

A Measure of Sinatra

DESPITE RUMORS to the contrary, no thunderclaps were heard when Frank Sinatra arrived on the national music scene in 1939. A matchstick of a man with a shock of curly hair, blue eyes, and Indian-high cheekbones dominating a memorably thin face, he joined Harry James's band after extensive freelancing in the New York area. Seemingly, still another pleasant, one-chorus, romantic singer of quiet interludes between instrumentals had been added to a faceless lot.

"But he had a quality; he touched people," recalls Johnny Richards, composer of the melody of "Young at Heart," one of Sinatra's biggest record sellers. "It wasn't something you could put your finger on. Yet each time he got up in front of Harry's band and sang, it happened; you could feel it."

From the outset Sinatra believed in the popular song as a vehicle for projection of feelings, and he thoroughly devoted himself to using it well. Like the many jazzmen with whom he had close contact during his six-month tenure with James and the subsequent two years within the Tommy Dorsey orbit, he sought to bring something extra to music. He dug for the meaning of each song, paying particular heed to enunciation and word shading, and he became concerned about breath control.

Night after night he heard trombonist Dorsey play long, mellifluous melody lines, sometimes extending to sixteen bars without obvious intake of breath. By applying the Dorsey concept to singing, Sinatra felt he could give more graphic and affecting readings of the lyric stories of songs. Much like a boxer in training, he expanded the capacity of his lungs by swimming and running, developing to the point where with one breath he could take in almost 40 per cent more air than the average person. This, and his having learned to breathe through his nose while singing, brought a floating, easy feeling to his work. The vocal line, even on some of his Dorsey-RCA Victor recordings, seemed to flow unimpeded from one natural pause in the song to another. He worked carefully, thoughtfully, utilizing silences and glissandi for dramatic effect. Songs assumed graceful shapes.

All of this became more apparent after Sinatra left the Dorsey orchestra to go out on his own. He recorded a series of songs for Columbia, including "That

Old Black Magic," "Sunday, Monday, or Always," "Nancy," and his theme, "Put Your Dreams Away," against a cushion of vocal or instrumental sound romantically arranged by Axel Stordahl. Touching, in a wistful manner, upon things of which dreams are made, he caught the country's fancy. The timing was right. Young girls were lonely. Men in the service sought a voice that spoke the language of fantasy, hope, and home. The young Sinatra, personifying the boy next door, filled a need. More importantly, he caught the temper of the times and its youth.

The type of material he recorded through the 1940s and the manner in which he sang supported his fantasy-youth image. He sounded shy rather than sure as he asked, yearned, for love. (Remember "Five Minutes More"?) The youthful sound of his voice in combination with his curiously believable lyric readings and unflagging dedication to musical detail, even his manner of dress—the casual sports coats and floppy bow ties—further defined this image.

As we turned the corner into the 1950s, there was a downward glide in Sinatra's fortunes. His voice began to slip away. Other singers, particularly the emerging Billy Eckstine, took his place in the affections of the public. The bottom seemed to have fallen out. Love ballads weren't selling as well as before. The music business had moved into a period of transition. Novelty recordings occupied top slots on the popularity charts. Sinatra, the romantic



—Wide World.

Frank Sinatra — "the lines show in the voice."

balladeer, was out of step and fast losing ground.

There is nothing as outdated as a fallen champion. Sinatra tried television with varying results. He couldn't "buy" a hit record. An engagement in this period at New York's Paramount, the site of past triumphs, was indicative of the situation: The people just didn't come.

Then, after the release of his first Capitol records in 1953, the darkness that had hovered over Sinatra's career began to lift. The tempo of his life changed, and so did the tempo of his songs. He who had never sung rhythm songs with any great distinction made them the staff of his presentations. Nelson Riddle, Billy May, and others helped establish a more liberated Sinatra. Their arrangements pulsed and kicked, and Sinatra moved around within them with an abandon unknown during his association with Columbia Records. He took chances, improvised, sometimes changed lyrics to suit himself, experimented with rhythms. And always, as in *A Swingin' Affair* (Capitol W 803), the prototype album of the new Sinatra, there was swaggering strength, grabbing you by the lapels. Sinatra had become a finger-snapping, jazz-oriented swinger who sang about things the way they really are, using standards as his medium—his voice deeper, more flexible, tougher, less perfect. Little Boy Blue had faded in favor of a more realistic figure—the guy on the block who hung out on the corner, then left town and made it.

What had remained latent during the early years—the man himself—came

A Partial Discography

Frankie and Tommy—RCA Victor LPM 1569.

The Voice—Columbia CL 743.

Frank Sinatra's Greatest Hits: The Early Years—Columbia CL 2474.

The Frank Sinatra Story in Music—Columbia C2L-6.

A Swingin' Affair—Capitol W 803.

Only The Lonely—Capitol W 1053.

Ring-a-Ding-Ding—Reprise R-1001.

Sinatra and Strings—Reprise R-1004.

Softly (As I Leave You)—Reprise F-1013.

The September of My Years—Reprise F-1014.

Sinatra: A Man and His Music—

Reprise R-1016.

through. Sinatra's work in other creative areas, particularly following his Academy Award-winning performance in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), reiterated the feeling established on records. In films he was our Pal Joey, the man on the town in *The Tender Trap* and *Come Blow Your Horn*, an Army major in *The Manchurian Candidate* . . . but unmistakably Sinatra.

Time and trouble, it would seem, had informed him and lent depth to his work. But, because the taste of comeback remains pungent years after the fact, there have been excesses—carelessly recorded performances and some films made with his friends (Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Joey Bishop, etc.), which seem little more than home movies for public consumption. For all this, the size of Sinatra the artist is inescapable. When he cares, the results can be particularly moving.

Sinatra's fiftieth birthday late last year was the occasion for the release of a two-record set and a ballad collection worth savoring. Not intimidated by the passage of time, he pauses to talk and take stock of his career on *Sinatra: A Man and His Music* (Reprise R-1016), which contains recent remakes of his most popular recordings. He moves from his James hit, "All or Nothing at All," through Dorsey highlights such as "There Are Such Things" and "I'll Never Smile Again," through "Young at Heart" and "Witchcraft," to "Softly as I Leave You," "My Kind of Town," and "September of My Years."

For those of us over thirty, this retrospective package stirs memories and makes for contemplation of our youth. But the music and its interpretation do not trap the listener in a net of nostalgia, as is typical of projects of this genre. On the contrary, the set gives a true picture of the contemporary Sinatra. The lines show in the voice; the softer contours are gone. In lieu of youth, he offers experience, illuminating the inner nature of his songs as only a veteran can.

On *The September of My Years*, the second album in question, Sinatra muses on the private side of his past, thinking aloud via songs by Cahn and Van Heusen, Gordon Jenkins, Ervin Drake, Strouse and Adams, Wilder and Engvick, Bart Howard, Don Hunt, and Weill and Anderson. From all indications, this was a "special" album for him. There are few, if any, mistakes. Notes are beautifully sustained; melody and lyrics meld in the creation of telling vignettes. Given a free field within Gordon Jenkins's spare arrangements, he sings with facility and with the depth of feeling of one who cares, respects his art, himself and his audience. Listen to Drake's reflective "It Was a Very Good Year"; it is indicative of the flavor of this album—in sum, a measure of Sinatra.

—BURT KORALL.

Benchley's Bushmen

ROBERT BENCHLEY III is following a path his distinguished grandfather, who always was full of abandon and hurrah, probably would have approved. He is fifteen going on sixteen; to his parents' alarm, he next will be seventeen and even more uncontrollable. A boy with the trunk of a professional wrestler, well-haired and blonde-thatched, overcome by the energy he gets from such breakfast foods as Knittels, Pablums, Scorchies, Frisbies, and the like, he cannot find anything better to do than to be the leader of a rock 'n' roll, rhythm 'n' blues, western 'n' country band called The Bushmen.

This organization plays gigs in the New Canaan - Darien - Norwalk - Pound Ridge-Broad River area of Connecticut. It is a defiant crew. It plays nothing original. Everything it knows it has learned from records. The lads in it take a certain strange pleasure from that. They do not mind being imitative of other, more successful groups. Robbie says with pride, "Why, last year we earned \$200 on jobs." When asked why the group has not developed any music of its own, he shrugs and, with the present-day teen-ager's inviolate coolness, says, "Well, we've been *too busy* practicing the music we *hear*." There are two implications to be drawn from this: The boys are too timid to venture into creativity, or they are unimaginative.

Having heard The Bushmen, I do not believe the latter premise. All of them are good musicians, in their own surfing ways. Yet they do take time off from their gliding activities, at sea or on land, to teach themselves to play instruments and to make interesting sounds. Perhaps I ought to qualify that last statement. The sounds are interesting because I cannot tell where they came from. I am not sure that I want to.

"Robbie has been listening to music all his life!" his mother cries, in tones that would make his electric guitar run for shelter.

"Debussy?" says Robbie. "Who's *he*? No, I never heard of anybody named Ravye." He meant, of course, Ravel.

I am more prepared to believe the son than the mother. The boy never has listened to anything, consciously. But she may be right in that he has been surrounded by music and unconsciously has absorbed a good deal of it. Sounds are echoing in his head, and he is trying to reproduce them. This gives his parents, not to say Rupert (their dachshund), some aural disturbance. Oh, perhaps not disturbance. Some nettling.

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Mrs. Benchley always has either the radio or the phonograph going. It is hard to be in her house without being assaulted by Martin Block, Herb Oscar Anderson, or WQXR. This is a pain in both ears to guests, but I suppose that if it has given the boy a firm base in both classical music and pop, and has enabled him to do something creative, it should not be knocked.

The group got together about a year and a half ago—almost two years from this coming Thanksgiving. A couple of kids in the Silvermine Road-New Canaan neighborhood got guitars and began messing around with them. This is in the tradition of the great jazzmen of our time. Eddie Condon learned to play the banjo by messing around with it. Nobody ever taught Pee Wee Russell how to play the clarinet, and as far as I know neither Bix nor Parker had any lessons. Erroll Garner still does not know how to read music, and I would bet that if one cast a handful of stones into the Count Basie band, at least four of them would pock men who play more by intuition than professional knowledge.

Jazz is felt more than learned. It was Fats Waller who said, "Man, if you don't know it, don't try it." What he actually was saying was the Louis Armstrong line: "It don't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing." Louis sang a number of other lines beyond that one, but I believe I will leave them to Nat Hentoff to reproduce.

Back to the boy, Mr. Benchley III. "I got this folk guitar a couple of years ago," he said.

"What is a folk guitar?"

He gave a shake, not unlike that of Rupert, the dachshund. "Unelectrified."

"Unelectrified?"

"Yup." His eyes were downcast. "I started messin' aroun' with it. Then Dad gave me the money to buy an electric one. Then there was a guy or two in the neighborhood, or aroun' here, they were playin' guitars, too, and we started sittin' aroun' and playin' together."

"What for?"

He gave another dachshund-like shrug. "For fun."

The Bushmen is one of several bands, if the euphemism will be excused, in this area. They are joined in contest sometimes with groups called The Intruders,

(Continued on page 62)