painting, as an idyll of mutual devotion, uxorious fidelity, and family values. In reality, Sinatra was a serial adulterer, conducting innumerable

one-night stands and affairs as he toured the US. Most of the time Evans was adroit in concealing Sinatra's infidelity from the public. Yet even he could not prevail upon Sinatra to be more discreet in his relationship with Ava Gardner. When Evans died unexpectedly, Sinatra seems to have decided to forgo all restraint. He persisted with his affair so ardently and with such punitive candor that Nancy filed for separation on Valentine's Day 1950.

Sinatra's relationship with Ava was always volatile. Initially, his recurring worries about her loyalty and respect were relegated behind guilt at the collapse of his marriage. For an unconscionable time after the announcement of the separation from Nancy and the children, his nightclub performances bordered on the unhinged. His violence became unpredictable and was frequently directed against himself. He attempted suicide twice. In 1952 he tried to gas himself in the New York apartment of Manie Sacks, the boss of Columbia Records. Sacks returned just in time to revive him. After his separation from Ava Gardner in 1953 he was found in an elevator at the home of one of his songwriters, Jimmy Van Heusen, with slashed wrists. He also had to have his stomach pumped in 1951 after an allegedly "accidental" overdose of sleeping pills. In these years Sinatra appeared to alternate between wallowing in bottomless despair and pursuing a pathological gangsterish determination to monopolize Ava. He rarely abused his audiences, but he frequently seemed preoccupied, irascible, and distracted. As already noted, even after his marriage to Ava, his recording and film career remained in the doldrums. He attempted to reinvent himself as a television celebrity through the *Frank Sinatra Show* and to return to his roots in radio with *Meet Frank Sinatra*. But the sponsors behind both ventures rapidly canceled after poor audience reaction. Sinatra's career seemed to have something in common with the *Titanic*.

Typically, at this time Sinatra never sought interviews with the media to ask for understanding, insight or forgiveness. If he was plagued by self-doubt and other demons in these years, he withheld his counsel from the press. Unlike the earlier stage in his career, where he was prepared to go through the motions of

asking for public forgiveness, he was now above showing contrition. Throughout this period his friends remember him as prone to confusion and emotional turmoil. But, unlike the attempts sponsored by George Evans to gain sympathy earlier in his career, he never explained himself to the public and never seriously sought professional counseling or help.

Italian-American

Sinatra's strong relationship with his mother, Dolly, was certainly a major factor in his extraordinary self-belief. He basked in the light of her unblinking parental devotion. Conversely, he was often exasperated by her domineering, hectoring character. His relationship with Dolly conformed to the stereotypical bond between the only child and its mother in which the adoring mother both inspires and dominates. But Dolly and Frank did not exist in dotlike isolation. As Italian-Americans they occupied a particular habitus, a specific social and cultural ethos which patterned their conduct. Sinatra's preening hauteur, his sentimentality, and his respect for the use of violence conform to a distinctive social-masculine type. This is Sicilian in origin and reveres self-reliance, courage, discretion, and respect from others as role ideals. It is scathing of officialdom, lavishing high praise upon the code of *omerta* – maintaining silence over "crimes" witnessed or experienced. Depending on your point of view, it is either incorrigibly hypocritical or utterly realistic about power, treating public acclaim as both desirable and superficial, and venerating ties of blood and honor as the ultimate bonds that hold society together.

Sicilians display a scornful attitude to aristocracy and inherited status. The self-made man is the idol of the culture, as one might expect in a region that has traditionally wearied under centuries of poverty and oppression at the hands of various colonizing forces. For Sicilians, success is like biblical bread, to be broken and shared rather than monopolized. The man of success is expected to follow the folk principle of *fatti la fame e curcati* - make yourself famous and lie back and relax. But

also to be available to the community, and to contribute to the common good. Thus the bravura that is such a dominant part of the masculine code in Sicilian culture has its origins in the recognition of the ultimate greater importance of community.

In middle age, Sinatra certainly cultivated this facade. The Rat Pack was an extended tribute to the values of hedonism, optimism and easy living. But it also proffered protection, assistance and solidarity to those involved with it. In hindsight it can be interpreted as a repudiation of the WASP values of discretion, thrift and self-control upon which the hegemonic ideal of American masculinity was constructed. Against this, the Rat Pack reveled in conspicuous consumption, immediate gratification, whisky-soaked priapism, leisurely rounds of golf, and helping a buddy. Traditionally, the nouveaux riches in America emulated the values and lifestyles of the establishment. Parvenus like Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr understood the convention. For example, their dress and grooming was the best that money could buy. Their image as sybarites was balanced by copper-bottomed patriotism. They extolled the American way and brandished the unfortunate national introspection with regard to world affairs. For these men, four of whom were of immigrant stock, America was the best of all possible worlds – arguably a delusion still shared by most Americans.

As is the fashion with the celebritariat in America, they and their wives also generously gave their money and spare time to appropriate charitable causes. But throughout they complained of establishment condescension. To repeat: four of the Rat Pack were the offspring of immigrant parents. Even the fifth member, Sammy Davis Jr, who possessed the best credentials of a truly American pedigree, had a Puerto Rican-born mother, Elvera "Baby" Sanchez. Sammy was also, of course, black. In all of them, the understandable pleasure in achievement was counter-balanced by a stubborn feeling of displacement. Although their wealth brought them to the ramparts of the American establishment, their status as nouveaux riches was always problematic. One reason why Sinatra so relished playing the part of Major

Ben Marco in his favourite movie role, in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), is that the brainwashed Marco eventually exposes both his Korean controllers *and* their establishment puppets, John and Eleanor Iselin (played by James Gregory and Angela Lansbury). The moral is that the establishment is always rotten, a prejudice shared by the downtrodden and the parvenu class alike. For Sinatra, ordinary, decent Americans who seek to achieve according to the meritocratic ideal laid down by the founding fathers, are sure to encounter the canker of deceit and self-interest which lies at the heart of the power hierarchy. Arguably, this is one reason for his notably relaxed attitude to the Mafia, who sought to realize the American dream by illegal activity.

At this juncture one must pause to reflect that at least part of Sinatra's insufferable self-righteousness and shallow didacticism, as well as his impulse towards generosity and antiracism and his abhorrence of flummery and humbug, was the result of his naive innocence in believing in America as an ideal. This was also the motive behind his lifelong patriotism and inconstant party politics. It is easy to discount the point. But for immigrants of Sinatra's day, and arguably even in contemporary times, America represented a clean slate, an arena for personal advancement and the realization of discredited eighteenth-century European ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality. Adherence to roots might be a dogmatic matter to their parents, but for the "first born" Americans of Sinatra's generation nothing was written in stone, everything was possible. For all his sense of being, at a fundamental level, misplaced in America, of not quite understanding the rules of the game, Sinatra savored these values, regarding them as defining the American way in distinction from exhausted and tarnished European precedents.

The children of first born white immigrants exist in a peculiar liminal space that has perhaps not received sufficient attention in academic literature. For these people – in Sinatra's day, as perhaps still today – are peculiarly displaced figures. The language of the idealized "society" differs from the language of home, not merely in respect of class and ethnic codes and

conventions, but more fundamentally in respect of vocabulary, syntax, shared understanding, and practices of embodiment. Although participation in schooling, work, sport, and wider popular culture acculturates them to the mores and values of the host society, they regard themselves as a violently transplanted species, bedded into strange soil, carrying folk beliefs, ways of speaking, ways of seeing and ways of embodiment that are not universally understood. They can never be truly "American" because their physical features, habits of comportment and "native" understanding irretrievably betray older, abandoned origins. Even successful Caucasian immigrants catch themselves feeling that they inhabit a different skin, one that is ritually denigrated by WASP America.

Sinatra wrestled with this for most of his life. His assiduous courting of politicians, his determination to entertain troops overseas after World War Two despite his initial, deep unpopularity with servicemen, his rheumy patriotism, his involvement with prominent politicians, can all be interpreted as attempts to acquire legitimacy. But his judgment in these matters was often faulty. Finally, he was too worldly to accept the premise that America is utopia. But paradoxically he held fast to the myth that America is, after all the wheeling and dealing, the crossing and the double-crossing, the best of all possible worlds. It is a common fancy, not only of migrant Americans but also of long-rooted stock. In a sense, the Minotaur of Sinatra's adult life was the chasm between the purple promise of new life in America and the daily example and experience of the disappointed upwardly mobile, the frustrated, and the cruelly deceived.

The "Jack Pack" and its Consequences

The most notorious and, for Sinatra, suppurating example of this was his association with the Kennedys, especially during the presidential campaign of 1960. By common consent, Sinatra played a highly active, effective role in John F. Kennedy's election campaign. He marshaled the Rat Pack to offer public sup-

port for Kennedy at the Democratic national convention in Los Angeles and participated in fundraising and publicity endorsement. At this time the Rat Pack was momentarily rechristened the "Jack Pack." They sang the *Star-Spangled Banner* and refrained from rising to racist taunts from Mississippi bigot delegates who protested at Sammy Davis Jr's presence on stage. The Sinatra song *High Hopes*, with new lyrics by Sammy Cahn, was adopted as Kennedy's campaign tune. After victory, Sinatra organized the presidential gala to celebrate Kennedy's election.

Yet within a year he was branded as a high-risk associate by Robert Kennedy and banished from the White House. Nick Tosches, the estimable biographer of Dean Martin, pointedly contrasts Martin's careful distance from the Kennedys with Sinatra's primitive first born American devotion. "Dean," writes Tosches cuttingly, "saw what Sinatra was too blind to see: there was no place in Camelot for wops" (1992: 331).

This is too brutal. The Kennedy's were sensitive to racism and bigotry, not least because the presidential campaign had been mired with anti-Irish and anti-Catholic jibes. Outwardly their politics was post-New Deal ecumenical, offering all peoples, of all creeds and colors, an equal share in democracy. But, of course, above all they were keenly interested in votes. Their support for the civil rights movement was at least in part calculated to deliver the black vote in the 1964 election. By extension, after 1961 they spurned Sinatra because his reputation for consorting with the Mafia made him an electoral liability. For Sinatra, the episode merely confirmed his conviction that despite his wealth and artistic achievements, as an Italian-American he would always be persona non grata in the eyes of the American establishment. The decision of the Nevada Gaming Control Board to rescind his gambling license and close his Cal-Neva casino in 1963 poured salt into the wound. After the mid-1960s it was the spur behind his philanthropic work and, arguably, the key factor in his drift to the right in the 1970s. Sinatra was possessed of a fierce sense of injustice, a burning insistence that he was above the judgment of ordinary people or elected officials, and a stinging conviction that he would never be fully accepted by the elite in American society.

American Caesar

After 1953, Sinatra became an American Caesar: king of the Rat Pack, champion of the public, and dictator to the press. His songs entered the vernacular of both elite and popular culture, in the way that poetry used to before the invention of the phonograph. Indeed the songs that Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen wrote for him *were* the poetry of American consumer culture in the 1950s. This was astounding success. The mass mania that Elvis Presley generated with teenagers in the 1950s, and that the Beatles and Rolling Stones surpassed in the 1960s, was not what he was seeking, although despite this he seldom ducked a chance to be scathing about it. He had been in the same position in the early 1940s and was a pastmaster at appreciating the fickle, transient nature of achieved celebrity, especially in the youth culture market. Real staying power lay in dominating the charts for decades not years. Despite flirting with pop and rock music later in his career by recording *Strangers in the Night*, *Love Me Tender*, *Yesterday*, *Something*, and *Mrs Robinson*, Sinatra held the bass, rhythm guitar, lead guitar and drums combination in low esteem. When he founded Reprise records in 1961 he declined to sign rock acts. Rock'n'roll signified not only the rude ascendance of the new, inscrutable youth culture market, it also smacked of levels of spontaneity and indiscipline that, in Sinatra's day, had perhaps not been seen since the Roaring Twenties.

It especially irked him that he was no longer perceived as holding the finger on the pulse of the youth market. For Sinatra, being viewed as cool and hip was fundamental and nonnegotiable. In his mind the rise of rock'n'roll symbolized the final end of the big band/nightclub era with all of its elegance and coruscating repartee, in which he had proven himself to be a seminal exemplar. Accordingly, his view of rock performers was acerbic and uncharitable. For example, in an interview given in 1957 he excoriated the music of the Elvis Presley generation of performers thus:

Frank's World

It is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiterations and sly, lewd – in fact plain dirty – lyrics . . . it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth. (Quoted in Evanier 2002: 89)

This was at best ingenuous and at worst hypocritical. As he set out on a solo career in 1942, Sinatra was an overtly sexual performer, caressing the microphone and standing in a suggestive manner, and using his peerless powers of enunciation to seduce the largely female audiences. For Sinatra, real vocal art lay in a singer fronting a big band and holding an audience in the palm of his hand by intonation, timing, and above all, enunciation. It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s that he engraved himself indelibly upon the public mind as the greatest living exponent of his art.

In part this was achieved by his sheer cultural *persistence* in the 1950s and 1960s. By today's standards, his work-rate and level of output was extraordinary:

- 3 releases of long-players per year in 1958, 1959
- 4 releases of long-players per year in 1960, 1961, 1963, 1965
- 6 releases of long-players per year in 1964
- 7 releases of long-players in 1957, 1962

All of this was accomplished in tandem with a film career that was equally demanding:

- 5 full-length feature films in 1955
- 4 full-length feature films in 1956
- 3 full-length feature films per year in 1957, 1960, 1962, 1965, 1966
- 2 full-length feature films per year in 1958, 1959, 1964, 1967

For a figure notorious in popular culture as much for his sybaritism and hedonism as his artistry, this was a record of remarkably industrious output.

Of course, not all of it was of the highest order. Despite their commercial success, *Come Fly with Me* (1958) and *Come Dance with Me* (1959) are, in my view, below-par albums. *Come Fly with Me* is a lightweight concoction, cashing in on the boom in long-distance air travel. The mediocrity is only relieved by an outstanding version of *April in Paris*. *Come Dance with Me* is disengaged and liberally doused with counterfeit nostalgia. Both recordings were long hits with the public. *Come Fly with Me* held the number one spot for five weeks and was in the top 50 for 70 weeks; *Come Dance with Me* won a Grammy award for best album recording of the year. However, like most of his recordings after 1973, both albums smack of Sinatra trying to second-guess contemporary taste but ending up patronizing his audience or unintentionally reminding them of former glories.

As for his film output, Sinatra was highly inconsistent. He followed up the artistic and commercial successes of *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), *The Joker Is Wild* (1957), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) with lowbrow pabulum of the order of *Johnny Concho* (1955), *Never So Few* (1959), and *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963).

Although in these years Sinatra repeatedly returned to the high theme of using popular art to change culture, his choice of projects was mercurial. He rarely passed up the chance of making a quick buck. This appears to have been the dominant motive in Sinatra's involvement in instantly forgettable films like *The Pride and the Passion* (1957), *Can-Can* (1960), *Sergeants Three* (1961), *Robin and the Seven Hoods* (1964), *Marriage on the Rocks* (1965), *Assault on a Queen* (1966), and *Dirty Dingus Magee* (1970); and formulaic albums like *Cycles* (1968), *A Man Alone* (1969), and *Some Nice Things I've Missed* (1974).

The Generalissimo of Romance

Interestingly, if Sinatra was a somewhat cavalier "natural" actor, seldom bothering to suffer more than two takes of a scene, he was never less than a dedicated vocalist. Commentators maintain that he was more adept than other vocalists at

persuading individual members of the audience that he was singing directly to them. They refer to Sinatra's warmth and common touch. What is not often pointed out is that Sinatra never approached the audience as an equal. Even in the final decade of his performing career, when his broken health obliged him from time to time to approach his audience as a hoary old generalissimo rather than the concupiscent Lothario of yore, he retained an imposing demeanor. The demotic, participatory styles developed by younger singers in the 1960s and 1970s were anathema to him. Sinatra always remained aloof, a fact that his fans neutralized in their eagerness to acknowledge him as "one of us." His intonation, timing and use of counterpoint conveyed power, magnanimity and a carefree existence, but the content of his songs often spoke of rejection, frustration and solitude.

This also applied to his onstage repartee. He projected a bravura masculine lifestyle of guiltless promiscuity and conspicuous consumption, yet his life seemed so fundamentally unfulfilled that at the end of it, his daughter Tina remarked: "He was ready to go. He was so tired and lonely and broken. His soul had expired years before that stubborn body gave way. His future held nothing but pain. He could never be at peace, never stop running, until he *stopped*" (T. Sinatra 2000: 286, emphasis in original).

Sinatra reflected the central values of American postwar consumer culture. That is, an unwavering faith in the American way, a belief that economic growth will eventually solve the fundamental social problems in society, an expectation that scientific, medical and technological advance will eventually make life easier for everyone, and a conviction that American democracy was the best political system devised by man. He also understood the corruption of American economic and political life, and the truth in the cliché that Hollywood is a boulevard of broken dreams. Sinatra regarded himself to be the unelected representative of ordinary people and he often commented on social and political issues. Despite the shift to the right in the last three decades of his life, his political philosophy remained true to the Panglossian model outlined in the short

didactic film he made in 1945, *The House I Live In*. It consisted of the patriotic belief that America is genuinely the land in which people of different creeds and colors can live together in mutual peace, tolerance and harmony, and where opportunity abounds.

But it is articulated from a position of great wealth, cultural privilege, and firsthand knowledge of political chicanery and economic manipulation. Sinatra's celebrity conferred upon his actions a certain level of immunity. He expatiated oleagiously on American inclusiveness and justice, while conducting a life that involved business deals with known members of the Mafia, sexual libertinism, and frequent acts of physical violence.

Garry Wills has remarked of the right-wing movie star John Wayne that he was an "American Adam" (1997: 302). By this he meant that Wayne's patriotism, masculinity and image of rugged self-reliance transcended postrevolutionary East Coast American dreams of drawing-room sophistication by renewing the ideal of the vigorous frontiersman, the "true" American, ever vigilant and ever situated on the boundary of the expanding West, looking outward. At the heart of this is a biblical sense of the original man, stripped of connotations of class, status and race, who makes his own way, by his own codes, which nonetheless reflect the utopian mores of America.

In contrast, Sinatra is a much more worldly example of achieved American celebrity. He enters the public eye in the late 1930s as a callow youth who is somehow well versed in the politics of seduction, manipulation and violence. Even his early image of vulnerable, unspoilt youth contained the seeds of corruption and venality. The first public signs of this were perhaps the intimidating manner he adopted with the press. According to the *Washington News* (April 14, 1947), as early as 1946 he threatened, albeit by telegram, to give the Hollywood columnist Erskine Johnson "a belt in your vicious and stupid mouth." The *New York Times* (April 14, 1947), reporting the assault on the columnist Lee Mortimer at Ciro's restaurant, quoted Sinatra as saying: "For two years he's been needling me. He gave me a look. I can't describe it. It was one of those contemptuous 'Who do you amount to' looks. I followed him

outside. I hit him." This assault occurred in the same year as Sinatra's damaging summit with leading figures of the Mafia in Havana. It prefigured the intimidation, belligerence and arrogance that blighted his public reputation in his middle and later years.

Caesarism is a condition of authority marked by supreme self-confidence, reticence about motives, steadfastness, self-absorption, and elevation above all customary ties and connections. It mixes generosity of spirit with frosty determination and an audacious indifference to public opinion (Meier 1996). Society does not have much hold upon Caesar, since his accomplishments have elevated him high above the conventions and mores of ordinary life. Conversely, elevation induces a state of languor in the achieved celebrity. Narcissism is emotionally isolating because the tributes of the people never quite match what the narcissist believes is his due. To fill the gap the narcissist seeks new sensations, but their failure to satisfy reinforces the tendency toward introversion and melancholy. The outside world is the source of the narcissist's *substance*, but it is a world that he regards as ever more unworthy and fetid. Hence the recourse to reckless behavior as a way of proving independence and superiority. Hence also the contrary tendency toward altruism and generosity. All of this applied to Sinatra in his middle and old age.

He regularly helped friends in need with all-expenses-paid holidays. After Charlie Morrison, owner of the Mocambo nightclub in Hollywood, died suddenly, Sinatra took it upon himself to pay his debts and provide for his dependants. When Bela Lugosi was hospitalized for his drug addiction, Sinatra paid his bills. When the actor Lee J. Cobb suffered a major heart attack, Sinatra, who had little more than a nodding acquaintance with him, put Cobb in a rest home for six weeks at his own expense. Later he installed him as his house guest in Palm Springs, found him an apartment in Los Angeles, and paid all of his bills until he resumed his career. When Buddy Rich, the drummer with whom Sinatra had a major fight in the Tommy Dorsey days, suffered a serious heart attack, Sinatra assumed responsibility for all of his medical expenses (Levinson 1999: 209).

Sinatra's generosity in his charity work could be even more extravagant. In 1970, Sinatra and Count Basie gave two concerts at the Royal Festival Hall in London. The entire proceeds of both performances were donated to children's charities. Moreover, Sinatra paid for the accommodation and expenses of not only his own entourage but all of the Basie band (Shaw 1968: 7).

Without wishing to minimize the authenticity of Sinatra's generosity, the gift can be read as the narcissist's way of showing his elevation from worldly things. It provides another basis for tributes, but it also underlines the narcissist's ultimate indifference to materialism. The narcissist finds no one to attach himself to since, by definition, he is without equal. The psychological remedy to this overpowering sense of a gap from others and the inner emptiness of being singular is twofold. On the one hand, the narcissist devotes himself or herself to sealing their own perfection through accomplishments that are consciously designed to be epochal and thus a perpetual reminder to others of superiority. On the other hand, the narcissist surrenders himself or herself to passionate distractions as a way to forget the uneasiness and discontent of their inner life. Ava Gardner's "otherness" is an example of this. Her attraction for Sinatra was proportionate to her power to destroy him, a power he romantically chose to see as beyond reason. This accurately describes the real public and private face of Frank Sinatra. By the mid-1950s he had become an American Caesar, and the melancholy, despairing side of his character was as solidly formed as his regal public bearing.

Sinatra and the Technology of Popular Entertainment

Vocal performance was Sinatra's forte and he was obsessive in his technical perfectionism. In fact, he was always more a technician than a natural singer. He worked on breath control, elocution and enunciation. In his youth he swam every day to increase his lung capacity, and he was not simply a fan of Bing Crosby, Billie Holiday and Mabel Mercer, he *studied* them to learn how they achieved their musical effects.

Some of his most important influences are unexpected. From Jascha Heifetz, he noticed that the violin player moved his bow over the fiddle and back again without seeming to pause, and he applied the technique to singing. He copied the mouth control and breathing technique of the trombone player and band leader Tommy Dorsey, to allow him to take a breath while singing. Sinatra developed a consummate style of legato singing that enabled him to dramatize melodies and words so as to achieve maximum impact. His repeated displays of arrogance, grandeur and insufferable rudeness, which, it must be said in mitigation, alternated with extraordinary acts of generosity and genuine magnanimity, derived most forcefully from his conviction that he was unsurpassed in his calling. By the late 1960s, his addictions to Jack Daniels, nicotine and high living would take their toll on his voice. But the confidence and zest that he achieved in both his recordings and film performances during his peak years provided American popular culture with a powerful post-war model of invincible authority in the genre of mass popular entertainment.

Sinatra belonged to the first generation of performers and consumers who regarded the electronic media as a staple form of popular entertainment. In eighteenth-century Europe the distinction between high and low forms of entertainment was not strong. The notion that musical literacy is a prerequisite of musical appreciation cohered in the early nineteenth century. Of course, the aristocracy always possessed free time. But it was permeated with the, often sullen, recognition of tacit seigniorial responsibilities and duties that generally hindered their freedom. While there was some basis in fact for the stereotypes of the dissolute duke and the ethically challenged earl, there was also a basic inertia in feudal society where many traditional rights and obligations remained immovably hallowed by time. With the ascendancy of the rising industrial and business class, appreciation of the arts of vocal and instrumental performance was venerated as a mark of high social status. It differentiated the capital-owning class from propertyless laborers and it established divisions of taste and *Kultur* within the ranks of the ascendant class. The schism between highbrow and lowbrow cultural

forms became pronounced. The children of the nouveaux riches cultivated knowledge of the musical arts as part of their spectrum of self-improving pastimes. The romantic ideal of the artist as a tortured, passionate performer was embodied in the careers of Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840) and Franz Liszt (1811–1886). The creation by Richard Wagner (1813–1883) of the Bayreuth theatre as a temple of superior musical art symbolized the triumph of the “refined” art of the industrial and aristocratic classes. These models of achieved celebrity were implacably hierarchical, since they positioned “genius” as the mark of God that separates the artist from the people (Hughes 1974; Frith 1998).

Sinatra did not spring from these social strata. His parents were Italian immigrants. Both were keenly aware of status distinctions from old Europe relating to cultural capital and position. Dolly Sinatra’s parents immigrated from Genoa, and they regarded the Sicilian stock from which Sinatra’s father, Marty, hailed as an inferior class. Sinatra was not raised in a hothouse of artistic aspiration. His parents were upwardly mobile, but the arts and musical performance did not figure prominently in family pastimes. However, an understanding of the relationship between taste and authority was well anointed in his family background. Sinatra’s obsessive concern with appearance and cleanliness – throughout his life he changed his clothes and showered several times a day – and his preoccupation with social position and rank fully reflect his original social milieu. It is also evident in the honor that he attributed to singing. Sinatra’s sense of vocation was hewn from the same ideology of artistic achievement as that observed in high culture. As a performer he sought to be without equal. In his finest recordings he aimed not merely to entertain, but to leave a permanent cultural mark as an artist. The public face of his celebrity showed few signs of this in the early years of his career. By the mid-1950s it was an overt feature of his stage act and recording career. It forms the backdrop to his middle career and later years and is the standard by which his work should be judged.

Sinatra’s first contact with commercial live musical performance was vaudeville. Vaudeville developed in America as a

form of popular variety entertainment in the late 1880s. From its ranks emerged popular stars like Al Jolson, Mae West, the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and Bob Hope. Sinatra's stage act with the Rat Pack in the 1950s borrowed some of the classic motifs and routines of high vaudeville. However, by the time he reached his mid teens vaudeville was in precipitous decline. New forms of popular entertainment at a remove from live performance, notably radio, film and gramophone recording, were taking over.

Radio was an especially important influence. The formation of NBC in 1927 and CBS in 1928 offered audiences round-the-clock variety, coast to coast. Sinatra gained his first indelible insights into the ideology of artistic success from radio and film. His idols were not Wagner and Brahms, although interestingly Sinatra enjoyed classical music, especially the work of Vaughan Williams, but the pop gods of his day: Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, and Fred Astaire. They supplied him with his earliest images of the glamour of achieved celebrity and the power of artistic success. Big bands and swing music became popular phenomena in the 1930s. Between 1933 and 1938 sales of RCA Victor recordings increased by 600 per cent.

Radio introduced Sinatra to the Benny Goodman Band and the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, with whom he would eventually feature as lead singer. It offered the adolescent Sinatra a staple and cheap means of musical education and of learning how to read mass taste. It was also the direct instrument for his initial success. In his teens Sinatra participated in amateur talent contests run in local vaudeville theaters like the Central in Jersey City and the Fabian in Hoboken. Sinatra's victory in a "Future Stars" contest in the latter venue led to an appearance at a downtown Manhattan vaudeville house, the Academy of Music on 14th Street. Through this route Sinatra made the acquaintance of other young hopefuls in the music business. He eventually founded a singing group, called the Hoboken Four. Their victory in September 1935, on a leading NBC talent show called *Major Bowes and His Original Amateur Hour* broadcast from the Capitol Theater, New York, was decisive in launching him on the road to stardom.

The programme was a classic example of how radio juxtaposed and blended different musical genres and eroded the barrier between highbrow and lowbrow forms of entertainment. For example, the *Major Bowes* show also launched the careers of future stars of New York's Metropolitan Opera like Beverly Sills and Robert Merrill. Discretion was not a prominent part of Sinatra's personality and he could be scathing in public about Bowes himself. During a monologue on the *Sinatra at the Sands* album, recorded with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1966, he described Bowes as "a pompous bum with a bulbous nose. He used to drink Green River. He was a big drunk, was Bowes. I don't know if you've heard of Green River, but it takes the paint off your deck if you got a boat! 59 cents a gallon baby!"

However, the *Major Bowes* show was not the *Pop Idol* of its day. Victory did not result in a cash prize or a lucrative recording contract. Instead, the Hoboken Four joined the *Major Bowes* traveling show, earning \$50 a week plus meals. The unit toured as far away as Hollywood, and there was constant artistic and personal friction between Sinatra and the other members of the group. They disbanded acrimoniously, and Sinatra returned to the grind of amateur talent contests and small club bookings in New Jersey.

Without radio Sinatra would still have been a major icon in twentieth-century popular culture. But its popular growth coincided with Sinatra's teens and enabled him to develop distinctive new ways of marketing himself as a pop idol. Sinatra was 14 when the popular singer Rudy Vallee became a radio sensation through his appearances on radio's first hour-long variety show, *The Fleischman Hour*. He was also aware of the impact that his idol Bing Crosby had achieved through the medium. Accordingly, as he relaunched his career as a solo performer in 1936, he offered to sing for free in local radio stations in New Jersey and New York. Sinatra made informal surveys of the listening habits of radio audiences. He divided them into four groups: the early morning birds, the lunchtime devotees, the teatime gang, and the insomniacs. He tailored his pitch to radio executives to gain airway time accordingly.

His obsession with gaining airtime by any means led to him singing at the Rustic Cabin Roadhouse on Route 9W near Alpine, New Jersey. The venue possessed a radio wire. This was a long-term engagement in which Sinatra sang solo, performed with an ensemble group called the Three Flashes or Pages, emceed, and sometimes waited on tables for \$15 a week. Sinatra's months at the Rustic Cabin coincided with the proliferation of big bands in the New York area. The Paul Whiteman Dance Band held popular residencies at the Biltmore Hotel, the Jimmy Dorsey Band had a similar slot at the Pennsylvania Hotel, Guy Lombardo was at the Roosevelt, and Glen Miller's band was playing at the Glen Island Casino. Harry James, who formed his band in 1939 as an offshoot from the Benny Goodman Orchestra, discovered Sinatra at the Rustic Cabin in March 1939. He signed him on a \$75 a week contract as lead vocalist. In addition to touring the East Coast, the Mid West and the West Coast, Sinatra participated in five recording sessions with the Harry James Orchestra, one of which yielded the crucial hit, *All or Nothing at All*. This recording is alleged to have caught the interest of Tommy Dorsey, who poached Sinatra to be the lead vocalist of his own, more popular band in December of 1939.

Sinatra's early success with the Tommy Dorsey Band was predicated in the image of a skinny kid emerging from the anonymous ranks of the listening public. He portrayed himself as an ordinary Joe, blessed with a mellifluous singing voice but essentially no different from the other decent kids in prewar and wartime American consumer culture. This was an act of calculated affectation. Sinatra always held a high, not to say Olympian, regard for his gifts. Throughout his career he played with the motif of being an ordinary Joe, but in reality he was an unusually imperious achieved celebrity, holding most other performers and often the listening public in low esteem.

Sinatra's belligerence and fastidiousness were already well established in his days with Dorsey. At a concert in Omaha he physically threatened a member of the audience who threw popcorn on to the stage during the performance. One evening, backstage at the Astor Roof, he had an altercation with the drummer Buddy Rich, hurling a pitcher of water at the player

with such ferocity that pieces of the glass were embedded in the plaster. At the same time, he insisted on staying at the best hotels during tours, often breaking with the band to do so. Band members recall him as always being impeccably dressed. He insisted on having two or three showers a day, and generally requested his pay to be handed over in new bills. His traveling cases were meticulously organized, with each item in place and precisely folded (Shaw 1968: 33–4).

Sinatra enjoyed increased radio exposure with the Tommy Dorsey Band and this was crucial in constructing the emerging public face of Sinatra as a mass celebrity. But he was also fortunate in achieving public acclaim as a singer when the technology of vocal performance was undergoing massive transformation. Edison patented the microphone in 1886. However, its development as an indispensable accessory in vocal performance took many years. Sinatra himself began singing with a megaphone. The microphone revolutionized stage performance. At a stroke it removed the requirement for singers to sing in high ranges in order to be heard above the band. Crucially, it enabled amplification to be rendered compatible in performance with the representation of intimacy. Whispers and sighs became audible, thus adding to the conversational, personalized tone. Singers no longer appeared to sing *at* the audience but engaged in an exchange *with* them. Most critics credit Bing Crosby with being the first popular vocalist to realize the auditory potential of the microphone on stage. But Sinatra was the first popular performer to use it as an *instrument*. In gripping the stationary mike, stroking it from side to side, Sinatra suggested erotic foreplay. “You must never jar the audience with it,” he explained (quoted in Lahr 1998: 17). “You must know when to move away from the mike and when to move into it . . . It’s like a geisha girl.”

His performance also suggested the vulnerability of callow youth – a crucial asset in an era when many mothers, sisters and girlfriends were all too aware of the sacrifices being made by young American males in the fight against fascism. In the words of Shaw:

Frank's World

[Sinatra] did not gesture, swing his hips, stamp his feet or leap in the air. He just stood at a microphone, clutching it as if he were too frail to remain standing without it. But the mike mannerism, the limp curl, the caved-in cheeks, the lean hungry look – “the frightened smile” as one reporter put it – emphasized a boyishness that belied a wife and child and brought him as close as the boy next door. (1968: 47)

The intimacy that Sinatra was able to build with an audience was a priceless asset in his popularity. Later, in the 1950s, with the introduction of 12-inch rather than 10-inch long-players Sinatra would transform the album experience. He used the longer playing times to develop a concept or narrative line. Indeed, Sinatra has some claim to be the inventor of the concept album. When he began his recording career in 1938 standard records were produced in the 78 rpm form of a single. Albums were available, but only in the cumbersome and expensive format of several 78s stored in a cardboard holder. Sinatra's first album, *The Voice*, was released in this version. Unfortunately, because the major record labels were geared up for the singles market, and because *The Voice* carried a high retail price, sales were disappointing.

The plastic microgroove long-playing record was launched in 1948 by Columbia records. The first long-players were in the 10-inch format, and a rerelease of *The Voice* was one of the first Columbia products. From today's standpoint the 10-inch technology was Neanderthal. They allowed for only four or five songs on each side. The 12-inch version which became widely available in the mid-1950s permitted eight songs each side. The first releases of LPs of both types suffered because the market for record players that could play them was in its infancy, but they would eventually transform the record business.

Sinatra's recordings in the 1950s demonstrated an alert, well-informed and imaginative interest in the new technology. *The Voice* is arguably the first concept album inasmuch as the individual recordings are clearly selected to combine into a single mood for the listener. But his albums of the mid to late 1950s,

notably *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955), *Where Are You?* (1957) and *Only the Lonely* (1958), move beyond *mise-en-scène* mood-setting to play a didactic role. In these albums Sinatra seeks to share his personal experience of frustrated love and the thwarted ideals of youth. These albums convey the impression that difficulties in love are universal and that Sinatra is a Zen master of the game. At the same time, Sinatra portrays himself as the very generalissimo of rejection. The young Sinatra of *I Fall in Love Too Easily* (1944), *She's Funny That Way* (1944) and *I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance* (1945) was role-playing. He was imagining the possibilities of romantic bliss and catastrophe as all young lovers do. The classic albums of the mid to late 1950s deliberately articulate his own experience and tacitly assume that his listeners have knowledge of his love life through the media. In all of them Ava Gardner is obviously the siren figure, whose appetites and impulses are a source of delight that cannot be controlled or collared and therefore cannot be relied upon. These are albums conceived and performed exclusively from the masculine standpoint. Sinatra is concerned not merely to share the experience of rejection, but to create a frame for it that conclusively defines the experience in popular culture. "Make it one for my baby, and one more for the road" is a grace note for the postwar male experience of bewilderment about the labyrinth of liberated femininity. These albums provide not merely a reflection of popular culture, but a reading of it that qualifies them as durable art.

Achieved Celebrity and the Microscope of the Public

The influence of technology upon Sinatra's art cannot be exaggerated. He was one of the first wave of pop idols to acquire fame in the age of fully developed consumer culture. For achieved celebrities of his generation the sense of living life in the public eye was unprecedented. Artists in high print culture during the late nineteenth century maintained a sense of privacy. They sequestered their private lives from public scrutiny and generally were more successful in defending a distinction

between their private (or veridical) self and the public face. This was necessary for maintaining psychological equilibrium. For achieved celebrities of Sinatra's day, the distinction was no longer tenable. Radio, film and later television and video were added to the probing hand of print culture to place them permanently under the public microscope. Achieved celebrities began to complain of being engulfed by their public image. To some extent, their sense of a private self was erased. Their position and wealth was subject to the fickle nature of the public. For this reason, performers often developed a love/hate relationship with their fans.

Naturally, as he aged, Sinatra's position under the microscope of the public changed. There is no question that unadulterated female lust was a major factor in the mass hysteria generated during his time with the Harry James Orchestra (1939), the Tommy Dorsey Band (1939–42), and especially in the first years of his solo career. The young Sinatra availed himself of the sexual opportunities that fame provided. In fact he did so greedily throughout his career until his early sixties, when, according to one of his biographers, his years of heavy drinking and high living rendered him impotent (Taraborrelli 1997: 580–1). Unquestionably, his behavior confirmed Freud's view that male artistic endeavor is driven by the desire for fame, wealth, and the love of beautiful women (Freud 1910). But beyond fame, wealth and love he obviously wished to be regarded as an unprecedented technical virtuoso, a master of his craft. Beyond all the bravado and the support for unbridled hedonism, there was always a dedicated, professional side to Sinatra's personality, dedicated to the vocation of vocal perfectionism.

Patrimony

A little over ten years after he quit the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in 1942 Sinatra commanded the patrimony that he felt was his due. He cut out the bandleader and the orchestra and became the unchallenged star. He was audacious, imperious, and narcissistic. Even in his cups, mourning the loss of Ava in the

concept album *Only the Lonely* or engaging in savage onstage repartee, he portrays himself as residing above the common ruck, imparting wisdom rather than seeking it, providing a role model rather than supplicating one. Sinatra's legendary status was not founded on being liked more than other performers. His audience frequently disapproved of his behavior. In particular they regarded his Rat Pack insolence and his post-Rat Pack incarnation as "chairman of the board" as intimidating, his belligerence as coarse, his sexism as boorish, and his links with the Mafia as unsavory. Notwithstanding this, he became a legend for three reasons.

First, his comeback after 1953 was against all the odds and appealed to popular admiration for the national values, supposedly bolstered during the war, of courage and perseverance. Sinatra's Caesarism meant that he was usually capable of nothing more than false humility. His self-image was of a man possessed of unique talent and extraordinary achievement to whom automatic respect and deference was *de rigueur*. To be sure, in his personal behavior this was moderated and in some cases suspended with celebrities he had grown up with as a fan. Even in old age he was starstruck by Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, Jimmy Durante, Humphrey Bogart, Spencer Tracy, and Edward G. Robinson. Nor was he beyond recognizing members of his own generations as worthy coevals, if not quite equals. Dean Martin, Robert Mitchum, Sammy Davis Jr, Count Basie and Nelson Riddle fall into this category. Significantly, after his comeback he also recognized belatedly, although never wholeheartedly, that there were public relations dangers attached to hauteur. In 1955 he appointed George Wood of the William Morris organization to be his agent. While his future career would hardly be free of scandal or public opprobrium, it never again descended into the prolonged public relations catastrophe of 1947-53.

Second, he embodied the collective sentiments of optimism and hedonism that flourished in America as consumer culture reinvented itself in the postwar period. Sinatra's public face of guiltless high living and unapologetic immediate gratification provided an antidote to those financially unleashed consumers

who worried about abandoning thrift and restraint. He also offered carefree relief from public worries about the war in Korea, the Soviet threat, the atom bomb, and the unfolding national tragedy of Vietnam.

Third, his career reinforced and developed American myths of rugged individualism. To some extent American preeminence owed more to the legacy of adventurers, risk-takers and land-boomers than to the prim manners and orotund vocabulary of the founding fathers. Sinatra's links with organized crime, his defiance of convention, and his bellicose histrionics against the press, rival entertainers and government officials appealed to the American tradition of adventurism. He disregarded the conventions of humility to the media and record companies, and scorned obedience to officialdom.

In middle age Sinatra became the apotheosis of cool.

The Kingmaker

Perhaps from Sinatra's standpoint success exonerated the imperious, self-aggrandizing, pugnacious traits in his personality. If he sought validation it was provided as early as the late 1950s by his close association with John F. Kennedy. Kennedy consorted with the Rat Pack, joining with them in drinking sessions and sexual escapades. Despite Sinatra's public reputation for violence and his links with organized crime, Kennedy invited Sinatra to play a prominent part in the 1960 presidential election campaign. Kennedy's choice of Sinatra to organize and host the gala celebrations for his presidency was arguably the apogee of Sinatra's career. For a man so closely attuned to the barometer of public recognition as Sinatra, it was a magnificent honor. The sociologist C. Wright Mills had written about the growing significance of the celebrity elite in American life and speculated on the emergence of interlocking linkages with the political and business elites (Mills 1956). Now Sinatra's involvement with Kennedy provided a textbook example.

At this time, nothing seemed to elude Sinatra's power. The cult of Caesarism that surrounded him in the Rat Pack and in the

world of popular entertainment now thrust him into the role of political kingmaker. He relished a new element in his self-mythology: friend and confidante of the President and welcome guest at the White House. For Sinatra, who throughout his life dreamt of fulfilling the Sicilian ideal of being a *uomo di rispetto*, a "man of respect" whose presence is automatically revered by society and who by a glance, word or gesture settles problems, it was a priceless accolade.

One should note that Sinatra's involvement with the Democrats was of long standing. His mother had been a political activist for the party in Hoboken, and after he became famous, Sinatra engaged in fundraising and campaigning activities for Franklin D. Roosevelt and, with Ava Gardner, for Adlai Stevenson in his presidential contest with Eisenhower. But Kennedy's campaign and presidency signified a self-conscious break with the past. Of course, since the days of Andrew Jackson presidential candidates have appreciated the value of public relations and public performance. But few were as well equipped as Kennedy to *seduce* the public. Kennedy oozed youth, sexuality and glamour. His campaign called for enlarged public responsibilities in defeating poverty, want and ignorance at home and expanding liberty and progress abroad. It was a confident, proactive stance that contrasted with the conservative, reactionary policies of the Eisenhower years. Kennedy exploited it to devastating effect in his television debates with the Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon. In these exchanges Kennedy seemed assured and open about the direction of American domestic and foreign policy, while Nixon seemed hesitant and furtive. Kennedy was to make great play of being the first President born in the twentieth century. For Sinatra, there was not only a sincere identification with Kennedy's policies of extending civil rights, increasing state investment in underprivileged communities and improving education and health care, there was also a thrilling sense of his own generation coming to power.

For its part, the Kennedy camp – at this time – judged that the energy and glamour that Sinatra and the Rat Pack radiated would increase the perception of JFK as a natural winner.

Later, long after Kennedy's assassination, evidence of Sinatra's role in providing Kennedy with a string of lovers, most notably Judith Campbell Exner, who was also sexually involved with Sinatra and with Sam Giancana, the Chicago Mafia boss, would surface, greatly diminishing the reputation of all protagonists. For the moment, the inaugural gala event constituted the crowning achievement of Sinatra's career: the undisputed master of ceremonies at the court that would later enter American history as "Camelot."

But as the administration got under way, Robert Kennedy's assault on organized crime turned the Sinatra connection into a liability. In addition, Sinatra embarrassed the Kennedy camp by defiantly hiring Albert Maltz, the old, blacklisted screenwriter of *The House I Live In*, to write the screenplay for a film that he was set on making, *The Execution of Private Slovik*. The film concerned the story of the only American soldier in World War Two to be shot for desertion. Maltz was a controversial choice for the new project because he had served a prison sentence during the McCarthy era for refusing to say whether or not he was a Communist. Perhaps Sinatra believed that his power immunized him from the consequences of working with a blacklisted member of the McCarthy era. He certainly regarded the hiring of Maltz as an act of defiance against the proceedings of HUAC and the right-wing press that supported them. "Once they get the movies throttled," he declared, "how long will it be before the committee goes to work on freedom of the air?... If you make a pitch on a nationwide radio network for a square deal for the underdog, will they call you a commie?" (quoted in Weiner 1991: 266.) Be that as it may, the Kennedys realized that the implication that a member of their circle was consorting with a suspected Communist was potentially politically devastating. As a result of pressure from the White House Sinatra fired Maltz, but honorably paid him his full screenwriter's fee and aborted the project. But in the Kennedy camp his reputation as a loose cannon was now set in stone. Questions of Sinatra's political judgment and speculation about his links with the Mafia quickly revived.

The Californian White House

After the Maltz affair, Kennedy was more wary in his public and private relations with Sinatra. The relationship became strained and eventually disintegrated in a dramatic fashion. In 1962 the President planned a visit to Sinatra's Palm Springs home. Nothing could have been calculated to appeal more to Sinatra's self-image as a *uomo di rispetto* and a *uomo d'onore*, a man of honor. In his mind's eye, the seat of power was temporarily relocating from Washington to his Palm Springs home. He was exultant. He set about making truly epic renovations to the property in preparation for JFK's visit. For example, he added a banquet room with seating space for 40; two cottages were built to house Secret Service agents; a communications center was constructed; a concrete heliport was installed; a towering flagpole was erected flying the presidential seal; a Kennedy room was established and furnished with mementos, framed personal notes and photographs; and a brass plaque was affixed to a bedroom door commemorating an earlier (nonpresidential) visit with "John F. Kennedy Slept Here, November 6th and 7th, 1960."⁵ It was typical of Sinatra's sense of self-importance, but also demonstrated the genuine largesse that he lavished upon friends, especially if they possessed influence. In the event, the effort and money were wasted. Kennedy's advisors prevailed upon him that it would be a political miscalculation to accept Sinatra's hospitality and the visit was abruptly canceled. To Sinatra's incredulity, Kennedy stayed at the estate of the known Republican performer Bing Crosby.

To a large extent, Kennedy's advisors were right. In the early 1960s the press was treating Sinatra's Mafia links as no longer speculative but transparent. In 1963 a visit by Sam Giancana to Sinatra's casino hotel, Cal-Neva Lodge, Lake Tahoe, contravened a public ruling of the Nevada Gaming Control Board. Sinatra was secretly filmed socializing with Giancana. During the subsequent Gaming Control Board enquiry, despite his attempts to dismiss the episode as harmless fun, Sinatra's license

was revoked and he was instructed to divest himself of his interests in the Cal-Neva and Sands casinos. Sinatra was livid and again resorted to the argument that he was a victim of establishment racism. Under sufferance, and with bad grace, he sold his casino interests. Sinatra shared the traditional Sicilian mistrust of officialdom and state interference in private matters. He regarded the judgment of the Nevada Gaming Control Board to be not only unjust but also an affront to his honor. In his mind, and in actuality, he had made an immense contribution to the wealth of the state through his performances in Las Vegas. For him, it followed that he deserved sympathy and respect from the authorities. Instead he received condescension and harassment.

The tendency to independently and automatically defend and avenge any violation of integrity to himself, his property or his family and friends recurs throughout Sinatra's career. It is evident in his disturbing acts of physical violence and litigation against journalists or others he believed did not treat him with sufficient respect. In his eyes, material success was never enough. The quest for power was all. He wanted to be viewed as a respectable member of the legitimate community – a figure whose activity is regarded as not simply a matter of self-interest, but mutual benefit. This is why he was magnetized by politics. Politics is the art of solving problems, achieving personal honor, and contributing to the common good. The leader who brings people together, solves problems and brings prosperity is the ultimate *uomo di rispetto* in the public sphere. For this reason he is also the key figure of influence in the power structure.

Padrone Reagan

When Sinatra's thoughts turned to making a serious attempt to regain his gambling license he approached President Reagan. But not before using his own influence to assist Reagan on the road to the White House and by this means, crucially, establishing an adhesive principle of reciprocity. Sinatra's drift to the

Republican Party began in the late 1960s. He was never part of Lyndon B. Johnson's circle. As president after John F. Kennedy's assassination, Johnson followed Robert Kennedy's position in regarding Sinatra as a mafioso and an electoral liability. Nor did Sinatra fare better with Johnson's Democrat successors. His offers to campaign and fundraise for Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential contest with Richard Nixon foundered when the *Wall Street Journal* resuscitated allegations of Sinatra's links with organized crime. Humphrey was petitioned by his advisors to shun Sinatra, which he duly did. By then, Sinatra's move away from the Democrats was arguably more than a matter of hurt pride. It was motivated by the perception, shared with many voters, that "soft" solutions to crime, education, welfare and the economy had failed.

In the early 1960s Sinatra was openly dismissive of Ronald Reagan's campaign for the governorship of California. In fact, he denounced him as "a stupid bore who couldn't get into pictures" (Freedland 1997: 347). He was ostentatious in his scorn when Reagan was duly elected in 1966. But he backed Reagan in his successful campaign for reelection as Governor in 1970. At this time, Sinatra was not alone in regarding Reagan as an improbable candidate for President. Instead he backed Spiro T. Agnew, Nixon's Vice President. However, when Agnew resigned from office in ignominy in 1973 following revelations about tax evasion, Reagan's star gradually began to rise, both within the Republican Party and with Sinatra. Sinatra supported Reagan's campaign to be elected as President in 1980. Perhaps he also judged that Reagan's origins in show business would make him more sympathetic to Sinatra's difficulties with the Nevada Gaming Control Board. Be that as it may, Sinatra agreed to become involved in campaigning and fundraising for the Reagan campaign, a decision that eventually contributed \$4 million to Republican coffers. Sinatra's fundraising role and public support was highly valued by the presidential candidate. Indeed, Nancy Reagan's praise was so fulsome that it triggered lewd media speculation that she was involved in a secret affair with Sinatra. There is no evidence to confirm the speculation. However, in a symbolic volte-face of his crowning moment at

Kennedy's inauguration in 1961, Sinatra organized the 1981 inaugural gala for the Republican Reagan, famously regaling Nancy with a revised, sycophantic version of his old nightclub standard, "Nancy (with the Laughing Face)."

Sinatra had delivered.

Reagan was now the *padrone* of American politics. In the psychology of the *uomo di rispetto*, the successful use of influence is an occasion for joy but also for the acknowledgment of reciprocity by those to whom favor has been granted. Sinatra was in no position to coerce Reagan to act on his behalf. On the other hand, by successfully assisting Reagan's path to the White House he established a precedent for reciprocity.

In 1981 Sinatra launched a legal challenge to reverse the judgment of the Nevada Gaming Control Board. He and his legal team solicited personal statements in Sinatra's favor from the great and the good in Hollywood. Kirk Douglas, Bob Hope and Gregory Peck provided sworn affidavits testifying to Sinatra's generosity and benevolence. A Catholic priest and friend of the Sinatra family, Father Herbert Ward, swore Sinatra to be God-fearing and trustworthy. Sinatra's friend Sheriff Peter Pitchess of Los Angeles County poured derision on the suggestion that Sinatra was a member of the Mafia. But arguably, it was President Ronald Reagan's letter of recommendation to the Nevada Gaming Control Board that represented Sinatra as "honorable," "loyal" and "completely honest" that proved decisive. The investigations of the Nevada Gaming Control Board found in Sinatra's favor, and awarded him back his gaming license.

In many respects it was a pyrrhic victory. To some extent, Sinatra's sense of outrage and smouldering injustice at the decision to relieve him of the Cal-Neva lodge and his investment in the Sands was appeased. But by 1981 the 66-year-old Sinatra was deep into the longest swansong in postwar American entertainment. Actually, he announced his retirement as early as 1971. The "last" concert in Los Angeles concluded with *Angel Eyes*, with its apt final refrain, "Scuse me while I disappear." But this, as with so much about the public face of Sinatra, was merely cosmetic.

The Final Curtain

Caesar cannot leave the people. He is bound to them by an umbilical cord, because they are the ultimate source of his power and sense of self-worth. Without the renewal of this popular connection his charisma declines. The accolades of other leaders and the honors given by states are as nothing compared to the tribute of the people. So it is with achieved celebrities. They often experience retirement as a vacuum because it affords no meaningful basis for the public replenishment of their honor and respect. This is why so many achieved celebrities continue working into their seventies, eighties and beyond, despite having no financial need to do so.

Sinatra recommenced touring in 1973 and continued until failing health forced him to abandon the stage in 1995. Some performances repeated the authority, insouciance and style that Sinatra radiated at his peak. In these concerts Sinatra seemed to defy the years. His voice had changed. The youthful light baritone with a two octave range from G to G darkened in later years, to what F. Balliett referred to "a Hoboken *bel canto* quality" (1998: 13). Nonetheless, the consummate power and confidence of the Rat Pack era and his famous performances with the Count Basie Orchestra in the 1960s were tangible. As I have already observed, age did not mellow him. He continued to defy controversy and to swim against the tide of political correctness. In 1981 his decision to agree to a ten-day engagement in Sun City, the playground for South African whites,⁶ was widely condemned by blacks and the liberal press for colluding with apartheid. Conversely, he was also honored by others as a twentieth-century humanitarian, gaining the Medal of Freedom in 1985 and a Life Achievement Award from the Los Angeles branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1987.

In other concert performances Sinatra showed his age. Friedwald quotes Sinatra's piano accompanist Vincent Falcone, who ventured that by the early 1970s Sinatra's voice had deteriorated irreparably (Friedwald 1996: 487). Randall Taraborrelli submits

that by the 1980s Sinatra's voice was already "ravaged" not simply by the ageing process but by his "careless lifestyle" (1997: 583). However, Sinatra partially disguised the decline by strenuous vocal exercises consisting of scales and arpeggios. He appears to have relaxed this regime somewhat in the 1980s, but by then his general health was becoming uncertain. In 1986 he collapsed on stage in Atlantic City and was officially diagnosed as suffering from diverticulitis. His doctors removed 12 inches of intestine and temporarily inserted a colostomy bag – horribly demeaning for the apotheosis of cool – prompting speculation that Sinatra was actually suffering from colon cancer. Sinatra was 71 at that time and was working five months a year with approximately 70 concert bookings. After he recovered, he returned to the stage and for a time reduced his pattern of bookings. Even so, in 1990 the 75-year-old Sinatra played 65 dates, he played 73 in 1991 and 84 in 1992. He still regarded himself as a global entertainer, performing in 17 different countries in 1991, including Australia, Ireland, Japan, and Sweden.

However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s his disabilities were abundantly evident. It was not just a question of his vocal powers. His memory was unreliable and he grew more dependent on autocues. In 1991 he was advised that he required a hearing aid in his left ear, and in 1993 he underwent two operations for the removal of cataracts in his eyes. In 1994 in Richmond, Virginia, he again collapsed on stage and was carried off in a wheelchair. Tina, his daughter, recalled that in an appearance at the Riviera Sinatra forgot the lyrics to one of his standards, *The Second Time Around*, and was bailed out by his audience finishing it for him (T. Sinatra 2000: 229). By the 1990s his performances were rarely triumphant, usually a pale shadow of his golden years and occasionally embarrassing. The press speculated that he was suffering from the onset of dementia, a proposition that became more frequent after his retirement. His final concert occurred in February 1995 at the Marriot Desert Springs Resort and Spa.

In his last decade as a public performer Sinatra was arguably more of a spectacle than an entertainer. Critics put his voice at three-fifths of its 1950s authority and power (Freedland

1997: 417). This was more than sufficient to deliver many memorable performances. But it was insufficient to guarantee consistency. Sinatra often faltered, failed to reach the correct notes, muffled his enunciation, and generally lost his way. But his presence as a legend symbolizing over half a century of achievement in popular music, film and celebrity lifestyle was enough to inspire popular homage. In his bow tie, white shirt and tuxedo he was an immortal icon of twentieth-century popular culture whose evident frailty oddly echoed the external vulnerability that was such a pronounced feature of his public face in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Sinatra spent all three ages of man – youth, middle age, and old age – in the spotlight. If the core of his fame was founded in the invulnerable, insouciant persona cultivated in middle age, the beginning and end of his career are united in the admittedly calculated, but nonetheless affecting, exhibition of human frailty.

Of course, in his later years Sinatra was uncomfortable about being regarded as a remnant of the past rather than a still vital and creative artist. He had feared ageing and death all his life and any insinuation that his powers of performance were receding was met with short shrift. He also affected a public humility that had not been seen since the days of *The House I Live In*. On the *Larry King Show* he dismissed the suggestion that he was preeminently famous for being a legend with what, by Sinatra's lights, was almost humility:

I don't know what a legend means, I really don't quite understand. I'm not a stupid man, but the definition of legend is so broad, I don't know what it means. King Arthur was a legend, Franklin Roosevelt was a legend, and this guy, that guy... But what does it mean? It's longevity. I think if you're around long enough people become aware, your name comes up in conversation, people write about you. Your name comes up. (Taraborrelli 1997: 585)

This has more than a whiff of insincerity about it. The *uomo di rispetto* maneuvers himself to head a network of power and influence which awards him respect and veneration by dint of

his position. It is a symbolic power that resorts to physical force only as a last resort. But it is consciously engineered and ferociously defended. The *uomo di rispetto* does not stoop to self-promotion in public. His influence in the community derives from being automatically acknowledged and revered as a leader and man of influence. So it is with a legendary celebrity. Sinatra knew his worth in American popular culture and he was quick to avenge any slight upon his reputation by threats, intimidation and litigation. In his later years his patient, determined efforts to regain his Nevada gambling license, and his acceptance of a variety of honorific medals and awards do not suggest the sudden blooming of a shrinking violet.

Sinatra was one of only a handful of iconic achieved celebrities in the popular culture of the twentieth century who created a personal mythology and body of work that defined not a single decade but over half of the century. He was "the Voice" of the 1940s, the leader of the Rat Pack and "chairman of the board" of the 1950s and 1960s, and "Ol' Blue Eyes" of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. As a pop idol of the 1940s, Sinatra was grafted into film early in his career. *Higher and Higher* (1943), *Anchors Away* (1945) and *It Happened in Brooklyn* (1947) required him to perform relatively undemanding roles for a captive, adoring teenage audience. These were unobjectionable and unremarkable films designed to achieve crossover capitalization from popular music to mass market film. He might have persisted with them – as, depressingly, Elvis Presley was to do at the behest of his avaricious manager, Colonel Tom Parker, in the 1960s. But in the 1950s Sinatra chose more challenging roles that addressed the dark side of American popular culture. *From Here to Eternity* explored class conflict and the politics of victimization; *Suddenly* (1954) – a neglected gem in the Sinatra film canon – deals with a plot to kill the President; *The Man with the Golden Arm* examined the transgressive world of heroin addiction; *The Joker Is Wild* was a biopic of Joe E. Lewis, a nightclub singer forced to change career after a rival club owner ordered assailants to cut his vocal chords. In the 1960s *The Manchurian Candidate* was based on Richard Condon's novel of a Congressional Medal of Honor war veteran who is brainwashed by the

Koreans to assassinate the President; the Tony Rome films (*Tony Rome*, 1967; *Lady in Cement*, 1968) focused on a hard-boiled Chandleresque detective loner.

These films dealt with the themes of the arid fantasies of Cold War American ideology, social friction, violence, alienation, and isolation. They demonstrate Sinatra's urge to make relevant, challenging films as a counterpoint to his straightforward mass market, money-making vehicles such as *Guys and Dolls* (1955), *The Tender Trap* (1955), *Can-Can* (1960), and the Rat Pack romps, of the 1960s, *Ocean's Eleven Sergeants Three, Four for Texas*, and *Robin and the Seven Hoods*.

Nor did Sinatra's recordings simply address carefree hedonism. He alternated up-tempo, escapist albums like *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*, *Come Fly with Me* and *Sinatra Swings with In the Wee Small Hours*, *Where Are You?*, *Only the Lonely* and *No One Cares*, which dealt piquantly with themes of rejection, loss, and emotional disintegration.

Sinatra's enormous fame derived not merely from his creative achievements in music and film but also from the persona and style of living that he cultivated. His public face transmitted assurance, boldness, confidence, insouciance and, perhaps above all, power. In the 1950s he personified the carefree hedonism of American consumer culture. As America's military and political role in the world expanded in Eastern Europe, Korea, Indo-China and, fatefully, into Vietnam, American popular culture grew more introspective and materialistic. Sinatra and the Rat Pack represented an idealized middle aged, male world of fooling around, gambling, leisurely rounds of golf, packed wallets, well-stocked drinks cabinets, and endless girlfriends offering sex without commitment. It was a world so self-centered and indifferent to global political and cultural realities that it bordered on the delusional. Conversely, so winning was this portrayal of carefree masculine West Coast hedonism that it overshadows Sinatra's unquestionable achievement in addressing abandonment, rejection, and emotional abuse. He was never a one-dimensional artist. His work took risks and, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, sought to change cultural attitudes.

Yet his career also illustrates the tensions of changing masculinity, the contradictions of American cultural imperialism, the shallowness of consumer culture, and the use of force and political influence to achieve goals. Sinatra was a brilliant success, but he was also the victim of cultural transformations that he did not fully understand. The loosening of puritan, white, Anglo-Saxon authoritarian values is something that his career helped to achieve. But in the final two decades of his life he clearly believed that the liberalization of culture had gone too far. Likewise in these years American culture evidently demurred from some aspects of Sinatra's persona, notably his belligerence, narcissism, and association with organized crime. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he was ritually subpoenaed to appear before state and Congressional commissions investigating the Mafia. He was never charged with criminal activity. Perhaps his immunity from prosecution owed much to his alleged links with the CIA. Notwithstanding this, the public requests to defend himself contributed to the public perception of him as a disreputable star which all of his sterling work for charity, especially children's causes, failed to dissipate. As he struggled to remember the lines of songs on stage, with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Jack Daniels in the other, he came to symptomatize an old-fashioned type of heroic, independent self-centered masculinity that was no longer acceptable in American life.

Nevertheless, Sinatra's presence in the landscape of postwar popular culture was sufficiently immense for him to thrive and prosper. More people revered him as a legend than cursed him as a tyrant and dissembler. Indeed, in his final years he had the uncanny experience for a living achieved celebrity of already being recognized as immortal.