

## Sinatra: A Memoir · John Picard

*It's Frank's world.  
We just live in it.  
—Dean Martin*

THE CALLER, a raspy-voiced man, said a reservation had been made in my name for tomorrow's 9 A.M. flight out of Friendship Airport, landing in Las Vegas. I'd be staying at the Sands Hotel, courtesy of Frank Sinatra.

"But I have classes," I told him. "I'm not sure I can get someone to fill in for me on such short notice."

"He wants to see ya. Don't let 'im down. Frank doesn't like people what let 'im down."

"But why would he want to see *me*?"

"He read somethin' a yours."

It was 1959. I was an associate professor of Classics and Humanities at Johns Hopkins University (master's: Columbia; doctorate: Tulane), all three of my books had appeared in one of the better university presses, I had recently published an article in *Daedalus*, and only last year I'd been mentioned on page 7 of *The New York Times Book Review*. So I wasn't exactly unknown. "I'm honored, of course. I've long been a fan of his music. But I'm puzzled as to why—"

"Jus' get out here," the man said. "Some of the boys'll meet ya at the airport."

"Some of the boys?"

After landing, I was whisked from the terminal by two large yet swift-moving men who led me to a waiting limousine. Arriving at the hotel, flanked by my beefy escorts, I was taken up an elevator, then ushered into a beautifully appointed suite. My host was wearing a maroon smoking jacket with a black felt collar and "FAS" monogrammed on his lapel. A white handkerchief protruded from the breast pocket. Appropriately, he was smoking. (We all did then.) He was still thin, but no longer the scrawny crooner of his bobbysoxer days. His smile was utterly charming; his handshake was firm without being vise-like. I told him how much I

admired his recent work with Capitol Records, and he complimented me in turn on my latest monograph. “I dig what you said about the pre-Socratics,” was how he put it.

He waved me into the living room area. “Get you anything to drink, Doc? Booze, beer, wine?”

“A little white wine might be nice.”

He straddled a chair he’d dragged over from the dining room, a glass of Jack Daniels in one hand, a burning cigarette in the other. His fabled blue eyes appraised me intently. Then, without preamble, he began throwing out random ideas and observations, some quite complex and original, with references to thinkers both classical and modern. I was at a loss at first; I hadn’t known this side of the superstar even existed. Before long, though, I was bouncing my own thoughts right back at him, and a kind of freewheeling exchange ensued. Over the course of the next hour we discussed, among other things, the major figures of the *quattrocento*, the causes of World War I, Wittgenstein’s “picture theory,” the decline of the Byzantine Empire, general relativity, Vico’s *Scienza nuova*, Freud’s claim for Moses’ Egyptian lineage, Zoroastrianism, and the narrative structure of *Bleak House*. He was equally knowledgeable on all these subjects. He had something fresh and new to say about each of them, and as I sipped an excellent Chardonnay, the conviction grew that I was in the presence of an extraordinary mind: a thinker, a polymath, a savant, an intellectual in the best sense of that word—in sum, one of the most impressive autodidacts it had ever been my privilege to meet.

I told him so.

He smiled, pleased, then got down to why he’d brought me there. He was interested in making me a part of his entourage, he said. He’d just finished a movie and he planned to start touring again later that month. He wanted me to go on the road with him.

I didn’t know what to say.

He mentioned the salary. The figure was incredible.

I asked for a more detailed description of my duties, but apparently all that would be required was that I be available to spend time in his company.

“I need to think about this,” I said. “I have a career, you know. I’m very well-respected in my field.”

“Go on sabbatical. Apply for a research leave. Look, baby, I like what happened between us just now. I thought it was a gas.”

We did seem to have a rapport, and it had been stimulating. Very different from the show-offy games of one-upsmanship my colleagues went in for. Here was intellection for its own sake, for the simple joy of it. I hadn't experienced anything like it since those old undergraduate bull sessions. "That's really all the job entails?" I said. "Hanging around? Talking to you?"

"That's it."

Besides a long and finally broken engagement, a couple of mild affairs, and a waning passion for contract bridge, there had been little else in my life apart from scholarly pursuits; certainly no adventures.

I stood up and put out my hand.

"Well, ring-a-ding-ding."

From the first stop on the tour I found myself summoned at all hours of the day and night. He would be pacing back and forth in his suite between shows or after an evening of heavy drinking or in the middle of an assignation. Invariably some of his lackeys would be present, the sharkskin-suited toughs who laughed at all his jokes, lit his cigarettes, procured female companionship; or some robed young woman sitting with her legs tucked under her, snapping her cigarette over an ashtray, glaring at the intruder. He would dismiss them with a wave. Often his first words to me would reflect a residual crudeness. "What is it with broads?" Or "Who the hell needs this screwy business?" But as we got onto some more elevated subject, most often a continuation of a previous discussion (the French Revolution, Tu Fu, *Sputnik*, Watteau—his interests were stunningly wide-ranging), a change would come over him. He would begin to lose his restiveness, stop his pacing and eventually light on some chair or sofa. After half an hour most traces of his profane, hipsterish speech would have vanished, replaced by an articulate and refined mode of expression—although never entirely. I remember poignantly, for example, his referring to Robespierre as "one rebarbative cat." He was as mercurial in temperament as he was inquisitive of mind, and our time together often ended abruptly. As he rejoined his cronies it was not unusual to hear him utter some obscenity in greeting, his reversion well underway.

His singing had never been better. No matter what the city, San Francisco, Cleveland, Chicago—at the end of every performance the audience was on

its feet, applauding, cheering, pleading for more. He'd lost a bit in the way of range and timbre. There were undoubtedly singers with better pipes around. But the Jack Joneses, the Buddy Grecos, let alone the myriad Avalons and Rydells, could not touch him for interpretation of lyrics, subtlety of phrasing, emotional nuance.

My sudden ascendancy to the inner circle met with mixed reactions. Unlike the more sinister elements of his entourage (the bodyguards, the professional goons and other unsavory types), who regarded me with suspicion, even contempt, Frank's swinging show business buddies—Sammy Davis, Jr., Joey Bishop, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford (known collectively as the Rat Pack)—gave me their complete support, accepted me totally. When I had some spare time and didn't feel like reading in my room, I would sometimes allow them to cajole me into a night of merrymaking. Though not themselves of an intellectual bent, they seemed to have grasped Frank's need for a brainy companion; also, I think they appreciated that I was capable of pulling him out of some of his darker moods, redirecting his sometimes irrational and destructive behavior.

I shall never forget the night at Villa Capri when he threw a plate of linguine into our waiter's face. (The pasta had arrived completely cooked, instead of al dente, the way Frank liked it.) Or the time he badly sprained his hand taking a swipe at a columnist who'd written of his underworld connections. I tried to be more attuned to his mood swings. At dinner soon after, following an argument at the bar between Frank and his latest love interest (Juliet or Lauren or Angie, I forget which), he returned to the table in the foulest of tempers. Normally I refrained from initiating intellectual repartee in front of the rest of the entourage. Not only would no one besides Frank and myself have been able to follow, but his sensitivity to his manly image precluded public discussions about the Ballet Russe, say, or the novels of the Brontës—which he adored, incidentally. But I decided this was an emergency and, sitting next to him (his teeth were gritted, his eyes a molten blue), I began luring him into a discussion of Leonardo's notebooks. We'd been marveling over a new leatherbound edition of them just that morning. I said to him, "When Nietzsche wrote of the *Vitruvian Man* 'Stripped of myth, man stands famished among all his past'—don't you think he'd failed to take into account Leonardo's ambivalent humanism?" Immediately I

could see the tension begin to drain from his face. In a matter of minutes, we were deep in conversation, the crisis averted.

He hadn't even graduated from high school, a fact of which he was much ashamed. (He had an inordinate respect for academic degrees, not uncommon among the undereducated, I've found.) I did my best to make him see that his shame was misplaced. I cited his fine analytical mind, the vast amount of reading he'd done on his own, and not least of all his rich lode of life experiences. But I had little success. It hadn't been until recently, after all, that he'd begun taking himself seriously as an intellect. Before enlisting me in his ranks he'd cocooned himself with performers, athletes, hoodlums, press agents, and sundry other hangers-on, none of whom possessed anything like his cerebral concerns, his mental rigor. How miserable, how frustrated, he must have been during that time: so many thoughts and no one to share them with. It helped explain, perhaps as much as his difficulties with Ava, the uniquely high quality of those Capitol recordings of the mid and late fifties, the pathos and pain that came through with every note, the honest suffering transmuted on such classic albums as "No One Cares," "Only the Lonely," "Where Are You?"

The aura of being around such famous people was bound to rub off and I found myself attracting beautiful and glamorous women. Most of these, I knew, were only trying to get close to Frank, but failing that, close to someone who was close to Frank. During our Atlantic City engagement, it struck me that I'd had more women in my bed the last two days than I'd had in all of my previous life.

I was the beneficiary of his legendary largess. In addition to cases of premium wines, he gifted me with theater tickets, watches, pinkie rings, television sets, and, gem of gems, the 1911 *Britannica*. His respect for the life of the mind did not extend to its traditional disregard for appearances. He accused me of dressing like a clyde: in Pack-ese, a square. He insisted I accompany him on a clothes-buying spree, his mere presence creating pandemonium in a half dozen of Manhattan's finest stores that day. He was a dapper and meticulous dresser himself and, under his personal supervision, I traded in my tweeds and loafers for a couple of the three hundred dollar sharkskin suits he favored, a dozen silk ties, and as many pairs of custom-made English shoes. We made one last stop at a jewelry store where

he bought me a gold plated cigarette case. I still have this. The inscription reads: *To Doc. Think lovely thoughts. Frank.*

In Detroit one sizzling afternoon, while we were down by the hotel pool (discussing neo-Confucianism, I think it was), his valet came by and urged us to join him and some other staff members in a game of poker. Frank said he wasn't interested; I said I was. When he realized I was thinking of going without him we got into quite a little tiff over it. I did not like him shouting at me and told him so. I also didn't appreciate my towel and things being thrown into the deep end. He apologized and we wound up going to the game together. But it was the first indication I had that he was becoming overly dependent on me.

I had the clothes. I was picking up the lingo. I was seldom more than a highball behind Dino who, interestingly, could not hold his liquor. (Sammy and I hauled him back to his room on numerous occasions.) I became, in short, an unofficial member of the Rat Pack. I prowled the night clubs and the casinos with them, chased women with them, got into trouble with them. In Cincinnati we stole a bread truck at 2 A.M. and roared around town, hanging out the doors and shouting at passersby, until Frank drove it through a grocery's plate glass window. Only his offer to defray the cost of all the damages, and then some, kept it out of the papers.

It was as if I had become a part of the boyhood gang from which I had always been excluded, my bookish ways alienating me from my coevals, making me either an object of ridicule (four eyes) or one of exaggerated and ironic respect (brain). In consequence I had never before experienced the camaraderie of my own sex, seeing in all groups of men a shallow and juvenile fellowship at best, a conspiracy to brutalize at worst. But without knowing it I had always yearned for such company; the former, that is.

Around this time he said of the Rat Pack, "They're good for a few laughs and some dirty stories, but let's face it, that's about it."

"That's a lot, though," I protested. "You take it for granted, Frank, but most middle-aged men don't even *have* friends."

"But their view of things—it's so narrow."

"They're great guys."

"Yeah, but I can't talk to them, not the way I can talk to you. They lack depth."

My peculiar status was frequently the object of the Pack's habitual bantering. There was none of the maliciousness I'd suffered as a boy, however. Instead, their ribbing was a sign of affection, a source of fraternal humor like Frank's mob ties, Sammy's race, Joey's Jewishness, Dean's drinking, Peter's in-laws. I relished their jibes.

"I didn't think you'd dig the guys this much," Frank said. "I thought you'd remain, well, more aloof—considering your background, your education."

He had a romanticized view of the intellectual life.

"That doesn't mean I can't have fun. You enjoy *yourself* with them."

"That's different." He looked away and said with a mirthless laugh, "Dean doesn't know what century the Civil War took place in."

"So?"

"Sam thinks Rabelais is a type of cheese."

"They have other qualities, Frank."

"They call you egg-head, bookworm, pencil-neck . . ."

"I'm well aware of that."

Then I understood. He was jealous. He was jealous of my relationship with his friends.

I had just returned to my room early one morning when the phone started ringing. I knew it was him, but I was expecting a visitor (a russet-haired former Miss Texas, now a lounge hostess) and even if I hadn't been, I probably wouldn't have answered it. I'd had enough for one day. When he wasn't summoning me to a late night confab, he was collaring me when I was chatting up some show girl, or bending my ear throughout dinner, or following me into the john (this actually happened), all in order to raise some obscure philosophical point. I suppose I was feeling stifled. I enjoyed our talks as much as ever, but I needed a break once in a while, something I'm not sure he ever understood. And perhaps I was growing a little tired of his seeing me one dimensionally, as a mind and nothing else. He never asked me a personal question, or inquired about my health, or appeared to care one way or another about my deeper feelings.

"Maybe you'd better lay off the booze a little," he said.

I'd just served myself three fingers of Jack Daniels.

"Lay off the booze? Baby, what do you mean?"

Stroking his chin, he said, "Nothing. Just slow down. Just take it easy." He looked at me. "You didn't even notice, did you?"

"Notice what, Frank?"

He drew a breath. "You said Giotto when you meant Cimabue just now."

"Did I?"

"Yeah, you did."

We'd been talking about the early Renaissance masters. The Leonardo book had piqued his interest. "Common mistake," I said.

"I guess." Then, "Why don't you get some rest and come back later? We'll take up where we left off."

I fully intended to return, but I ran into Dean in the lobby and we ended up willy-nilly at the local race track. Frank reached me in my room hours later. He was irate. I told him I'd forgotten, and I had. The crash I heard was the phone smashing against his bedroom wall. We avoided each other for a few days, then he sent me a signed copy of Margaret Mead's latest book, as a sort of apology or peace offering, or both, plus an invitation to meet him after that night's performance. It was one of our longest sessions ever, lasting until dawn, but there was something desperate about it, forced, as if we were fanning a dying flame.

Then it was back to Vegas.

I'd been looking forward to it since the tour began: a Summit Meeting, a gathering of the whole clan for a week of performances in the Copa room at the Sands, with all the on-stage drinking and cutting-up, the tossing of cream pies in the hotel's steamroom, the round-the-clock swinging, all the things I'd heard about that made it such an event.

Unfortunately, he seemed to have more need of me during these frenetic, fun-filled days than at any other time in our travels. He wanted me backstage before he went on, right down front during the show, and close at hand afterwards, trooping with him from party to party, bar to bar. This was true even when it wasn't appropriate, when he had some woman in tow who was clearly uncomfortable with me there, not to mention the high-toned conversation from which she was cavalierly excluded.

After the second show on Saturday, Sammy and Peter and I decided to catch the Ink Spots at the Dunes. I'd gone back to my room for a change of



clothes when the phone rang. Without thinking I picked it up. Frank wanted to see me right away.

"Can't it wait, baby?"

"No, it can't wait—*baby*."

When I got there he was pacing between the picture window and the dining room. His unshaven face was drawn and pale; his eyes were bloodshot. Physically he was exhausted; intellectually it was another story.

"Great show tonight."

He mumbled his thanks.

I headed over to the bar. "Mind if I help myself to some Jackie D?"

"Haven't you had enough for one—?" He waved his hand dismissively, then resumed his pacing, snapping his fingers as if to get his mind revved. He could go on like this for hours, I thought despairingly. "I've been thinking about something all night," he began. "I've got my own ideas, but I'm curious to know what you have to say. What do you think he meant when he wrote, 'Only when love is a duty, only then is love eternally secure?'"

"What who wrote?"

He stopped in his tracks. "Who?"

I checked my watch.

"It sounds familiar."

"It sounds familiar? It *sounds* familiar? You don't recognize a quote from Kierkegaard?" He was yelling, and yet there was something plaintive underneath his angry words. "You wrote a book on Kierkegaard."

"He was one of my sources, he wasn't—"

He raised his hand. "Forget it, OK? Forget it."

"I'm just tired, baby. And besides, who cares?"

I was sure I saw him flinch. There was a long silence as he shuffled over to the big arm chair in front of the window. He sat with his cigarette cupped in his hand the way he did when he was pensive.

"Is it all right if I split now?" I yawned loudly.

After a moment, "Sure. Split."

I let myself out of the suite.

The next morning I couldn't open the door to my room. The lock had been changed. The front desk refused to give me a key. They said they were under strict orders not to; I didn't have to ask from whom. There was a

plane ticket and all my things packed in the three-piece luggage set Frank had given me last month for my 39th birthday.

I had to find him. Hurrying through the lobby, I came upon Sammy at the slot machines. He told me Frank had found out where we'd been last night. When it became clear I'd lied to him he stormed through the hotel, broke into my room and tore it apart. "If I were you, Doc, I'd stay away. I've never seen him like this."

I thanked Sammy for his concern, but I was certain I could entice him out of his bad mood, as I'd done so often before.

He was in the casino, surrounded at the craps table by virtually the entire entourage. "Frank," I called to him.

Joey and Dean and Peter glanced anxiously from me to their leader.

He tossed the dice. Snake eyes.

"Frank, I—"

"Get this creep out of my sight."

Two of his goons grabbed my arms and started dragging me toward the exit. Kicking, squirming, I repeatedly hollered his name.

"Wait," he said. He swaggered over, puffing on a cigarette.

I was sweating profusely. I could smell alcohol seeping through my pores. The goons tightened their hold on me. "Can't we talk about this, Frank? How about getting together later? I've been thinking about what you said. For Kierkegaard, the duty to love is a paradox, one of Christianity's hard sayings, if you will, which—"

"It's too late for that," he barked and made a sideways chopping motion. It was the exact same one he used on stage, if much less crisply, during the first crescendo of "I'll Never Smile Again." He stepped closer to me. "It's over. You're all through. You dig?"

"But why, Frank? Why?"

He sucked on his cigarette, then removed it from his lips. Smoke dribbled out of one corner of his mouth. "Because baby, you're just not intelligent anymore."

I did my best to maintain contact with Sammy and the others, but they weren't big on letter-writing, nor did they always return my calls. I asked each of them to intercede for me with Frank, but they said he wouldn't even discuss it, that the mere mention of my name sent him into a rage. This gave me hope, made me think he still might care.

The university had taken me back, once my case had gone before a review committee. My research leave had been limited to only one semester and I'd been AWOL for weeks. It was a tough adjustment for me. I'd been leading a very different kind of existence, and my colleagues seemed such a dull lot.

I followed the Pack's activities in the media, but this only whetted my appetite for my old life. I couldn't afford to fly all over the country, but I did manage a trip to Vegas that summer; another Summit Meeting. The guys were extremely busy, of course, and it wasn't easy for them to get together with me. (I was still barred from the Sands.) But we did finally meet for a drink at a bar on the strip, on the fourth and final day of my visit.

It did not go well. The drinks were watery, everyone was hung over, and worst of all, we had nothing to say to each other. We never had. I think we were relieved whenever somebody came by our table to ask for an autograph.

All at once their limitations became glaringly obvious to me. I knew then it wasn't the Pack I'd been missing. It was him. I missed Frank. I missed our talks. I recalled that just before our break we'd had numerous discussions about the Stoics. (Frank couldn't get enough of Epictetus and committed whole sections of the *Encheiridion* to memory.) They intrigued him, I now realized, because they advocated what he himself was striving for, the ability to enjoy the fruits of one's success without becoming a slave to them. "So how is he?" I said.

Everyone sort of muttered and stared into their drinks.

"What is it?" I said. "What's happened?"

"You'd probably find out sooner or later," Sammy said.

"Find out what?"

"He's got someone new."

"Someone new? You mean . . .?"

Sammy just nodded.

"Who?"

He didn't recall his name. Neither did Joey or Peter who said, "He's a real clyde. I don't know what Frank sees in him."

Dean said, "Boris something. Ascow. Blascow. I don't talk to the guy, myself."

"He doesn't dig us the way you did," Sammy added, graciously.

"Boris Glasgow?" I said. "Dr. Boris Glasgow?"

"That's him. That's the cat."

He was a good man, I had to admit. Glasgow, whom I'd heard give a paper some time back at the MLA in Washington, was the Lopes Professor of Art, History and Urban Affairs at the University of Southern California. Only forty-five and at the top of his field, he had an international reputation, had published book after book (with Scribners, no less), and had once appeared on Jack Paar as some sort of expert on cultural trends.

"Well, that's that, isn't it?" I said.

"Sorry, Doc," Joey said.

"Yeah, sorry," the others echoed.

"Well, thanks for coming," I told them. "It's been great, but . . . maybe you better go now." I didn't want them to see how upset I was, and they were in a hurry to get back anyway.

I walked them outside to their limousine.

I shook hands with Joey and Peter.

"Not the same without you, pally," Dean said, clapping me on the shoulder.

Sammy gave me a hug. "Ciao, baby. And stay in touch."

None of it was real. We knew we'd never see one other again.

After watching the limo slip into traffic, I got in my rental and sped away. I tried to draw comfort from another great Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, who writes in book six of the *Meditations*, "The pain which is intolerable carries us off; but that which lasts a long time is tolerable." I drove out of the city and kept going. Soon I was cruising in the desert. After a while I began to sing. It wasn't something I normally did—I haven't much of a voice—but the mood was on me. I was singing one of those piercing, mournful ballads he'd recorded a few years back. When I got to the end of it, I started singing another one, and after that, another. Driving through the desert that night so long ago, I sang every sad song of his I could remember, and I remembered quite a few.