

SINATRA AT THE DESERT INN, 1993

by Michael Ventura

*This article was incorporated into my novel **The Death of Frank Sinatra***

Every musician wore a tuxedo. The conductor was a small round man sitting at a grand piano wearing earphones. With a slash of the conductor's hand the rhythm and brass burst into a loud, up-tempo number and Sinatra flashed a smile that made him look uncannily young, a young smile in his old pasty face, and his eyes were the same as they'd always been, brighter in person than they ever registered on screen, and, like the smile, the eyes were young to the point of seeming unnatural. No makeup could conceal the sad ravages of the face, but the eyes and the smile seemed untouched. As though to put his listeners at his with these contradictions, Sinatra grabbed the microphone from the top of the black grand piano and sang about how we made him feel so young, we strangers in this room had that power, we made him feel so young and he would feel that way even when he was old and gray, the song itself was keeping him alive.

It was as though Sinatra's voice was living his entire life all over again, at different stages, throughout the song. The first bars were the voice of the old man, raspy, worn, unable to hold notes for longer than a beat, and only his mastery of rhythm kept the song alive and made each word surprising – surprising, though everyone in the room knew the lyrics by heart. Then on a high note the voice cracked, and for an instant the music soured, and the audience flinched as one person, but instead of retreating from that bad sound Sinatra leaned into it, Sinatra bent the note still further, into a jazzlike harmony, and so he erased his mistake from memory by making it part of the performance – and then instead of softening after the mistake, as we expected, Sinatra held the new note longer and louder, as though diving into it, then took a quick breath and sang the next note louder still, and fuller, until seamlessly for several bars it was the voice of thirty or forty years ago, full and unfettered, resonant and suggestive, until again it began to crack and again he used the cracking to modulate back into the voice and style of the old man, on pitch but raw, one note per beat, sometimes right on the beat, sometimes just off it, keeping the performance tense until on the last note the young man's voice returned, as though saluting the old man who sang it, and Sinatra let that note ride, and the audience cheered. It was a breathless performance, like watching a trapeze artist work without a net.

With barely a pause he started singing of how the best was yet to come and wouldn't it be fine, an old man in some ageless space who could make us believe for the length of a song that the best indeed was yet to come, and the voice again going to and fro between strength and fragility, youth and age. Sinatra's foot tapped the beat with absolute certainty, while his posture was ever so slightly wobbly, as though his energy was too much for his body. And in his immaculate tuxedo, with the surety of his presence and the reckless confidence of his style, he seemed to be demonstrating his legend without trading on it, without needing to. If it were possible that someone in the room had never heard of him, they would have been just as fascinated, just as relentlessly pulled into the performance, as though watching not a human being but a changeling, a creature both created and possessed by the sounds that came from and surrounded him. The lyrics were trite, obvious, sentimental. Somehow he made them true. The music was simple to the point of childishness. Somehow he made it complex. The audience found themselves applauding and cheering at the song's end, not in homage but as their only way to release

the energy he gave them. The man was dispensing something, a kind of vitality that surged from his darkness with bright light, and he was giving it away with generous abandon as though he had no fear that he would not have more to give in the next song, the next show, the next anything. In such an old man, where could this vitality come from?

I lit my cigarettes like he did, I wore the kind of clothes he wore. I still do. I tried to stand as he stood, I tried to walk as he walked. I still do. Not because I was imitating him, but because I was imitating all the people who gave and taught me life, and they took so many of their cues from him. And where had he taken his cues from? From peasants who came to America from an older, less sentimental world – peasants who came with the intention of becoming aristocrats, and who, almost as soon as they arrived, began to stand and walk like those aristocrats they'd watched so closely, yet from afar, for generations. European princes had taught them grace; American streets taught them flair. They didn't need to learn violence from anyone. That, they were born with. And Sinatra blended all this better than any, and sang as he did so – sang of life, and of pride, despairing of one and reveling in the other. And that was why Sicilians especially gave him respect, in the peculiar way Sicilians use that word, meaning homage, deference, consideration, and that invitation to betrayal, loyalty.

Now Sinatra sang about how they (whoever “they” were) couldn't take that (whatever “that” was) away from him – that somehow the way she held her hat and the way she sipped her tea was beyond the world's possibility to destroy or erode. *And I thought of all the photographs: Sinatra with Lyndon Johnson, with Adlai Stevenson, with Eleanor Roosevelt (he was holding her hand and looking into her eyes), with Jack Kennedy, Bobby, Jackie, Nixon, Reagan, Nancy; and Sinatra with very different people, Sinatra with Johnny Roselli, Paul Castellano, Carlo Gambino, Carol's son Joey, Jimmy Fratianno, Sallie Spatola; and still another kind, Sinatra with Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Ava Gardner, Louis Armstrong, Elvis Presley, Duke Ellington.* That body on the stage, that old man, was where it all connected. Who else had held the hand of Eleanor Roosevelt and shaken the hand of Carlo Gambino both, and on equal terms? And why? Because he could sing love songs like no one else. History, of a kind. History transfixed by love songs. That's life, that's what all the people say, he was singing now. Some people get their kicks from stomping on a dream but he doesn't let that get him down.

And I remembered hearing that Sinatra owned a company that made components for guided missiles. So he owned even something of those great explosions that Las Vegas had witnessed long ago. And I'd heard that Dean Martin was afraid of elevators, and that Martin and Sinatra, those proud men, would only book rooms on the first floor because they feared to sleep higher. And that Sinatra's mother, when he was very small, often dressed him as a little girl.

The old man was speaking now.

“I'm just waiting for a downbeat, not a bus. Where you working tomorrow?”

The musicians laughed. The conductor, that little round man, laughed.

“”That's my son, the guy with the earphones. I had to promise his mother I'd give the bum a job.”

More laughter.

But something was wrong on the stage. The music was playing but Sinatra wasn't singing. He was looking around as though he'd forgotten where he was. He started a lyric, then stopped. It didn't fit the music. He turned toward his son, whose presence seemed to remind him who he was, he was Frank Sinatra, he was there to sing love songs to history, and he wheeled around and began to beg, but in the proudest terms, that luck be a lady tonight, and that she keep the party polite, and that she not blow on some other guy's dice. But it had been an awful moment, to see that confidence suddenly abandoned, with nothing in the man to take its place.

He sang, more slowly now, that it seemed we'd stood and talked like this before, and he was right. That we'd looked at each other in the same way then, but there was no way to remember where or when. He sang in the young voice and the old, back and forth, where and when unknowable, and as the lyrics climbed to the final high note he became, in his voice, younger and younger, until he hit the last "when" roundly and fully, and held that note a long time, and when the note and the word were finally exhausted the loose muscles of his fatty face trembled, and his eyes were frightened again. He had to know that it was very possible that was the last time his voice would rise to such a height. And he looked like a man who had said an irreparable goodbye.

He took a few steps. Tried to recover. Slowly, he started to speak.

"I'm... what they call... a saloon singer."

For most of the performance he had been singing happily about love. Jauntily. Perhaps that was, in part, a function of age. It was easier, with that ravaged and undependable voice, to sing faster tempos that gave him the flexibility to go through many changes and use many approaches. Slow, sad songs required rounder tones and more control, could not be played with easily, were far more dangerous.

And I saw that he was risking humiliation every moment. Say what you like, he was a very brave man.

The song began. He was telling us to drink up, all we happy people. *And I thought that nobody here looked very happy, but he's admitting that we're happier than him.* He said he's paying for the drinks and the laughs. He's paying for everything. Because a woman with angel eyes has gone. And she's really gone. *What a tenderness he has for her. What a terrible, generous, all-encompassing tenderness. He's not bitter, he's not angry at her. Those angel eyes had every right to look elsewhere. He asks us to excuse him, because he must disappear. And his voice is disappearing with him. A scratchy whisper. Like an old wax record played on an old machine. 'Scuse me, he's saying. His Angel Eyes, she did not say excuse me. And Kennedy, Eleanor Roosevelt, Paul Castellano, Carlo Gambino, they have disappeared, and none of them said excuse me. With unbearable politeness, with a tenderness close to death, the death of his voice, he is saying excuse me, I must disappear. There are no angel eyes left in the room, no reason to stay. I am disappearing. Excuse me.*

The old man lit a cigarette, then picked up a drink from the piano and sat on a stool, and sang even more slowly. *In the city without clocks, he knows it's a quarter to three, always a quarter to three, and that there's no one in the place, not really, but him and each of us. He is singing that though we might not know it, yet he is a poet, and he just wants to drink one for his baby and one more for the road. He sings with a terrible fatigue, the voice almost not there. He expected the road to end long before this. He's tired. He could not live unless he sang to us, but each time he sings he dares humiliation,*

lets us watch the dying relationship between him and his voice, him and his memory, him and that angelic one whom he could not hold, whom he was no man for, whom his tenderness could finally not sustain, whom his darkness drove away. Everything has ended, everything is over. He thanks us. He's leaving us. He touched what we liked to think was our history and it has left him like this and now he is leaving us.

Everyone cheered as he walked off stage. Do they know what they're cheering? Do they know they're watching a man rehearse his death?