

Frank Sinatra Confidential

GANGSTERS IN THE NIGHT CLUBS

Lee Mortimer

THOUGH SOME five million words of testimony and assorted reports emanated from the Kefauver committee, not a line was printed which dealt with the infiltration of the organized underworld into the entertainment field, except for those cases where night-club tie-ins were directly connected with gambling operations. There were a number of practical reasons for ignoring the subject. By common repute, the night-club racket is no longer a profitable one, at least in the ledgers. The legitimate side of show business, too, is but a hollow shell of its once lusty self, scarcely worth the trouble required for gangsters to muscle in or probers to probe. The twin giants of movies and broadcasting, however, have created fertile fields

for the operations of the modern hoodlum who invests in and finally takes over legitimate industries, not through gun and stink bomb as formerly, but through stock ownership and elaborate corporate set-ups.

For years, the movies have been lush pastures for Mafia affiliates who used their control of certain unions as an opening wedge. The government half-heartedly prosecuted some key figures a few years ago. Some of the boys and two movie executives received jail sentences. As soon as the hue and cry died down, they were all quietly paroled.

The Kefauver committee was supplied with copious evidence proving that the underworld was still an important factor in Hollywood. A contemplated investigation mysteri-

ously evaporated after committee counsel Rudolph Halley was seen at New York's swank El Morocco spending an evening with a publicist representing the film companies. Shortly afterwards, Senator Kefauver signed up to do the prologue for a movie. Mr. Halley's law firm got a new client, a distillery, which, by chance, was also represented by the roving ambassador from Hollywood. In the subsequent committee hearings, the cinema capital was conspicuous by its absence.

It was, in a way, a pity the committee did not dig into show business. A few handsome profiles and well-rounded figures would not have hurt the TV broadcasts. A few real belly laughs might have supplied a welcome respite from the bleak humor of the dessicated deacon from New Hampshire. If the quizzers had dug into the history of gangster manipulations on Broadway, TV audiences might have enjoyed the classic about *Strike Me Pink*, a musical which was financed by underworld angels and which starred Jimmy Durante and Lupe Velez. A dozen or more of the boys, including Waxey Gordon, kittied the bankroll. That gave them the privilege of putting their molls in the cast and sitting in on rehearsals. As one girl went through her paces, one of the patrons loudly inquired:

"Is dat your bim, Joe?"

"Nah!" came the answer.

"Whose bim is she?"

"Nobody's."

"Den whadduhell is she doin' in our show?"

THE AVERAGE American, whose salary is pretty well taken care of by taxes and family burdens, does not patronize the cabarets. All he knows about them is what he sees in the movies, which represent them with their customary verisimilitude. In pictures, all night clubs are bigger than Radio City and every table is occupied by a wealthy playboy and his girl, both impeccably clad in evening clothes. The owner of the establishment is usually pictured as a sinister but suave character who does his masterminding in an elaborately furnished hidden office reached through a series of magically controlled doors, each guarded by a hefty cut-throat. This proprietor usually turns out to be a gangster with powerful connections.

Except for the last-mentioned item, the Hollywood representation is the stuff that dreams are made of. These baroque hippodromes have no present-day counterparts. Most night clubs are small places with postage-stamp dance floors. The greatest number of them are sleazy, poorly patronized dives. Out of the thirty thousand or more such establishments licensed throughout the nation, there are scarcely a handful that even pay expenses. It seems difficult to believe that the underworld which now operates with such

blue chips as railroads, banks, insurance companies, steamship lines, and hotel chains, should want to bother with such paltry stuff. Nevertheless, the mob is heavily involved in night clubs and other branches of the amusement industry. I found it out a few years ago, when, after Frank Sinatra took a poke at me, my curiosity led me to do a little detective work on him. For a crooner, he throws a suspiciously forceful wallop.

The remarkable fact about the failure of the Kefauver committee to investigate show business is that it takes so little effort to turn up information about the Mafia's infiltration into the entertainment world. Any investigator could have looked up the Treasury file from which I learned a great deal about Sinatra. The biography of the New Jersey songbird is typical of present-day careers in the entertainment jungle.

The dossier said, in effect, that the crooner had been adopted by underworld big shots for the specific purpose of making his sponsors seem respectable, thereby furthering their business enterprises, which included, among others, the wholesale distribution of narcotics. The report went on to state that Frankie was by no means a rare case. Many well-known entertainment figures had been "captured," either with or without their knowledge, by the underworld, the Communists, or both. The Communists and the gangsters both have

the same motive, acquiring respectability by association with prestige names. Frankie's contacts with both groups are numerous.

ACCORDING TO the report, Sinatra's close friendship and association with known narcotics peddlers and dope addicts was constantly advertised to propagandize kids with a taste for the fast life and surround dope-taking with glamor. How Frankie reached his present eminent position is a fairly complicated story and illustrative of the methods whereby the Mafia (as well as the Communists) exploits susceptible stars. It is a far cry from the old methods of the Black Hand (the name by which the Mafia was formerly known — the organization, incidentally, for all its pulp-fiction sound, is a very real and realistic one) which used to compel every Italian to kick in a tithe of his earnings, from the bootblack who came across with a dime a day to Enrico Caruso, who contributed a thousand a night from his ten-thousand-dollar singing dates.

Sinatra's father was a professional pug, a preliminary fighter who never got out of Jersey City. At the beginning of his career, strange as it may sound, the young Sinatra was following in his father's footsteps. Frankie spent quite a period as a local semi-pro, fighting in neighborhood clubs for peanuts and dreaming of the championship. Then one of those

meetings that make history occurred. Willie Moretti, alias Moore, kingpin of the Jersey rackets and cousin of Joe Adonis, "discovered" the struggling lad in a Hoboken gym. He was impressed by the kid's style and offered to take him under his wing and make a real boxer out of him. Frankie accepted and trained briefly under the Moretti aegis but soon showed that he lacked "heart." Meanwhile, with more folding money than he had dreamed of in his pocket, supplied by generous Moretti, he had become a flashy local playboy and spent more time in the bars than he did in the gyms.

The versatile Frankie then became impressed with his own larynx and decided to become a singer. Moretti went along with his new ambition. The mob got Sinatra a job in the Rustic Cabin, a Jersey roadside retreat where he made his singing debut at thirty-five dollars a week. Patron saint Moretti couldn't bear to see the gifted youngster struggling along on a pittance so he was also kept liberally supplied with pocket money. He also kept his boy out of trouble. About this time, Frankie was arrested in Bergen County on a sex charge and held in jail overnight. As a respected and prominent Jersey citizen, Moretti managed to have the complaint reduced to seduction, then dropped by the plaintiff when the Grand Jury failed to indict the fledgling crooner. Frankie was on his way up.

Frankie had outgrown New Jersey and was ripe for the big time. With Moretti behind him, he did not have to make it the hard way. The underworld owns so many night clubs that it is one of the largest purchasers of theatrical talent in the country. As a consequence, all kinds of people in the entertainment world are obligated to the leaders and prefer to remain on friendly terms with them. When Moretti put out the word that a good job for Frankie would be appreciated, Sinatra did not have to wait long before he found himself a featured vocalist on Tommy Dorsey's band.

HIS RAPID RISE to popularity on his own thereafter is common knowledge but the gangster wire-pulling behind the scenes is not. Sinatra was a swaggering, flashy kid who liked being associated with mobsters and frequently pretended to be one. He always carried a gun and continued to long after the Los Angeles sheriff told the press that he had taken it away. Among Frankie's intimates at this time were the infamous Fischetti brothers of Chicago — cousins of Al Capone. The younger Fischetti was just about Frankie's age. The two hit it off well and made the rounds together, drinking, chasing women, and generally keeping themselves amused.

Frankie had become a huge success and was now a limelight-bathed,

valuable piece of property. There was, however, a slight hindrance to his further exploitation and increased prosperity. His contract was owned by the canny Tommy Dorsey. Sinatra offered him seventy-five thousand dollars to be released and was promptly refused. His contract had seven years to run and Frankie was already pulling in about a million and a half a year, with Dorsey collecting one third of it as his share. Shortly after the breakdown of negotiations, Dorsey told me, he was visited by three business-like men, who told him out of the sides of their mouths to "sign or else." Frankie got his release pronto.

The Fischettis had now taken over the handling of Frankie's huge and difficult finances. Frankie isn't the disloyal type, however. He still remained on close terms with his original angel, Moretti. When Moretti's daughter got married, Frankie sang at the wedding to which he was escorted from New York by a delegation of New York motorcycle cops. After the festivities, Frankie presented the bride with an autographed photo and all was sweetness and light.

Although Frankie's income was large enough to support a large part of New Jersey, he suffered frequently from "the shorts." Unfortunately, he had hit his peak at the very time when surtaxes had reached their all-time high. The Chicago boys continually found themselves

called upon to reinvest goodly sums, often running into the six figure bracket. It wouldn't have been nice to have a bigtime crooner running around in dungarees. The payoff, naturally, was the underworld's use of Sinatra as a front. He was constantly in the company of the brothers Fischetti and assorted syndicate big shots. He once traveled in a private plane from Las Vegas to Palm Springs with the flying Fischettis and a stagestruck Detroit automobile tycoon. Shortly afterwards, the Syndicate began to acquire agency franchises in big cities to sell that particular make of car. The Fischettis had got back their investment with interest.

I HAVE IN my collection of historic Twentieth Century documents a photostat of the manifest of a Pan-American airways flight from Miami to Havana in February, 1947. It reveals that Sinatra flew to Cuba in the company of Joe and Rocco Fischetti. Also in my collection is a photograph showing Sinatra alighting in Havana from that plane surrounded by two men who hid their faces. A microscopic study of the shy pair definitely identifies the faces as belonging to the nomadic Fischettis. But the most unusual item in the picture is a heavy suitcase which was being lugged by Sinatra. What makes the suitcase unusual is the fact that airplane passengers do not carry their own baggage off

planes. Furthermore, if they are a Sinatra, they don't carry baggage. His two companions were not burdened at all.

It later developed that this gay trio was on their way to visit Charles "Lucky" Luciano, the international vice king who, having been deported to his native Italy, had sneaked back secretly to Havana. The entire criminal syndicate had been notified and a small assembly, for which thirty-six rooms in the leading Havana hotel were engaged, had been convoked.

Meanwhile, the U. S. Bureau of Narcotics had made a few arrangements of its own. Luciano's phone was tapped, with his calls to the mainland receiving particular attention. It was discovered that a wire was kept constantly open between the Colonial Inn, in Hallendale, Florida, and "Lucky's" hotel room. Narcotics Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger definitely established that Luciano was still in undisputed command of the complex operations of the infamous and powerful Unione Siciliano.

The night before he flew to Havana, Sinatra and Joe Fischetti paid a visit to the Colonial Inn, a luxurious gambling den owned by Joe Adonis and Meyer Lansky. Frankie put on a free show for his friends who doubtless offered some reciprocal entertainment.

The T-men were as yet not ready to break the story of Luciano's

presence in Cuba. He had, however, been seen holding court in the Havana Casino, surrounded by mobsters, gorgeous women, Hollywood celebrities, among them Sinatra, and such Syndicate big shots as the Fischettis, Ralph Capone, Joe Adonis, and Frank Costello. The doings of the international set are always big news and an American columnist found the goings-on too good to keep to himself. After an ultimatum from the Narcotics Bureau, the Cubans unwillingly gave Luciano the nudge and he returned to Italy with good long notices in the press.

DURING THE less public part of his stay in Cuba, a considerable amount of time had been spent by "Lucky" and his boys figuring out ways to have transferred to him the huge sums of money he had coming for past and future narcotic transactions. Bank drafts can be easily traced and bills of large denominations are suspect. So, according to the story released by government men, the boys got the idea of passing over the loot in small currency units carried in hand luggage by celebrities who would be given the freedom of the port because of their prestige. The same week Sinatra and the flying Fischettis visited "Lucky" in Cuba, the Feds reported that two million dollars had been delivered to Luciano by Rocco Fischetti, transported "in the hand luggage of an entertainer." When Italian

police raided Luciano's apartment last year they found, among other objets d'art, a solid gold cigarette case inscribed, "to my dear pal Lucky, from his friend, Frank Sinatra."

Besides the acquisition of glamorous celebrities the underworld acquires many substantial benefits from its multi-million dollar entertainment investments, and, indeed, its show-business and night-club parties are an indispensable part of its organization. For one thing, since repeal, many of the largest American and Canadian distillers, as well as some wine and liquor importers, are owned by the hoodlums who bought into them with their swollen prohibition profits. Night clubs are perfect outlets for their wares.

Although many of the night clubs show a loss on the books, modern corporate set-ups utilize this fact in a diversity of ways. A man can lose on the operation of one of them but more than make up for it in the profit he obtains from his liquor sales to it. Some are operated to obtain convenient "tax losses" for the boys, to get rid of unlisted funds or to cheat Uncle Sam of income and amusement taxes. One of the gaudiest New York saloons never shows a profit on its books though hundreds of thousands are distributed to the bosses every year. Prices in this club are unusually moderate but it is impossible to get a table without slipping the headwaiter from five to

twenty dollars. Of this sum he keeps 10 per cent; the balance, in cash, goes back to the gangster owners. Frank Costello has a fifty-thousand-dollar investment in it.

The underworld is dependent on a huge machine of workers, and when crime times are slow, the lower caste still has to be taken care of. It is cheaper to put them on the payroll in various parts of the entertainment and night-club world than simply to pension them. By absorbing thousands of unemployed hangers-on, the night clubs keep the huge underworld machine together. Another purpose served by the cabaret is the development of new acts. There is no vaudeville today, few road shows and stock companies. The saloon is the cradle of talent and many of the "finds" go on to Hollywood, radio and television, owned outright by the mob. One of the biggest American comedy teams, earning twenty thousand dollars a week, is in this position at the moment.

BY NOW, the financial position of the gangsters and their activities are all interrelated and each section of their operations is involved in all the rest. The night clubs are also a priceless communications system for the underworld without which they would be greatly hampered. A large percentage of its messages are delivered in them in one way or another. For example, it will be known

that Frank Costello can be found at a certain cabaret every Wednesday night at 9:00. If you should want to deliver a message to him, all you have to do is come to the place, sit at another table, and then accidentally bump into him. In emergencies notes or verbal instructions can be left with headwaiters or owners. But the mobsters cannot be seen in the same place every night, so a string of clubs is required and augmented by gymnasiums, barber-shops, Turkish baths, and restaurants.

Show business also helps maintain the underworld's necessary social and political contacts. It may cause trouble if public figures allow their hoodlum friends to visit their houses, but the danger is minimal if they

exchange a few words in a crowded night club. In the entertainment world, the gangsters can mix freely with politicians, tycoons, union bosses, and newspapermen and build up the priceless asset of good-will in important strata.

YET, WHEN you get down to brass tacks, the most basic of all the functions the night clubs perform for the gangland leaders is the most obvious. It makes them attractive to their women, who invariably go for footlights and spotlights. Which is why, I suppose, the Kefauver committee couldn't bear to investigate them. The Senate is the last refuge of gallantry; women are eternal and there are new investigations every year.

THE GENTLE GRAFTERS

OR

HOW TO GET ALONG IN MEXICO CITY

JEAN MALAQUAIS

THE STEWARDESS wore a beautiful smile over her lovely teeth. "We're flying over Popocatepetl," she said in Spanish, with a North American accent.

"Popoc-what?" said I, staring at her beautiful mouth.

"Popocatepetl," she repeated, pleased by my ignorance. "And over there, that's Ixtacihuatl."

Jean Malaquais' latest novel, World without Visa, published here in 1948, has been called the most remarkable French book of and about this generation. He is Polish by birth, but went to France while still in his teens. He came to this country several years ago, after stints in the French army and in Nazi prison camp.

I stuck my nose against the window. The plane glided past a peak covered with snow, a black tonsure cutting through the middle. Other lesser peaks, buttressing it, rose gradually one on top of the other, but without snow and without tonsures. Some clouds, all pink and demure, rode the wings of our Douglas C-4. "It's beautiful," I said, not wanting to contradict anyone.

"*Esto es Mexico,*" the stewardess said, in a pure Texas accent.

Devouring her handsomeness, her youth, I was all admiration. She liked that; you could see it on her lips. Besides, while we had been flying over Nicaragua, she'd taught me the name of the Nicaraguan