

Sing It Again for Us, Ol' Blue Eyes

By Tom Chaffin

THE OTHER NIGHT, I caught an Atlanta theater company's salute to the music of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Although it was a good performance, about 15 minutes into the first act it seemed that something was missing. By the time they got to "The Lady Is a Tramp," I knew what that something was: Frank Sinatra.

Great poets, it has been said, lay waste to huge fields of words. Over the course of a career, great poets so indelibly put their stamp on certain words, and ways of using those words, that those words, and those rhythms, become unusable for later poets. For my money, Frank Sinatra — can it be that he really turns 80 years old today? — accomplishes the same feat. I can appreciate other singers essaying Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, the Gershwin brothers, Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen.

But I always return to Sinatra.

Sinatra is among those rare interpretive artists whose talents match, and often transcend, the quality of their material. And when the songs are up to Sinatra's level, the combination is incendiary.

Sinatra singing Cole Porter — practically any Cole Porter tune — is as good as it gets in American popular music. But he also works magic with lesser material. Don't believe me? For an extreme test case, check out Sinatra's swinging 1960 take of "Ol' McDonald." As the late jazz critic Ralph Gleason once put it, "Sinatra can take lyrics that are in themselves banal, lyrics that are trite and sometimes even slight enough to be silly, and yet he can make them live and breathe and communicate emotion."

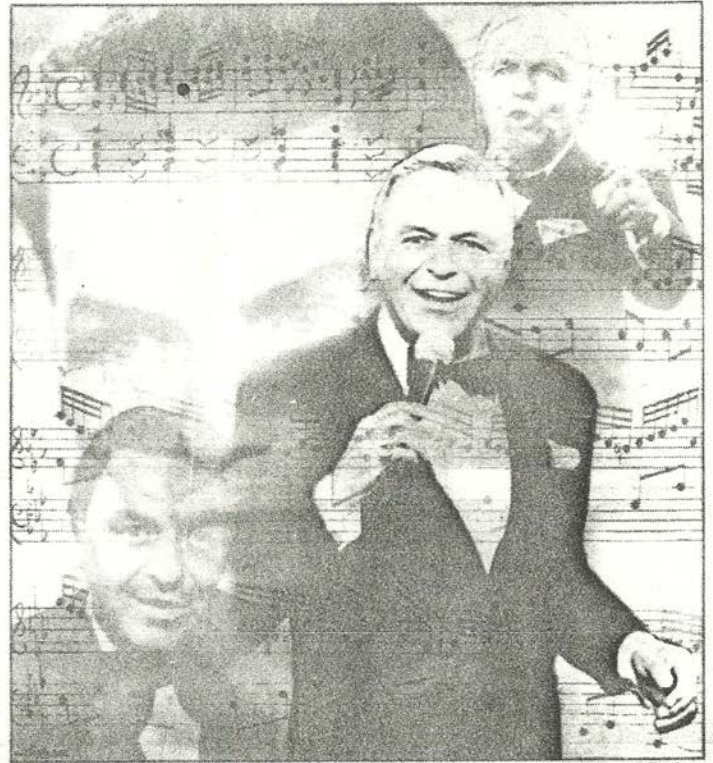
What's amazing is that Sinatra accomplishes this in a style that seems as effortless as the smoke that curls from his Chesterfields. Although he makes occasional use of such flourishes as "tempo rubato" — robbed time — ("it would bore me terrifically, too"), Sinatra's approach generally seems free of artifice.

Hoboken's favorite son achieved fame in the early 1940s as "The Voice," a mellifluous Bing

Crosby-styled crooner with the Tommy Dorsey band. During the 1950s, as his voice deepened and coarsened, Sinatra honed his ability to color and shade notes for dramatic effect and became the acknowledged master of vocal phrasing. In the process, he developed a musical personality, alternately vulnerable and cocky, uniquely his own. It's hardly surprising that Sinatra went into movies, or that he counts Arlen's and Mercer's torchy "One for My Baby" as one of his favorite songs. For Sinatra at his best, whether in up or down tempo, has always been a narrative artist, a story-teller.

Some artists — Van Gogh, the poet Hart Crane, any opera singer — dazzle with artistry that begs us to examine their labors. They want us to see their sweat, their brush marks, their artifice. Sinatra comes from another tradition. In the 16th Century, the writer Baldesar Castiglione, had some advice for young gentlemen wishing to make the strongest impression: "Practice in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless." Like the writer John Updike or the painter Edward Hopper, Sinatra conceals his labors. That's why he has always been a bad bet for comic impersonators. The style is transparent. Unlike that of, say, Ray Charles or Charles Aznavour, Sinatra's way offers no easily mimicked tics.

The irony, of course, is that this apparent effortlessness arises from a lifetime of artistic discipline. Sinatra made drinking, smoking and carousing central to his roguish public persona. But, in the recording studio, he was the brooding perfection-



Newsday / Ned Levine; Reprise Records and file photos

ist, recording the same number countless times to get the desired track.

As a young singer, he practiced a lot. Like an opera singer, he performed daily vocal exercises. He swam laps in a pool to give his lungs the strength "to sing six bars and, in some songs, eight bars without taking a visible or audible breath." He described that ability to sing "legato" — in unbroken lines as giving "the melody a flowing, unbroken quality, and that — if anything — was what made me sound different."

As Sinatra turns 80, it's entirely fitting that, after all the public controversies about his private life, it's the music that now seems most important. It's the music that will endure.

Happy birthday, Frank.



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