

An appreciation of Frank Sinatra

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I can't claim to be an aficionado of Frank Sinatra's singing, but like millions of others I am proud to consider myself an admirer.

Once Sinatra began to sing, one's feelings about his erratic personal behavior, his hobnobbing with mobsters and politicians and his grating stage demeanor were swept away by the sheer beauty of his elegant and impeccable timbre and phrasing. Sinatra was at his best when he sang from the great American song book, and Gershwin, Kern, Porter, Rogers and Hart, and Van Heusen never sounded better than when Sinatra interpreted them.

Sinatra was a powerful contradictory personality. He often was hopelessly violent, rude and self absorbed, yet he never failed to give credit to songwriters, bandleaders and individual musicians, and he frequently made generous gifts of his time and money.

Sinatra's singing career divides rather neatly into four periods. During the first, he sang for the big bands of Harry James and Tommy Dorsey and then as a single act for Columbia Records. If his career had ended in 1952, when Columbia dropped his contract due to his declining popularity, he would have remained a relatively insignificant figure, a Crosby-derived crooner able to deliver soft and smooth vocals of a pleasant but not particularly profound character.

1953 was Sinatra's watershed year and the beginning of his second musical period. His personal life and career both seemed to be falling apart when he got the Oscar-winning role of Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* and signed with Capitol Records. Capitol had been formed by musicians after World War II, and the American Federation of Musicians ban on recording had broken the hold of the major record labels. Coincidentally, the long-playing 33 rpm record album began replacing the three-minute 78 rpm singles at this time. Teamed with musically more advanced arrangers than he had enjoyed at Columbia, particularly Nelson

Riddle, the results were astounding.

Almost overnight, Sinatra's baritone seemed to take on a much deeper, almost sandy texture. He suddenly grasped the inner rhythmic swing of the melodies and the use of dynamics. His performances triggered emotional reactions more complex and profound than those made for Columbia. Sinatra's early Capitol recordings with Riddle, particularly his 'theme' albums, 'In the Wee Small Hours,' 'Swing Easy,' 'Songs for Young Lovers,' and 'Songs for Swinging Lovers,' are timeless expressions of the beauty of the American popular song. Despite Sinatra's relatively straight forward renditions--he took only small liberties with melodies--his subtle phrasing coupled with near perfect enunciation of the lyrics and an uncanny ability to convey the emotion of the song's 'story' elevated his singing to the level of art.

Although he maintained a standard of excellence, Sinatra proved unable to consistently recapture the aesthetic heights of his early Capitol years. In 1962 his singing career moved into its third phase as he launched his own company, Reprise Records, and spent the next 10 years either searching for a niche within the increasingly rock-dominated popular music scene ('Strangers in the Night') or making generally inferior new recordings of his previous masterpieces. In growing frustration, Sinatra announced his retirement in 1971.

Sinatra emerged again after a short layoff. The final phase of his singing career was spent more as an elder statesman of the music, comfortable in his role as the foremost exponent of the classic popular song. While age of course had its effects, Sinatra remained unparalleled as an interpreter of classic songs. This was proven beyond doubt when, as he approached the age of 80, Sinatra made a series of recordings with other singers on his very successful 'duets' albums. Only a few of the guests, Tony Bennett for example, were able

to hold their own on the same tune with Sinatra. For the most part, the gulf between Sinatra's lyricism and that of the current pop idols with whom he recorded was staggering.

Sinatra's death gives us an opportunity not just to note his passing, but also to reflect on the complex and contradictory relationship between popular culture and art, as well as between the artist and society. But in the final analysis, I'd like to mark his passing simply with the observation that his magnificent voice has made my life, as well as countless others, that much more enjoyable.

A link to a good Sinatra Discography:
<http://www.eclipse.net/~steveja/Frank.html>



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