Gene Lees
Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93023

December 1983 Vol. 3 No. 5

Letters

I finally got the population data you requested. It lends even more drama to your comparison of 12- to 30-year-olds. Most striking is the projected growth for the 40-44 and 35-39 age groups, especially as contrasted to the shrinkage of the 20-24 and 15-19 groups.

Billboard a few weeks ago carried a story on a survey commissioned by the RIAA and NARM, which said, "Rock accounted for 34 percent of all record purchases in 1982, compared to 43 percent the year before...

"By age, the 15- to 19-year-old group declined as a factor in total retail purchases by two percentage points to 16 percent and the 20-24 group dropped from 27 percent to 23 percent, while the 25-34 group rose one point to 27 percent and the 35-plus group from 24 percent to 29 percent."

Now, this should be put in the context of what is happening to the population as a whole. The data I obtained is as follows:

The median age of the U.S. population reached 30.0 years in 1980, marking the first time this figure ever reached the 30-year plateau. In 1970, the median age of the U.S. population was 28.0. The increase in the median age from 28.0 to 30.0 in ten years appears to be a result of declining fertility, aging of the "baby boom" generation, and the increasing longevity of the population.

The baby boom generation (Americans born 1947-1964) remains the most influential in the U.S., representing 33 percent of the entire population. The baby-boom generation's impact stems from the fact that it is squeezed into only an 18-year span, which is less than 25 percent of the average American's life span. Also, because the boom generation stands between much smaller generations, it dominates them.

In the 1980s, the baby boom will enter middle age. As a result, those aged 30-34 will grow 24 percent; those aged 35-39 will increase 41 percent; and those aged 40-44 will grow 50 percent. Teenagers and young adults will become scarce. In 1982, the baby-boom generation fills the ages 18-35, representing 30 percent of the total U.S. population. As members of the baby boom grow older, they will move into higher income brackets, and their growing productivity and enlarged buying power should serve as a stimulus to the economy.

In addition, the over-65 segment will grow significantly during the 1980s.

It is, to be sure, easy for Monday-morning quarterbacks to sit back and say how dumb it is for marketers to put all their eggs in a shrinking basket, as the record industry is doing. Still, companies outside the music business got hip early on. Even Gerber baby foods successfully diversified in the mid-1970s when their target market for little jars of pureed vegetables — their equivalent of black vinyl — went on the skids. It's clear that, short and medium term, ages 25-39 deserve primary emphasis, and even 40-44 should get as much as or more emphasis than teens, in view of their comparable sizes and the greater disposable income of the older group.

And long term — say 15 years from now? In 1980, there were half as many 50-54s as 20-24s. In 15 years the groups will be the same size. The nucleus of the mass market will be 30-49.

Since, over the long haul, the needs and wants of consumers usually determine which industries — and indeed which companies — survive, all of this should give cause for optimism. Still, the music industry needs to plan for a *systematic* adjustment in tastes rather than a series of knee-jerk reactions each time financial panic sets in. For example, Carly Simon's and Linda Ronstadt's recent LP expeditions into 1940s torch songs are knee-jerk reactions, though commendable efforts.

However, seeing the Top 100 gradually shift to more melodic music with more emphasis on lyric content is a process that, over ten years or so, could raise the standards and expectations of the mass audience to a point that more sophisticated music could be hugely successful in the 1990s. We are in fact already seeing signs of such a shift, with four out of one recent week's top five being melodic, almost MOR ballads, for the first time in years, though I think the lyrics to all of them are pretty awful.

Two final thoughts:

First, the entertainment industry is still the only industry of its size that does so little *post hoc* research on what makes something successful. When a record is in demand, nobody can tell you why. Granted, it's a very subjective matter that requires creative analysis and marketing investigation. But even perfume marketers — and how subjective can you get? — know why their successful products are successful. And the answer goes much deeper than "it smells good". Consumer research isn't a band-aid to be applied when you're in trouble. It should be an ongoing, pre-planned component of any professional marketing plan. It would be fascinating to compare the music industry's research-to-sales ratio (the percentage of gross dollar sales invested in consumer research) to that of healthy industries.

Second, I have often thought that it's only the adversary relationship between different components of the music business that prevents the creation of an effective trade association that could spearhead an organized approach to more scientific marketing of music. The last thing the world needs is another bureaucracy, but in many industries — fresh produce, for example, which has its Produce Marketing Association that has made major contributions to elevating the marketing efficiency of agricultural products — it's working.

Between the record labels, video/MTV, radio stations, hardware manufacturers, publishers, software manufacturers, and so on, something should be possible.

If of course we could ever get these groups to agree on anything.

Steven Marc Cristol
Los Angeles, California

Steven Marc Cristol, 31, in many ways exemplifies what is happening to the baby-boom generation. He began as a rock guitarist and songwriter and recently completed studies in composition and arranging at the Dick Grove Music Workshops. He has had songs recorded by Harry Belafonte and Ronnie Mack. And he has a second career as head of a company that acts as consultant to advertising agencies. He holds a master's degree in market research from Northwestern University.

The older bass players like Milt Hinton, George Duvivier, and Ray Brown make time interesting, with their warm, hefty swing, and linear resolutions. I mean, they are strong enough to warrant a focus on not only their solos but also their ensemble lines. The LaFaro-styled bassist don't produce as thick a sound, partly because they play faster. Their ensemble lines are often broken up. The focus centers on the interaction of bass, drums, and piano — or whatever. The trance of swing is implied rather than spelled out, and your mind works to fill in the gaps.

Recording engineers accustomed to rock music and electric basses often jack up the high end of the bass. Then the depth is gone, the picture is flat, the resonance perspective of the music disappears. We are left with a tangle of lines all weighing the same.

Solos are a matter of personal listening habits and imagination. I like to visualize the bassist if I am listening to a record. I usually picture them as being animated — someone like Stafford James or Richard Davis — and percussive.

Non-musicians probably have a lot of misconceptions about the bass. Some musicians do, too. I once worked for a leader who, when his bassist cancelled out on a gig — this was a big-band job — hired another sax player instead of trying to replace the bassist. I never did understand his logic.

Owen Cordle
Cary, North Carolina

After the Bands: The Sinatra Effect

When Frank Sinatra's career took off in the early 1940s, journalists rushed to their telephones and then to their typewriters to pose the wrong questions and come up with the wrong answers. Girls were "swooning" at his performances. What was the cause of this mysterious phenomenon?

There were two causes. The first was hunger. Some of the girls had waited so long in theater lines to see him that they fainted. The second was George Evans, Sinatra's press agent, who knew an angle when he saw one and paid a few more girls to fake it.

But what caused this flocking? The journalists went to psychologists and psychiatrists for explanations, and came away with a few, all of them silly. His thin face and slender frame, barely hanging on the microphone, touched the maternal instincts of the girls. Maternal indeed. Or it was the war: Sinatra was a surrogate for the boy-next-door who was away in service.

The journalists and psychologists alike revealed an ignorance of history. The Sinatra effect was by no means unprecedented, and in fact suggested a question I have not yet seen answered, or for that matter even seriously addressed.

This kind of sexual flocking had occurred around many male performers, including Franz Liszt, who plucked a large bouquet of his era's fairest flowers. So too Louis Moreau Gottschalk. It happened around Offenbach. When he arrived in Boston, aristocratic ladies unhitched his horses and pulled his carriage through the streets by hand. No doubt it happened around Spohr. Certainly in Italy, many of the great castrati were adored by quantities of women. When Henry Pleasants said so in a piece about the castrati published in *Stereo Review*, several readers wrote to argue that affairs were impossible for the castrated male. Henry replied that while castration assured sterility, it did not necessarily confer indifference, or even, for that matter, impotence.

It seems that a man, even an ugly one, need only become famous to have women fling themselves at him, particularly if he achieves his high visibility as an entertainer. Let us not even bother with the more obvious cases like Elvis Presley and the Beatles. One would be naive to think that, say, Zubin Mehta suffers from a dearth of opportunities. And in each instance, the phenomenon erodes the image of the male as the sexual aggressor, the female as the reluctant recipient of his brutish attentions. For there is nowhere in history a comparable example of men flocking in a sort of collective self-humiliation around a famous female entertainer — not Lily Langtree, not Sarah Bernhardt, not Marilyn Monroe, not Olivia Newton-John. But we know how women behaved toward Erroll Flynn and John Barrymore, and there is no reason to assume Henry Irving or David Garrick experienced anything very different. A man, if he has the opportunity and that bent of temperament, may try to add a famous beauty to his trophy collection, but he will not stand in a screaming crowd of [redacted] clamoring for their idol, and given a choice of an anonymous but beauteous barmaid or a homely movie star, he will almost invariably choose the former. So fully if silently does society recognize this difference in behavior that a man who follows a famous woman and tries to break into her hotel room will end up in jail or a psychiatric ward while a girl who similarly tracks a public idol will be dismissed more or less lightly as more or less normal.

> The bagpipes sound exactly the same when you have finished learning them as when you start.
>
> — Sir Thomas Beecham

Whatever the reasons for this mass self-debasement of women, the fact is that it happened far more to Sinatra than to Dick Haymes, Perry Como, Nat Cole, Andy Russell, or any other of the singers coming up at the time. And of course it did not happen at all to the "girl singers" such as Peggy Lee and Doris Day. Sinatra was The Man, for a whole generation of young people, for [redacted] boys as well as the girls. Indeed, the theory that he was a surrogate for the absent servicemen overlooked his popularity with those self-same servicemen.

He said for the boys what they wanted to say. He said to the girls what they wanted to hear. The body of excellent songs that had come into existence in the United States at last found a singer worthy of them. He was the best singer we had ever heard. He was one of the best singers in history. And we knew it. He was our poet laureate.

One of the writers at the time said, with more than a touch of condescension, that Sinatra sang those love songs as if he believed them. But of course. That was the secret. And far from manifesting a callow gullibility on Sinatra's part, this was a striking advance in the art of singing. Sinatra was to American song what Montgomery Clift was to American acting.

As for that forgotten writer's contempt for mere love songs, he apparently did not understand that there are only two things worth writing about, sex and death. The vast bulk of our literature, whether noble or trivial, is about either or both of these subjects. A suspense thriller is about the avoidance of death, the survival of the individual. A love story is (secretly) about the survival of the species. When the hero destroys the villain and saves the heroine, he has achieved the survival, for the nonce, of the individual, and when he takes her in his arms in the fadeout, you know they are about to make their own modest contribution

Jazzletter is published twelve times a year at Ojai, California, 93023, and distributed by first class mail to the United States and Canada, air mail to other countries. Subscriptions are $30 per year in U.S. currency for the United States and Canada, $35 for other countries.

to the survival of the species. Essentially, then, all literature is about survival. Almost all of our stories and songs are about love, the highest exaltation we know excepting that achieved by some people through religion, and even then the terminology of romantic love is often used in the effort to describe the experience.

Sinatra sang our love songs with an overwhelming persuasive immediacy. Julius LaRosa says, "He was able to turn a thirty-two bar song into an three-act play."

Remembering her days with the Pied Pipers and Tommy Dorsey, Jo Stafford says, "Frank joined the band while we were playing a theater in Milwaukee. The Pipers were... well, we thought we were pretty good. We were a little clique unto ourselves. Frank was very thin in those days, almost fragile looking. When he stepped up to the microphone, we all smirked and looked at each other, waiting to see what he could do. The first song he did was *Stardust.*

"I know it sounds like something out of a B movie, but it's true: before he'd sung four bars, we *knew.* We knew he was going to be a great star."

That was early in 1940. The style was not even fully formed. Sinatra had just come up from the Harry James band, at that time much less successful than the Dorsey band. But he had already recorded with James, and in an early Columbia side, *All or Nothing At All,* one of the characteristics of his work is already in evidence: his exquisite enunciation. His vowels are almost Oxonian. The title line comes out almost *ohllll or nothing at ohllllll...*

And there is something else very interesting about the way he treats those words. When you sing a long note, it is the vowel you sustain, almost always. Certain of the consonants, voiced or voiceless, cannot be sustained: b and its voiceless counterpart p, d and t, g and k. You cannot sing *thattttt.* It is impossible. You must sing *thaaaaat.* Or *cuuuuup.* Or *taaaaake.* But certain other consonants, voiced and unvoiced — v and f, z and s — can be sustained, being fricatives, although I find the effect unattractive. You cannot sustain the semivowels w and y. But there are four semivowels that can be sustained, m, n, l, and r. Now, just as Spanish has long and short forms of the letter r — a double rr, as in *perro,* is rolled — correct Italian enunciation requires that you slightly sustain all double consonants. And Sinatra has always recognized this principle, whether because of his Italian background or not. You hear it when he extends the l in *Allll or Nothing at Allllll.* No doubt having grown up at least familiar with Italian, the sound of the long l seemed natural to him.

There is another aspect of his enunciation that is distinctly Italian. This is the tendency to dentalize d's and t's and to soften the letter r almost to a lisp when it follows d or t. The sound is impossible to describe, easy to imitate, and anyone who has heard Sinatra sing *tree* or *dream* knows exactly what I mean. These sounds seem to be specific to people of Italian background who grew up in or close to New York City. You will hear them in the speech of the late actor Richard Conte. In fact, this is one of the most significant things about Sinatra's singing: its Italianness.

Until the arrival of Sinatra, the dominant influence among white popular singers was Irish. This is not to overlook Jewish singers such as Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson. But both of them sang out of a background of minstrelsy, and their work was imitative of black singers, or more precisely it was an imitation of previous white singers imitating what black singers supposedly sounded like. Thus it was about as "authentic" as the black influence in white American rock groups imitating earlier white American rock groups imitating English rock groups imitating Chuck Berry. But Jolson had power equivalent to his ego, and he swung, and he was the best singer in that tradition.

Most of the favored male vocalists prior to Sinatra produced a high light sound, like Morton Downey, and if they were not Irish tenors, they tried to sound like them. This is the school of Lanny Ross, Buddy Clark, Dennis Day, and Kenny Baker. Gene Austin, with his falsetto effects, seemed to aspire to be a soprano. Andy Williams is a throwback to that school. You will notice it in the way he produces head tones. With Sinatra, the Italians arrive — Perry Como, Tony Bennett, Vic Damone, Frankie Laine, Julius LaRosa, Al Martino, Tommy Leonetti, Bobby Darin, David Allyn.

And there is another difference. The earlier performers were a part of or derived from a tradition before amplification. Sinatra was the first singer who really understood how to use a microphone.

In opera's early days, a rather normal voice volume was all that was required. And it was not uncommon for a composer to be asked to write within a limited range, as Cole Porter had to do for Ethel Merman. But when composers came to use larger orchestras in works designed for performances in larger halls, singers were required to produce greater volume, although the throwing power of a voice is not totally dependent on volume: a really good singer can bounce a pianissimo off the back wall of a large hall. The phenomenon is in fact rather mysterious, like the projection of a piano. Leontyne Price is uncanny at this. Nonetheless, it takes a voice of great power to balance a large opera orchestra, and sheer size came in time to be an important quality. This was even truer in popular music than in opera, whose admirers usually had some

> **Music first and last should sound well, should allure and enchant the ear. Never mind the inner significance.**
>
> **— Igor Stravinsky**

appreciation of the subtler qualities of the human voice. In non-classical music-hall popular music of the *Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-Dee-Yay* period, wall-shaking belting was much admired. But the kind of intimate song that emerged after the rise of Irving Berlin seemed to require a more personal kind of singing. This led to the odd and fortunately temporary practice of singing through a megaphone, which produced a hollow cardboard kind of sound. Rudy Valee was probably the best-known singer with a megaphone, and he got rid of it as soon as microphones improved.

Early recording was entirely acoustic. With the development of electrical recording, a new technique was called for, but few people grasped this. Bing Crosby understood it to an extent. He appreciated that it was unnecessary to shout into the microphone. What he did not appreciate was the dramatic possibilities opened up by the microphone and the constantly improving techniques of recording.

Of its very nature, singing through a good sound system or for recording should be as different from vaudeville belting as film acting is from stage acting. One can convey on film with a lift of an eyebrow what might require a conspicuous change of voice or tone or volume or some expansive gesture on a stage. And something similar is true of singing into a sensitive microphone.

Sinatra understood this. It seems that the comprehension came to him gradually: his evolution is clear in his recorded work.

Sinatra has on occasion said that he learned a great deal from listening to Tommy Dorsey play trombone night after night on the bandstand. Indeed, one of the myths about his work in the early days was that he learned an Indian trick of breathing in through his nose while continuing to sing. Whatever the athletic skills of the American Indians, none of them ever achieved this physiological impossibility, and neither did Sinatra. In brass and woodwind playing there is a technique in which the cheeks are filled with air to maintain pressure in the embouchure while the player inhales through the nose. Clark Terry can do this seemingly

endlessly. But only a few players have mastered this technique, and Tommy Dorsey was not one of them. He did, however, have remarkable breath control, and his slow deliberate release of air to support long lyrical melodic lines was indeed instructive to Sinatra and still worth any singer's attention. Dorsey would use this control to tie the end of one phrase into the start of the next. Sinatra learned to do the same. This is evident in their 1941 recording of *Without a Song.* Since Dorsey's trombone solo precedes the vocal, the record provides an opportunity to observe how Sinatra was learning from Dorsey, and how far he had come since *All or Nothing at All.* At the end of the bridge, Sinatra goes up to a mezzo-forte high note to crest the phrase "as long as a song is strung in my SOUL!" But he does not breathe then, as most singers would. He drops easily to a soft "I'll never know..." This linking of phrases between the inner units, learned from Dorsey, gave Sinatra's work a kind of seamlessness.

The next time he sings "I'll never know", he hits an A on the word "know" before falling to G, the proper note for the word. This kind of glissando drove the adolescent girls wild. When George Evans had built a general national hysteria, Sinatra had only to sing one of these falls in a theater and the next four bars were drowned in a sea of shrieking. This was in fact merely another device derived from Dorsey, and natural to the trombone.

Sinatra's voice at that time was a pure sweet tenor. A year and a half later, when he recorded *In the Blue of Evening*, he was already losing some of that quality, which owed more to the Irish tradition than the Italian. His singing was acquiring strength. (The entire body of Sinatra's work with Dorsey has been reissued on seven LPs by RCA, ninety-seven songs recorded in thirty-two months.)

If Sinatra had acquired a good deal of his technique from Dorsey, he seems to have drawn some of his conception from Billie Holiday. Indeed, most of the best singers of his generation, including Peggy Lee — his equivalent among women singers for dramatic intensity — seem to have paid at least some attention to Holiday.

Fats Waller is reputed to have said, "Billie sings as if her shoes pinch." Whoever said it, somebody took note of the squeezed quality of her voice. But many informed and sensitive listeners find a deep emotional experience in her work, and there is no questioning her effect on any number of women singers, including Lee, Anita O'Day, and June Christy, all of whom are her stylistic descendants. With a small voice and a tendency to short phrases — in contrast to Sinatra's extremely long ones — she phrases not according to the melodic structure of a song, but according to the natural fall of the words. Whether she did this by design or inspired intuition, I do not know. But Sinatra does it by design.

Naturalistic phrasing, however, requires the use of the microphone. Journalists made fun in those early days of Sinatra's way of handling a microphone, his hands around the stand, just under the mike itself. They joked that he was propping himself up with it. They did not understand that he was playing it. He had completely abandoned the previous approach to the microphone, that of standing bravely facing it, using the hands for dramatic emphasis. Sinatra was moving the mike in accordance with what he was singing. And he was the man who developed this technique. In later times, when microphones had been greatly reduced in size, singers would slip them off their stands and walk freely around the stage with them. But those early mikes were bulky and screwed firmly to the top of the stands. And so Sinatra gripped the stand and drew it toward him or tilted it away according to the force of the note he was putting out at any given moment. He totally mastered this.

Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time, and annoys the pig.

— Source unknown

The microphone made possible speech-level singing. It did not make singing unnatural; it restored naturalness to it. But, and this is insufficiently understood, the microphone is treacherous in that it magnifies not only the virtues of a performance, but the flaws too. And it is a difficult instrument to use well.

For example, the plosive consonants p and b, and for that matter t and d, and sometimes even the aspirated h, which pose no problem to anyone singing in an opera house or a bathtub, are booby traps to a singer working close to a mike. Therefore the singer must approach them with caution. Failure to do so results in the phenomenon called popping the mike. You will hear it on many records. Some of the best singers will now and then pop one of those letters in a recording session, rattling the speakers in every living room in which the record is later played. In the entire body of his recorded work, I have never heard Sinatra pop a consonant.

Sinatra's stature as a performer was not fully manifest, however, until he worked outside the context of the Dorsey band. Despite Dorsey's showcasing of singers, Sinatra had been required on the whole to sing at tempos suitable for dancing. Freedom to explore a song as a dramatic miniature did not come until he made four sides for Bluebird on January 19, 1942, eight months before he left the band. These are *The Song Is You, The Lamplighter's Serenade, Night and Day,* and *The Night We Called It a Day.* The choice of composers is interesting: Jerome Kern, Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, and Matt Dennis, for whose work Sinatra would always have an affinity. The Axel Stordahl arrangements were well above the norm of accompaniment in popular music. The string section comprised only four violins and a cello, but Stordahl used them skillfully. These are chamber recordings, really, designed to set off the intimacy Sinatra's work had attained. It is as if he is singing not to a great and anonymous company but to you. With these four sides, Sinatra becomes Sinatra. In later years his work would mellow, deepen, and mature, but the conception and the method were fully developed by then. Sinatra had just turned twenty-six at the time, the bird about to fly. The great shrill mobs of girls were not yet begging him to autograph their underwear, and there is captured in these four songs something "of love and youth and spring" that would never be heard in his work again. They were remarkable recordings when they came out, and they are remarkable now. It is a pity that he and Stordahl did not record two dozen or so songs in that vein at that time.

They would produce a superb string of recordings for Columbia Records, but the orchestras would be larger, the intimacy less, the thinking sophisticated. Sinatra was by then the biggest celebrity in America. Only a few years later, a Gallup poll would reveal that his name was better known than that of President Truman. Newspaper writers were boggled by his earnings, a million dollars a year. The record companies, further impelled by Petrillo's recording ban, rushed to get other band singers into the studios, including Billy Eckstine, inevitably promoted as the Sepia Sinatra, although his style had more in common with his friend from the Earl Hines band, the brilliant Sarah Vaughan; Jo Stafford, who thought of herself as a group singer, had no taste for stardom, and withdrew from it without fanfare in 1956; Doris Day from the Les Brown band, Perry Como (who, as Julius LaRosa says, probably has the most perfect voice placement of all the singers) from Ted Weems; Peggy Lee from Benny Goodman; Andy Russell from the Alvino Rey and early Stan Kenton bands; Kay Starr from Charlie Barnet; and of course Dick Haymes, he of the wondrous richness of sound, who had followed Sinatra through the James and Dorsey bands. David Allyn was an alumnus of the Boyd Raeburn band, a striking baritone with a

dark woody timbre, a favorite with musicians, who never got the recognition he deserved. Nobody thought to do anything with Harry Babbitt of the Kay Kyser band, whom I thought was one of the best band singers. There was something sunny about his work. Maybe that's what was wrong with it: it said nothing of the dark side of life. One great singer who did not come out of a band was Nat Cole. Cole was of course a jazz pianist, one of the great and influential ones. That he sang extremely well was discovered almost by accident, and his success as a singer virtually ended his career as a pianist.

Sinatra opened the way for all of them. And he influenced at least two generations of singers, including Vic Damone, Steve Lawrence, Jack Jones, Bobby Darin, Matt Monro, LaRosa, and another underrated singer, the gifted and ill-fated Tommy Leonetti.

But in pioneering a new approach to singing, Sinatra also created a problem. What he did seemed so indisputably right that any other approach to phrasing seemed wrong. If one phrased in the same way, one sounded obviously derivative. But what was the singer to do, *not* phrase for the meaning of the lyric? Actually, these singers, examined closely, do not sound all that much like Sinatra. Technically, as LaRosa and I (and Sinatra too) have long contended, the best male voice of all is that of Vic Damone. The instrument itself, the unbelievably open throat, is gorgeous. One of the best voices belonged to (don't gasp) Eddie Fisher. Unfortunately, he never did find out what singing is all about, and his time, or rather lack of it, is legendary among musicians. Steve Lawrence and Jack Jones probably have the firmest musical

Sidney Bechet, after being presented to the king of England: "It's the only time I ever met anybody whose picture was on money."

command, although Jack is inclined to waste a magnificent talent on unworthy songs. LaRosa, for my taste, achieves the greatest unaffected emotional depth. But the voices, in all these cases, bear no resemblance to Sinatra's and all of these people avoid enunciating in his manner — excepting of course that bemusing Chicago anomaly Duke Hazlitt, who has made not only a career but a life out of sounding as much like Sinatra as possible, right down to the *dr* idiosyncrasy in a word like *dream*, and even dressing like him. In 1960, after a long, well-publicized, and vain attempt to hire Sinatra for its first jazz festival in Chicago, *Playboy* sent Hazlitt onto the bandstand without introduction. Hazlitt was even wearing a Tyrolean hat like Sinatra's. He sang at least eight bars before the professionals realized it wasn't Sinatra, two or three songs before any of the audience caught on. And no doubt some of them went away convinced they had seen Sinatra. (Sinatra supposedly went one night with friends to a club to hear Hazlitt, and quipped, "I'll sue.")

There is an outstanding exception among the Sinatra derivations, one who doesn't seem to sound like him. Tony Bennett learned his phrasing from Sinatra. But Tony tapped another source of inspiration, which no one seems to have noticed: Louis Armstrong. The clue is in the vibrato. And so Tony gets away with it better than the others. It also helps that his voice is about a fourth or fifth higher than Sinatra's.

Sinatra's work, unlike that of most singers, has distinct phases to it, like the periods in a painter's life.

The first of these is the period with Harry James, which might be called embryonic. Only in retrospect do we find signs of the special. Otherwise he was indistinguishable from any number of capable but bland band singers. Then there is what could be considered the childhood, the period with Dorsey. This is followed by an all-too-brief adolescence, consisting of the four Bluebird sides with Stordahl.

Then comes the young manhood, the period with Columbia, when he turns to Broadway to find songs commensurate with his talent, essaying *Old Man River* (for which he was laughed at, although his reading of it was outstanding) and the *Soliloquy* from *Carousel*. And he is already looking to the past for material: *These Foolish Things, Try a Little Tenderness*, and *When Your Lover Has Gone* were not new even then when he recorded them. This is the first great plateau, *There's No You, What Makes the Sunset? Mam'selle, Day by Day, If You Are But a Dream, Time after Time, It's the Same Old Dream, Nancy, The Girl that I Marry*. He recorded ballads almost exclusively. When he did tackle brighter tempos, in *Five Minutes More, I Begged Her*, and *Saturday Night Is the Loneliest Night in the Week*, the swing, if any, is rather self-conscious, advanced hardly at all since that dreadful song he recorded with Dorsey, *I'll Take Tallulah*.

And then his career slipped a cog. His record sales petered out toward the end of the 1940s. He began to have voice problems. Mitch Miller, who was then head of a&r at Columbia and already committed to the recording by various people, such as Guy Mitchell, of some appalling trash, was forcing like material on Sinatra. He even made him make a record with Dagmar, that curious lady famous for a Himalayan bust line. A side man on one of these painful sessions was a guitarist named Speedy West, who was known for being able to produce a cluck-cluck-cluckah chicken sound from his instrument. Despising the tune, his throat bothering him, Sinatra struggled through a take. A smiling Mitch Miller rushed from the booth as if to embrace him — and embraced Speedy West.

Sinatra waited out his contract with Columbia, written off as a has-been by the press, struggling with his voice, desperate. Curiously enough, the only time I ever saw him perform live (other than in the recording studio) was during that period. He played the Chez Paree in Montreal. He came onstage full of obvious and visible anger and anxiety, and sang with a new darkness and depth. It was shortly after this that he signed a contract with Capitol Records and made a ten-inch LP with a small orchestra and charts by a former Charlie Spivak arranger named Nelson Riddle, a discovery of Nat Cole's. The album, called *Songs for Young Lovers*, tended to swing lightly. When your voice is not in good shape, and Sinatra's still wasn't, it is wise to avoid very slow tempos, which require the long sustention of notes and lines. But the album was shot through with prismatic new colors. For the first time, his work takes on the hue of jazz. And the swing is insouciant, unselfconscious: he has learned to ride a rhythm section. And whatever he had lost in length of phrase (which later he regained) is more than compensated for by the emotional depth of his readings and the bounce he brings to the songs.

That album was followed by a long series of hit singles (such as *The Young at Heart*) and albums for Capitol and more on Reprise, a label Sinatra founded. Sinatra found some very compatible arrangers to work with, including, over the years, Riddle, the brilliant Billy May, Gordon Jenkins, Don Costa, Robert Farnon (for one album only, made in England and never released in America, although it is excellent), Claus Ogerman, Johnny Mandel.

Nelson Riddle once said that the earlier Sinatra, of the Columbia days, sounded like a violin, but the later one, the one who emerged at Capitol, sounded like a viola. That is an apt analogy. The voice had acquired a slightly rougher texture. It had in fact become more Italian. There's no trace of the tenor left, not at least in the voice quality, although his range covered at least two octaves, from F to F.

There is a voice quality that is not limited to Italians but is more

common among them than other peoples. It is a gravelly sound that comedians affect when they are limning some archetypal hoodlum. I have often wondered what causes this quality.

"Probably," says Michael Renzi, the pianist, who has such a voice, "it's all the shouting and screaming at home when you're a kid." But no. It seems to be a physical characteristic. You hear it in Congressman Peter Rodino, actor Aldo Ray, and many more. Tony Bennett has a touch of it, and so does LaRosa. In women it manifests itself as a rather sexy huskiness — Ann Bancroft and Brenda Vaccaro have such voices. And so, as of the period at Capitol, does Sinatra. His sound acquired tremendous body, and although something has been lost — he never again uses head tone, and certainly not the falsetto that ends *The Song Is You* — he had arrived in the period of his finest work, the artist in perfect control of his material, recording one after another of the greatest American songs, creating albums that are like haunted rooms in a museum. Some of these performances are so definitive that a singer — male, anyway — has to think twice about taking any of them on. No doubt that is why there are not many vocal recordings of *The Young at Heart, The Tender Trap, From Here to Eternity*. There may be another reason why so few singers have done *My One and Only Love*: it climbs a twelfth in the first two bars, and there is no way of sneaking up on it.

There is no questioning Sinatra's musicianship. He has never claimed to be a "jazz singer", referring to himself as a saloon singer. But he is a universal favorite of jazz musicians. When Leonard Feather did a poll of musicians for his 1956 *Encyclopedia Yearbook of Jazz*, Sinatra got almost half the votes. Out of a hundred and twenty ballots, Sinatra got fifty-six, Nat Cole

---

The other line is always moving faster.
— Source unknown

---

thirteen, Billy Eckstine eleven, and Louis Armstrong nine. Among those who named him their all-time favorite singer were Buck Clayton, Nat Cole, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Herb Ellis, Tal Farlow, Stan Getz, Benny Goodman, Bill Harris, Bobby Hackett, Carmen McRae, Gerry Mulligan, Sy Oliver, Oscar Peterson, Oscar Pettiford, Bud Powell, Andre Previn, Jimmy Raney, Howard Roberts, Horace Silver, Billy Taylor, Cal Tjader, and Lester Young.

Shelly Manne coached Sinatra for the drum-playing scenes in *The Man with the Golden Arm*. "He had a definite feel for it," Shelly says. "He could have played if he'd wanted to, although whether he'd have been as great a drummer as he is a singer is another question." Woody Herman toured a few years ago with Sinatra. "How was he singing?" I asked Woody later. "Well you know how I feel," Woody said. "He can sing the phone book and I'll like it." In theory Sinatra can't read music. "Well he can't but he can, if you know what I mean," said one arranger who had worked with him. One of Sinatra's early friends was the late Alec Wilder, who wrote the *a capella* arrangements for the first Sinatra Columbia sides, including *The Music Stopped* and *A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening*, as well as composing such songs as *I'll Be Around* and *While We're Young*. Sinatra heard acetate air checks of two pieces Wilder had written for woodwind octet and string orchestra, learned there were more of them, and determined to see them recorded, which they were, in 1945, with Sinatra conducting: *Theme and Variations, Air for Bassoon, Air for Flute, Air for English Horn, Slow Dance*, and *Air for Oboe*. (Ironically, the English horn and oboe soloist was Mitch Miller.) Years later I asked Alec if Sinatra had in fact conducted those pieces. "Yes," Alec said, "he not only conducted, he did them better than anyone else has ever done them, before or since." The pieces, which are exquisite, must be considered experiments in a Third Stream, entailing elements of "jazz" and "classical" music. "He understood something," Alec said, "that is important in those pieces, and that the orchestra itself did not: steady dance tempos."

I watched Sinatra listening closely as Claus Ogerman ran down an arrangement at a recording session. "I think I hear a couple of little strangers in the strings," he said, and Claus corrected them — probably copyist's errors. Composer Lyn Murray recalls watching him over a period of days conduct an orchestra in rehearsal for an engagement in Las Vegas. Lyn said that he expended twenty-one hours rehearsing that orchestra, meticulously preparing every nuance of time and blend and dynamics. "When he was through," Lyn said, "every word of each lyric was laid out like a jewel on black velvet."

I was flabbergasted by the detail work in his reading of the lyric to *This Happy Madness*. The melody is one of Antonio Carlos Jobim's early ones, and the song is, again, very difficult to sing. Indeed, I have never heard anyone else do it. The lyric is mine, and I think I can claim to know what its intent is — what the "undertext," as actors and directors say, is. When the record came out (the song is in an album called *Sinatra and Company*) I sat in open-mouthed amazement as he caught every nuance of the words.

The first half of the release goes:

I feel that I've gone back to childhood,
and I'm skipping though the wildwood,
so excited that I don't know what to do.

I intended the first two lines as a sort of self-mockery, as if the "character" in the song finds himself resorting to an abyssmal banality, a dreadful cliche (the reference is to the old song *Childhood in the Wildwood*), and a false rhyme. Sinatra caught this, and sings those first two lines with a hard and self-disgusted edge on his voice. And suddenly in the third line, the voice takes on an infinitely gentle sound, as of total wonder. I couldn't believe it when I heard it. He caught not what the lyric said but what it didn't say.

Asked once by an interviewer what he thought his most important achievement had been, Sinatra said that it was a certain approach to singing that he hoped would endure — or words to that effect. The hope was a vain one, at least up to this point in history. Even as he was turning out his finest work, Elvis Presley was exploding into prominence, and the quality of commercial popular music was plummeting. Those singers who had indeed learned from him were still doing well, but by the 1960s and certainly by the 1970s they were finding it harder and harder to come by record contracts. At this juncture, none of the major singers who grew up in his school has a contract with a major label, and most of them do not record at all any more. Only Sinatra has sailed on through it all, seemingly safe from the storms of fad. Rock-and-roll did not embrace his naturalism, the effect of a contained and inward drama. As amplification cranked up the volume of guitars and drums to a level dangerous to hearing, the singing became shrill, a distorted and grimmaced music lacking in literacy or subtlety, a hysterical celebration of the mundane that all the press agentry in the world could not disguise. While Sinatra himself retained an audience, packing them in whenever and wherever he chose to go, gradually a great tradition was being forgotten. The fans of Billy Joel and Elvis Costello and David Bowie and Michael Jackson have never heard of Jerome Kern, chances are that few of them have heard of Sinatra, and her fans probably think that Linda Ronstadt discovered Nelson Riddle.

What Sinatra's legacy will be we cannot know. But for a time, for a very long time, Frank Sinatra turned the singing of the American song into an art form.