

STREET OF DREAMS: PART II

By Michael Ventura

June 14, 2002

To track the drastic shifts in America's ideals of manhood, compare 1960's *Ocean's Eleven* with its remake of 2001. By today's standards, the 1960 version -- starring Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and Angie Dickinson -- is talky and slack. A gratuitous barroom fight is the only "action" in the film. The robbery of five casinos is almost sedate, requiring no stunts, a set-piece for movie-going America's first lovingly detailed look at Las Vegas -- a stylish, sanitized travelogue with a flimsy story attached. Otherwise the movie is little more than an excuse to watch these stars hang out. When they decide to rob Las Vegas, their street-aristocrat style seems all the ammunition they'll need. The one realistic personal moment is between Sinatra and his estranged wife Angie Dickinson (who appears in only two brief scenes): psyches of equal force who love but can't live with each other -- she's left him, and she won't be back. In the end all the Rat Pack's plans go wrong, the robbers are unmasked with ease by visiting retired gangster Cesar Romero, the money is destroyed in a Hitchcockian twist, and you're left with the last scene: Danny Ocean (Frank Sinatra) and his 10 buddies, immaculately dejected in their suits and ties (these guys knew how to wear suits), walking past the Sands while Sammy Davis sings on the soundtrack, "Show me a man without a dream and I'll show you a man who's dead ... once I had me a dream, but that dream got a kick in the head ... Some judge is gonna say 'I'm putting you away' ..."

End of film. The heroes have failed. Sinatra and Angie are still estranged. There's a sense of impending doom. They are defeated ... but defeat hasn't dented their cool. The statement is clear: It's better to be one of these guys in defeat, with your back against the wall, at the dead-end of your life ... better, even so, to be one of these guys than to be a safe, successful square. Failure can't rob them of their manhood.

That same year Norman Mailer summed up the ethos of such films in his great essay ("Superman Comes to the Supermarket") on the Los Angeles Democratic Convention that nominated John Kennedy for the presidency -- a convention in which much of the Southern Democratic delegation walked out in protest as an interracial pop "choir" consisting of Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis sang "The Star Spangled Banner" (or was it "God Bless America"?). The Southerners were *that* offended at a black man singing in the company of white men. Mailer wrote:

... this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed no matter how the nation's regulators -- politicians, medicos, policemen, professors, priests, rabbis, ministers, ideologues, psychoanalysts, builders, executives and endless communicators -- would brick-in the modern life with hygiene upon sanity, and middlebrow homily over platitude; the myth would not die ... it was as if the message in the labyrinth of the genes would insist that violence was locked with creativity, and adventure was the secret of love.

Almost half a century later this seems hyperbolic, but it explains pretty well why 1960's *Ocean's Eleven* was a hit movie, even a feel-good movie, though its stars end defeated: They personified Mailer's words, they had the sophistication to take on the

modern world, the moxie to stand on their own, and the grit to remain unique and unabashed even in failure.

2001's *Ocean's Eleven* has lots of action. Danny Ocean (George Clooney) happily reunites with his wife (Julia Roberts). He, Brad Pitt, and the others pull off the robbery, defeat mobster Andy Garcia, keep the money, ride off laughing in triumph. These changes say all we need know about America's revision of what Mailer called "the myth": If *these* guys lose, their cool style and their manhood deflate ... so they can't lose, because they're not substantial enough to lose and still retain who and what they are. If they lose, they're just losers -- the audience wouldn't accept that and Hollywood wouldn't make the picture. Whereas in 1960's *Ocean's Eleven* the manhood is in the gamble, no matter how the deal goes down -- whether or not you win isn't as important as how and what you dare.

Well ... that message was thrilling to Dave (16) and me (15), seeing *Ocean's Eleven* three times in the summer of 1960. And we were thrilled by Las Vegas. In '60 it was a small desert town with a half-dozen or so casinos that by today's standards would look merely like pretentious motels (and maybe that's what they were). But it pulsed with something dangerous and alive. Many years later I met a man who'd spent almost his entire working life parking cars at the Dunes (which, like the Sands, is no more -- the enormous Bellagio and Venetian casinos stand on the site of those old desert hideaways). *Almost* his whole working-life: He'd begun as a brilliant mathematician and engineer employed by the government at what they still call in Vegas "the test site" -- the place where, by 1960, nearly 100 atomic mushroom clouds had risen into the sky just an hour's drive north of Vegas. After working a couple of years at the test site he decided he'd rather park cars at the casinos, which he did for several decades, mostly at the Dunes. The "parkers" (not "valets") in those days didn't use ticket stubs. Their pride was that they remembered, on sight, which car belonged to whom. This man told me of Sinatra always giving a neatly folded \$100 bill for a "toke" -- Old Vegas slang for "tip," short for "token of appreciation." He told me: "There is no human behavior -- *no* human behavior, you dig? -- that I haven't seen in the parking lot of the Dunes."

No human behavior. From lovemaking to murder. That was Vegas. The test site drove this man kind of crazy, but he loved parking cars at the Dunes. The test site was about mass annihilation. The Dunes was about no human behavior being too much for Vegas. As Sinatra (not John Lennon or Lou Reed) coined: "I'm for anything that gets you through the night, be it booze or religion."

Well ... Dave and I saw *Ocean's Eleven* when he was 16 and I was a few months shy of 16. One day we'd go to Vegas, we promised ourselves, one day we'd test our walk, our style, our capacity to be genuine even in defeat ... test all that against an image that a silly-serious movie had instilled in our dreams. We didn't get there until our early 30s, when it was still a small desert town and you still had to wear a suit to enter a casino gambling room at night -- and a woman had to be "decked out," as they used to say. Fast-forward to December, 1995: Dave had turned 50 in June, I'd turned 50 in October ... and there we were, drinking in the wee hours in a suite at the Rio. One entire wall was a window looking east with a full north-south view of the Strip, all of Vegas spread out before us. We knew the town well by then. I couldn't have guessed in 1960 that *Ocean's Eleven* started a fascination that would inspire me to spend a substantial part of my writing life concentrating on Las Vegas: dozens of articles, one published novel called *The Death of Frank Sinatra* (who hadn't died yet), one completed novel that no one will publish ("It overwhelms the reader," the Holt editor explained), and plans for still

another. I'd seen Sinatra sing at Bally's and the Desert Inn. I'd taken artists and thinkers as different as John Cassavetes, James Hillman, and Steve Erickson to my favorite haunts. I'd fallen in and out of love with women who journeyed a long way to that town and to me to do the same. (My wife proposed to me at the Stardust.) I'd known Vegas' strippers (as friend and customer) and whores (as friend, never customer). I'd befriended a child of one the gangsters who created the town ... dear and difficult Susan Berman, who would be killed in a mob-style hit in 1999 (my wife and I would attend Susan's funeral, hoping she hadn't had much time for terror before her execution). That December, 1995, sipping our Irish whiskey, Dave said: "All these years ... and we are still who we *are* ... we have made the journey retaining the core of who we *are* ... this is no small achievement." How improbable, even silly, that all this began when we'd over-estimated a movie in our teens ... Dave said, that wee hour in 1995, "We're better now than we've been. I didn't expect that of age 50." "Indian summer, baby," was my reply. The next day he flew back to Oakland. I was still in Vegas a few days later, on Christmas, when Dean Martin died. And Dave and I were in Vegas the May that Sinatra died. Strange to be there for both their deaths. A kind of culmination. ("*No* human behavior, you dig?") They dimmed the lights on the Strip in tribute to Sinatra's passing. An ex-showgirl, in her late 60s, still gorgeous, said to me the next day: "They blacked the Strip for Frank. They won't do it for me and I'm *just* as nice."

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