

**Frank Sinatra:**

*Culmination of American Popular Culture and  
Italian Identity*

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*That's Life, Fly Me To The Moon, My Way* – from mood-makers and breakers to an arsenal of Christmas cheer, Frank Sinatra's long-lasting career established his legacy as one of history's greatest musicians. Sinatra emerged as the distinct face of American music and popular culture during the inter-war period and beyond by the sense of solace his music provided in a time of worldwide strife. Born in 1915, Sinatra entered the world amidst anguish, conflict, and uncertainty; and out of this environment he would capture the hearts of America and the world with his heartfelt message and catchy tune. His power lay in his ability to captivate his listeners and unite unlikely strangers through his artistry. As the child of two Italian immigrants in a small working-class city, numerous hurdles stood in the way, but he exceeded people's low expectations and redefined what it meant to be a musician. An Italian American from Hoboken New Jersey, Frank Sinatra transcended societal barriers and transformed the world of music through his unparalleled talent, cultural identity, and passion for equity.

With a discography that continues to permeate society to this day, Frank Sinatra brought live music and performance to new heights and formed a standard for musical creation and the definition of what it meant to be an artist. He was born on December 12, 1915, to parents Natalia (Dolly) Garaventa and Anthony Martin Sinatra; Garaventa grew up in a village near Genoa, and Sinatra in Sicily.<sup>1</sup> Frank Sinatra's birth was tumultuous, and he nearly died as a result of a doctor's careless misuse of forceps, which left him with visible, permanent scarring on his neck.<sup>2</sup> Growing up in Hoboken during the 1920's, Sinatra lived in the most densely populated city in the United States that had garnered a reputation as a tough, working-class town.<sup>3</sup> Hoboken

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Meyer, "Frank Sinatra: The Popular Front and an American Icon", *Science & Society* 66.3 (Guilford Press, 2002), 313.

<sup>2</sup> Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold", *Creative Nonfiction* 4 (Creative Nonfiction Foundation, 1995), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, 313.

housed a high Italian population, but it was comprised of numerous ethnic groups living in close proximity with one another.

The turn of the century saw an immigration boom and Italians constituted a major portion of those arriving in the United States. It was a time where ‘Social Darwinism’ promoted the idea that certain ethnic groups were more naturally selected to lead than others; and Italians’ characteristics failed to fit the bill, especially southern Italians.<sup>4</sup> Given also that “they constituted the largest group of new immigrants [to the country], their entry was doubly deplored.”<sup>5</sup> This led to the emergence of an anti-Italian sentiment and an increase in discrimination against Italian immigrants. Hoboken’s proximity to Ellis Island and New York made it an area many immigrants chose to settle into, and though the area housed a diverse population, Italians made up the bulk of Hoboken’s inhabitants. This fostered a tense division between the groups, and one had to be cautious when crossing town in order to avoid certain areas that they were not readily welcome in. This environment exposed Sinatra to the anti-Italian beliefs commonly held at the time, but it also enlightened him on the experience of other minority communities surrounding him. At ten years old, he found himself the victim of an attack by an Irish gang for supposedly defending a Jewish boy in his neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> His melting-pot experience in Hoboken might explain his dedication to racial equality and justice throughout the span of his career.

Though tensions separated these groups physically, by nature of existing alongside one another, multicultural communities tend to share aspects from each of their respective cultures

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<sup>4</sup> Salvatore J. LaGumina, “Discrimination, Prejudice and Italian American History”, *The Routledge History of Italian Americans* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2018), 227.

<sup>5</sup> LaGumina, 227.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Freedland, *All the Way: A Biography of Frank Sinatra* (New York, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 9.

over time, especially with regards to food, music, and certain traditions. Sinatra's upbringing in a rough but diverse area also introduced him to new cultures that likely blended with his own, and:

One can't help but think Sinatra's keen ear was educated by his upbringing in the Italian streets of Hoboken... further refined by the Jews, Irish, and Blacks of New York City... [and] all these peoples, whether selling pretzels in the street or running for political office, have a special feel for the... shadings of vocal expression...<sup>7</sup>

Living with a diverse group of people alongside several cultures naturally brings forth new experience and inspiration. Frank Sinatra's upbringing helped shape his deep-rooted belief in equality as well as his unique musical perspective, priming him for unprecedented levels of success during his career.

Sinatra revolutionized stage performance particularly with his use of microphones, mood, and masculinity. He used the microphone as an extension of both him and his performance, and it served as one of his defining characteristics – the microphone was developed as he was emerging as a vocal powerhouse.<sup>8</sup> It quickly became his secret weapon, with which he could lean into his notes and physically communicate “the figurative and literal dynamic that he desired. The simple stage maneuver perfectly accentuated his unique vocal styling,”<sup>9</sup> and his audiences adored it. He was among the first to incorporate the microphone as a component of his art in this way, and it prompted a relationship between the stage and promiscuity. His use of the microphone as an extension of himself developed a new way for artists to convey their messages

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard Mustazza, *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture: Essays on an American Icon* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 188.

<sup>8</sup> Mustazza, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Mustazza, 119.

during live performance. Sinatra's dazzling stage presence and novel use of stage equipment outshone other artists in the industry regardless that he "did not possess the strongest instrument, the largest range, or even the truest pitch."<sup>10</sup> His power also lay in his diverse palette of vocal colors surpassing that of any other singer's richness at the time: his brassy, belting voice complemented his softer, husky tone, combining into the unique sound that audiences could not get enough of!<sup>11</sup>

As his career flourished during the 1950s, Sinatra utilized another technological advancement in a way no one else had: the twelve-inch, long-playing record. This type of record came with the capacity for ten to twelve songs instead of the usual four, and he immediately saw the massive potential this offered, sparking his creativity to new levels.<sup>12</sup> Taking advantage of this newfound ability to provide a longer narrative, he invented a storyline-based record that would later be referred to as a 'concept album', in which he began the writing process based upon a specific mood or feeling in mind.<sup>13</sup> This uprooted and redefined the creative process for the music industry as it knew it. Frank Sinatra's development led to a massive creativity boom in the industry and transformed the way musicians perceived and produced their work. Today, it can be harder to find an album *without* a concept.

Frank Sinatra's music alone, regardless of his technological maneuvers, also proved enough to ensure his long-standing success as an artist. His inherent talent for the subject, home environment, and life experience created a sound unlike any other. Early in his career, he worked with Tommy Dorsey's band and learned the key fundamentals of music there, largely drawing

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<sup>10</sup> Mustazza, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Mustazza, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Nelson, "Frank Sinatra: The Loneliness of the Long Distance Singer", *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 75.4 (University of Virginia, 1999), 615.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, 615.

upon Dorsey's ability to sustain long, seamless, melodic lines in his trombone solos.<sup>14</sup> Though he left the group to pursue his own career as a solo vocalist in September 1942, the experience with Dorsey's band undoubtedly inspired Sinatra's sound and strengthened his skills in jazz and swing.<sup>15</sup> Further, his upbringing in a multicultural area introduced him to different music styles and instruments, and the political environment he lived within helped shape the content of his music. At all stages of his career, his power stemmed from his gift for voicing his insecurities and vulnerabilities – the art that nurtures any and all who listen to it.<sup>16</sup> His music in the forties appealed to diverse populations “not only in the sweetness of his voice but [in] the vulnerability it conveyed... he seemed exposed and helpless in the face of powerful feelings...”<sup>17</sup> He tapped into emotions in a way no other male musician did, and his sentimental style of writing both intrigued and comforted listeners. Throughout the forties his songs also voiced disguised sexual desires, which fit the growing sexual adventurism that erupted in post-war society.<sup>18</sup> As time progressed into the fifties, his style graduated into that of a “collaboration artist, a magician and poet, an alchemist of torn and twisted emotions... [for people] to explore...”<sup>19</sup> Frank Sinatra's music provided people with new perceptions on society and self by exploring emotions and mindsets rarely discussed so publicly or explicitly.

His stylization and innovation in musical composition also elevated his discography to a level above his peers – deemed superior at swing, his upbeat tempos attracted listeners amidst a growing craze for jazz. Of his works, “some albums have more of a jazz “feel” than others...

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<sup>14</sup> Nelson, 608.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, 608.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Furia, “Frank Sinatra: Musician, Actor and Quintessential Ethnic”, *Italian Americana* 19.1 (Italian Americana, 2001), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Mustazza, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Furia, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Furia, 14.

[but] there's a jazz foundation to everything he does, particularly his ballads."<sup>20</sup> His application of unique lyricism atop jazzy beats won over the hearts of listeners on a global scale. His music stood out within the genre, however, as he implemented powerful quarter notes contrary to the common baseline of eighth notes in the standard; occasionally, this approach resulted in 'a feeling of two', which was a musical experience invented by Sinatra that rarely appeared anywhere else.<sup>21</sup> His clever "use of long and short notes, and where he stops sound, is crucial to what makes the swing feel work."<sup>22</sup> Frank Sinatra worked to ensure the quality of each piece of music he composed, attempting with each song to convey deep-rooted emotions wrapped up within intricate, danceable tempos.

His novel use of technology and uncommon stylization that ensured his art was contemporary and unique was compounded on by Sinatra's stage persona and charisma. As an Italian American rising to fame in the mid-forties, he was already breaking the social norms of his time, but he took things a step further with both his playful use of gender roles and his seductive appeal. Sinatra's shows were packed with young women and men who were infatuated with his flirty aura and soft-hearted lyricism, rivalled only by Elvis. Frank Sinatra played into this and as he "himself noted, he was a surrogate to young women for "the boy in every corner drugstore who'd gone off, drafted to the war."<sup>23</sup> His status as the world's lover-boy was cemented by his introduction of sex into public life, evoked with the way he wrote and sang his love songs; many felt as though he deeply meant the words he sang and meant it for each individual listener to hear.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mustazza, 176.

<sup>21</sup> Mustazza, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Mustazza, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Tom and Phil Kuntz, *The Sinatra Files: The Secret FBI Dossier* (New York, New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2000), xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, 611.

Another charming aspect to Sinatra's music was his open playfulness with his use of gender in his artistry. He had a particular interest in Broadway showtunes and was able to extend the emotional range of his stage persona by utilizing them. Many of the songs were formulated for female singers, but it did not sway him. If the lyrics were adapted to suit him as a male, he would often change it back to the original. In fact, he leaned into such gender reversal and chose to sing certain female lyrics purposely to retain their clever rhymes and idioms. It also allowed him to portray himself as gentle and 'lamb-like' in the face of a more aggressive female suitor, a far contrast to the traditional societal norms of the time.<sup>25</sup> In a period where identity first started to come into public question and conversation, his willingness "to strip away the protective covering of poise and charm that had always characterized the star in order to expose the wounded ego beneath"<sup>26</sup> resonated with innumerable listeners, establishing Sinatra as a relatable artist who was easy to find community in.

Frank Sinatra's cultural identity is also a key factor in highlighting his influence, as his music encompassed the experience of all; he became known as the people's top choice for music during his career. Despite his decreased status as a first generation Italian American, he still embodied America as a whole during his career: he was the prime entertainer to Americans, his style was complex and rich as a result of his upbringing in close contact with numerous cultural identities, his lyricism teetered between tough and tender, and he cleverly used new technological innovations.<sup>27</sup> Likely a result of the discrimination he both faced as an Italian American and witnessed happen to other minority communities, Sinatra was also a fighter for the people, standing out against prejudice and racial discrimination in an era brimming with

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<sup>25</sup> Furia, 165.

<sup>26</sup> Mustazza, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Mustazza, 184.



intolerance. Though not his chief intention, this boosted his popularity significantly because it allowed numerous cultural groups to find a sense of home within his music. His song *The House I Live In*, for example, exemplifies his belief in equality when he says America is “the town I live in, the street, the house, the room... but especially, the people,” stating that the people represented in the song were “all races and religions... the grocer and the butcher... the worker by my side...”<sup>28</sup> Sinatra was the son of working-class parents, and at a younger age, he spent time working “at the Teijant and Lang Shipyards,” and, “for a while, ... in the dispatch department of the local newspaper, the New Jersey Observer...”<sup>29</sup> In this way, Sinatra appeared as a songwriter for the masses more than he ever did for the elites of society, even in the height of his fame.

One of his strongest positions on justice throughout his career was his commitment to the fight against anti-Semitism, and he firmly defended and stood with Jewish individuals. His song *The House I Live In* also asserted his belief in racial and religious equality in addition to class equality, saying “look, fellers,... religion makes no difference except to a Nazi or somebody as stupid... This wonderful country is made up of a hundred different ways of talking and a hundred different ways of going to church. But they’re all American ways...”<sup>30</sup> Sinatra even called out prejudice within the privacy of his own home; when his daughter Nancy was a young girl, she poked fun at Albert Einstein for looking “so Jewish”, to which she said “my father’s face... I had never seen him so angry before. He glared at me and said loudly, ‘Nobody looks anything – remember that.’”<sup>31</sup> His respect for equality and racial justice proved fundamental to who Frank Sinatra was and what he stood for. He also “rallied against people

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<sup>28</sup> Meyer, 319.

<sup>29</sup> Freedland, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Freedland, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Sinatra, *Frank Sinatra: My Father* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 166.

who called ‘Negroes’ – a totally acceptable word in 1945 – ‘dirty n\*\*\*\*\*,’” in addition to speaking “at the World Youth Rally in New York City [on 21 March 1945.]”<sup>32</sup> His music and public appearance reflected the best attributes America had to offer – liberty and justice for all – in a time that the exact opposite was practiced in society. Not only were the songs written by a person with a diverse life experience, but they were also written as open invitations to all, and the embodiment of these ideals illustrates Sinatra’s significance to the world. Though he swung to the Republican party in 1981, his social attitudes remained more liberal, and he existed as a public figure against prejudice throughout his life.<sup>33</sup> The open-arms policy he extended to humanity was not always reciprocated, however, and he faced hardship due his being Italian American in the height of anti-Italian rhetoric in American society.

During the inter-war and post-war periods, tensions between Italian Americans and their fellow citizens remained high-strung, and this untrustworthy perception ultimately spilled over into Sinatra’s career, world-class musician or not. The stereotype of Italians being involved in organized crime followed Frank Sinatra, and according to his daughter, Nancy, “the buzz word was ‘Mafia’. The mob. For years, people – particularly some of the right-wing press – had been making allegations about Frank Sinatra’s ‘ties to organized crime’...”<sup>34</sup> He was the first Italian American to achieve such levels of fame, and despite his welcoming nature, he repeatedly found himself at the center of discrimination. He even found himself facing prejudice at the federal level – the FBI was thoroughly convinced of his direct involvement in the affairs of the Mafia or other organized crime groups. The FBI never uncovered tangible, convictable evidence for their theories about Sinatra, and “the 1,275-page dossier that the agency first opened on him in 1943

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<sup>32</sup> Freedland, 124.

<sup>33</sup> Kuntz, xxii.

<sup>34</sup> Sinatra, 166.

[was] the product of a 40-year surveillance on the single most famous and influential vocalist of American popular music.”<sup>35</sup> Though Frank Sinatra was far from perfect and had his fair share of public scandal and promiscuity, what the FBI accused and sought evidence for was nothing more than a conspiracy based upon harmful stereotypes surrounding Italian Americans.

Sinatra’s experience reflected the unfortunate reality for many Italian Americans throughout the interwar period and beyond. Anti-Italian sentiment centered largely around false claims of their violent and unintelligent nature as well as their affiliation with organized crime – though unfounded, it led to discrimination and, often, violence against Italians. He outsold every other artist in the industry at the time and because of being the “king of the hill among Italian performers, he has suffered the most from this prejudice,”<sup>36</sup> his daughter Nancy laments. Frank Sinatra broke through into American mainstream popular culture, earning Italians a permanent presence in mass media, but it did not come without hardship. For Italians, however, seeing a fellow Italian as legendary and well-established as Sinatra sitting at the heart of the music industry was a delight unlike any other, and it allowed them to garner more confidence in their identities.

Frank Sinatra’s cultural identity and steadfast belief in equity are just a few of many highlights of his career. He serves as an excellent embodiment of a greater American culture, and:

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<sup>35</sup> Meyer, 312.

<sup>36</sup> Sinatra, 167.

The generation that produced Sinatra shared an identity... they suffered the “Great Depression”, fought World War II... and strove for dreams in the newly invented postwar suburbs... Bestowing stardom was an act of community, an honor that carried responsibility.<sup>37</sup>

Further than a rallying point for Italian Americans, he represented a pillar of hope to the national community amidst a painful, confusing era. There lies his significance and his importance as a musician – few others could fulfill such a role, try as they may. Frank Sinatra was full of natural talent, novel ideas, and felt strongly in-tune with his emotions, allowing him to garner a reputation as one of the greatest artists in music history. One of the more surprising features of Sinatra’s career is how far his influence expanded. His tender songwriting stands out as the prominent feature of his success, but his manipulation of technology to bolster his art is subtler, yet just as paramount. He served as the glue between stage equipment and persona, capturing audiences with his ability to take something as seemingly lifeless as a microphone and turn it into an extension of himself. Similarly important was his development of the ‘concept album’ – another revolutionary invention that has defined the music industry since. His clever maneuvers and deep-rooted talent have earned him the continued position as one of the world’s most beloved musicians.

As an Italian American from the small city of Hoboken, New Jersey, Frank Sinatra’s exemplar career has established him as a paradigm of American popular culture. He entered the world of fame despite obstacles facing him as an Italian in the United States during a time of turmoil and bigotry. Even so, Sinatra rapidly stole America’s hearts with his seductive stage presence, heart-wrenching yet swingy tunes, and his passion for equality. Frank Sinatra

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<sup>37</sup> Mustazza, 189.

singlehandedly revolutionized the music industry and redefined what it meant to live as a performer; and his influence on Italian communities and American popular culture will forever serve as a height for the international music industry. Perhaps a testament to this is the fact that to this day, Frank Sinatra's voice is the very first that Americans hear every New Year's: his *(Theme From) New York, New York* plays as the ball drops, ushering in each new year with joy and cheer.

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