

Our Way

Ten years after his death, NIAF Member Frank Sinatra continues to embody the American Dream. Ambassador magazine takes a look back at what his accomplishments meant and continue to mean to Italian Americans.

By Monica Soladay

Courtesy of Frank Sinatra Enterprises, LLC

“Come fly with me, come fly, come fly away.”

For more than 60 years, Frank Sinatra’s music cut across all segments of society to help listeners do just that, lifting lawyers and truck drivers, housewives and career women alike out of the daily grind to a place of glamour and possibility.

With them, his music also lifted Italian Americans to a higher place, showing them that a child of Sicilian and Genovese immigrants could succeed just as well as the offspring of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. In 1985, in recognition of his life of accomplishments, the National Italian American Foundation presented Sinatra with the NIAF Special Achievement Award for Humanitarian Service during an emotional gala at which he was the sole honoree.

“Many times over the years I saw Italian American people approach my husband to say hello, shake his hand, call out his name, and generally express their warmth and affection,” reminisced Barbara Sinatra, his wife of 22 years. “...Frank was extremely proud of his heritage; both his Italian immigrant parents, family and friends, and being an American.”

“He had fans all over the world and certainly in America, but the Italian Americans were fiercely proud of him,” agreed Tom Dreesen, a comedian who worked as Sinatra’s opening act from 1982 to 1996 and served as a pallbearer at his funeral. “...I really believe that, among others, Frank truly was the pride of the Italian American community.”

Ten years after Sinatra’s death on May 14, 1998 at the age of 82, his influence continues to be felt in the Italian American community, the music world, and society at large. In this issue of *Ambassador*, Sinatra’s friends and fans examine what his career has meant to our country and our people.

Celebrate Sinatra

Join NIAF on Friday, October 17, 2008 for our annual Salute to the Martini, which will feature the music of Frank Sinatra in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of his passing. Part of NIAF’s Convention and 33rd Anniversary Gala Weekend, the Foundation’s Salute to the Martini will be held at the Hilton Washington & Towers in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit www.niaf.org.

Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, on December 12, 1915 to Natalie Della (née Garaventi) and Anthony Martin Sinatra, young Frank Sinatra began singing at an early age. His mother, known as Dolly, was influential in the neighborhood and in local Democratic Party circles, while Frank's father, Martin, served with the Hoboken Fire Department and boxed.

Frank worked for some time as a delivery boy at the Jersey Observer newspaper, and as a riveter at a shipyard. It was in the early 1930s that he first began singing in public; by 1939, Sinatra had recorded his first song and was soon touring with Harry James's band.

During the next six decades, Sinatra's career spanned a host of ups and downs including the Big Band era, a decrease in popularity at the end of the 1940s, an Academy Award for his landmark performance as Private Angelo Maggio in the 1953 film "From Here to Eternity," a tumultuous marriage to film star Ava Gardner, his Rat Pack years, retirement in 1971, a subsequent comeback and a late-in-life resurgence in popularity with younger listeners.

Ask Frank Sinatra's friends what qualities best defined his career, and without fail they mention the loyalty of his fans, particularly Italian Americans. "He certainly did help Italian Americans, I would say, first of all just by being an Italian American and always being proud of his heritage," said singer Jerry Vale, who performed with Sinatra at the Sands Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas during the 1950s.

In the 1940s, Sinatra's success began to have a true impact on Italian Americans, who were facing suspicion and prejudice at home, in part due to Benito Mussolini's Fascist government, part of the Axis, and in part due to pre-existing prejudices. It was a time when Italian immigrants were just becoming accepted by mainstream society, notes Hofstra

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-Gay Talese

University history professor Stanislao Pugliese; many Italian Americans were now fighting new battles for recognition as true Americans.

In contrast, Frank Sinatra joined Tommy Dorsey's band in 1940 and, in his first year with them, released more than 40 songs with "I'll Never Smile Again" topping the charts for 12 weeks in mid-July. In 1943, he left the band and signed with Columbia Records. By 1945, he was touring to sold-out crowds of screaming teenage girls and co-starring with actor Gene Kelly in the MGM musical comedy "Anchors Aweigh." Also that year, he appeared in RKO's short film about tolerance and racial equality, "The House I Live In," which earned a special Academy Award and Golden Globe for "Promoting Good Will." ►

Courtesy of Sinatra Family Collection





Frank Sinatra (center) with NIAF Chairman Frank D. Stella (left) and NIAF Vice Chair Congressman Frank J. Guarini (back) at a NIAF gala honoring him in 1985.

“Sinatra’s presence in the 1940s was a redeeming experience for Americans of Italian background because his rise to fame in the World War II years was a time when Italian Americans had little to cheer about,” mused noted author Gay Talese, whose landmark article about the singer, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” was published in *Esquire* magazine in 1966.

In addition to the war, at that time, Talese noted, well-known Italian American names were too often linked with organized crime. “Names such as Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello and Joe Bonanno...,” Talese reminisced. “The Americans of Italian heritage were ...embarrassed by the constant harping on the organized crime factions sometimes called the mafia.”

Sinatra was far from those characters. Instead, he was the ladies man, adored by young women across the country, an Italian American who got the girl. “Sinatra had great social upward mobility at a time when many Italian Americans were first getting to know what upward mobility meant,” Talese said. “...He was even more influential upon Italian Americans because Americans, real Americans, white-bread Americans, were swayed by [his] talents,” Talese said. “He became accepted, Sinatra did, at a time when very few Italians were socially accepted.”

But it wasn’t until after his Big Band years and comeback in “From Here to Eternity” that Sinatra really began to truly reach all his potential fans. “After having been beaten down and come back, the men started listening to him,” said Mark Rotella, an editor with *Publisher’s Weekly* whose latest book, “The Saloon Singers,” details the great Italian American singers of popular song and is due to be published in 2009. “And after that, he sang with authority, as someone who had been beaten down...someone who had gone down to his lowest and was coming back, sort of like a boxer.”

“He was singing about heartbreak,” Rotella continued. “He was the guy in the bar singing to all the men who had their hearts broken.”

Pugliese, editor of “Frank Sinatra: History, Identity, and Italian American Culture,” agreed. “His best songs dealt with loss – longing, loss, and nostalgia,” Pugliese said. “I think he almost absorbed that through the

Frank Sinatra (left) with U.S. Congressman Frank Annunzio (center) and U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont in 1985.



tradition of Italian Neopolitan folk-singing. Those songs must have been in the air in his childhood.”

In fact, Sinatra’s ability to convey the feeling behind lyrics is what many say set him apart from other performers. “Frank was an actor,” said Vale. “Singers are actors anyway because they interpret the meaning of lyrics. Frank was like an actor interpreting a script that was song.”

Part of that talent was rooted in Sinatra’s natural sensitivity, said those who knew him best, including Dreesen. “You only have to listen to the music to know how sensitive he was.” Dreesen said. “...In song, he was very, very vulnerable. Offstage, he would pretend not to be. But in the song, he would immerse himself into the lyrics and you could really feel the sensitivity of Frank Sinatra.”

That ability to transform onstage and project such emotion was more than a personality quirk; it was part of what Sinatra felt he owed his fans, particularly later in life. Dreesen recalled that on many nights, Sinatra would ask him, “How’s the crowd?” following his opening act. After Dreesen’s usual positive response, the singer would wander off alone and pace. “You’d realize the pressure, the enormous pressure, on him to go out and perform in front of 20,000 people, who as he said, plunked their hard-earned dollars down. And they expected this great performance from him,” Dreesen recalled. “He would be pacing and you’d feel sorry for him. You’d look at him and say, ‘Gosh, he looks like this old, tired guy.’ ➤



NIAF honored Barbara Sinatra in recognition of her work for children at the 23rd Anniversary Gala in 1998. Liza Minnelli presented the award.

“And then he’d walk out there, he’d hear his name and he’d walk out there, and the light would hit him and 20 years would fall off his face. He’d start singing, ‘Come fly with me, come fly, let’s fly away,’ and all of a sudden he was young again.”

Sinatra’s sensitivity carried over to his defense of his heritage. “Sinatra was like the grandfather of NIAF,” said Talese. “He was the first guy that took offense if he was treated disrespectfully, or if

he was called by ethnic names that were not flattering, just as NIAF does today. He was the forerunner of NIAF.”

Accordingly, he celebrated when those sharing his background achieved great success. “In addition to supporting many Italian American causes, Frank was particularly thrilled and honored when the first Italian American was appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States, Justice [Antonin] Scalia,” said Barbara Sinatra. “Frank wrote a letter to Justice Scalia at that time in which he expressed his hopes and feelings as a fellow Italian American.”



Courtesy of Sinatra Family Collection

But as much as Sinatra fought negative Italian American stereotypes, he also found himself entangled in them. His reputation for womanizing, bar room brawls and lashing out at journalists in some ways fed into the stereotype of a hot-blooded Italian man. “Sinatra is a problem because in some ways he reinforced those negative stereotypes just as in some ways he challenged them,” Pugliese said. “At the bar he was the hoodlum from Hoboken, but on stage he was this meticulous craftsman of American song.”

The U.S. Senate’s Kefauver Committee mafia hearings of the 1950s and later efforts by U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy to crack down on organized crime caused further image problems for Sinatra by putting those stereotypes in the forefront of American consciousness, Rotella added.

“Much about him that was negative was manufactured by those who were trying to get their names in the headlines,” Talese said. “He was insulted often by people in government such as Robert Kennedy and the late John F. Kennedy when they tried to belittle him and degrade him that he was too close to organized crime figures like Sam Giancana and others.”

Despite the negative press, Sinatra fought to retain his individuality, said Dreesen. “Frank Sinatra was not a saint...he did saintly things, but he certainly was not a saint.” The younger comedian once asked Sinatra what he felt performers owed their fans. Sinatra responded, he recalled, ““We owe them the greatest possible performance we can give them. When they plunk their hard-earned dollars down to see us perform, Tommy, we’ve got to give it

all we got. That’s what we owe them,” Dreesen remembered. “The rest of it was his private life.”

Perhaps the personal quality that most distinguished Sinatra was his giving nature and willingness to support other performers, and even other ethnic groups, in their struggles to get ahead – a quality recognized by the NIAF Special Achievement Award for Humanitarian Service given to him in 1985.

His philanthropy extended to young performers, including Vale, who Sinatra helped get work at the Sands during the 1950s. “He was a good friend to his friends,” Vale remembered. Pugliese sees such altruism as being rooted in the Italian traditions of Sinatra’s childhood. “Italian Americans are not known for our philanthropy,” Pugliese noted. “...But [Sinatra] was very much part of this Italian gift culture – alliances and friendships are created and strengthened through the exchange of gifts.”

Barbara Sinatra agreed that her husband’s early years were key in forming his commitment to equality and the American dream. “I think my husband felt the sting of discrimination from his childhood years,” she reflected. “He lived in a rigid immigrant neighborhood with other ethnically segregated neighborhoods nearby. He felt that everyone should get a fair chance, as is the American hope and dream.”

To ensure that dream, Sinatra used his God-given talent to raise money for a variety of causes. “Frank Sinatra sang his songs and raised millions of dollars and Protestant orphanages were built, and Frank Sinatra [was] not Protestant. He sang his songs and raised millions of dollars and Jewish temples were built, and Frank Sinatra [was] not Jewish. He sang his songs and raised millions of dollars and thousands of African American children went to college, and he [was] not African American,” noted Dreesen.

On January 27, 1961, Sinatra played a benefit show at Carnegie Hall for civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. He would go on to play a major role in the desegregation of Nevada hotels and casinos in the 1960s, leading friends from the Rat Pack and fellow entertainers in refusing to patronize hotels and casinos that wouldn’t hire black performers or allow black patrons. Additionally, he would often speak from the stage about the importance of desegregation.

“When derogatory racial and ethnic slurs were thrown, many times they became ‘fighting words,’” recalled Barbara Sinatra. “He was not fond of bigots, and he was not shy. Frank always supported the underdog.”

Today, Sinatra lives on through his music, his commitment to heritage and his philanthropy, inspiring Italian Americans to pursue our dreams, rise up from disappointment, and do it our way.

While he was alive, it seemed that, “As long as Frank Sinatra was out there singing, you were still young,” Dreesen noted. Thankfully, Sinatra’s music is still playing and, through it, his listeners are young once again. ▲