

*Frank Sinatra: The Man, The Voice, and The Fans.*

Curated by Robert Foster.

Hoboken Historical Museum, Hoboken, New Jersey.

August 2, 2015–July 3, 2016.

The Hoboken city limit sign reads “Welcome to Hoboken: Birthplace of Baseball and Frank Sinatra.” The walls of old-time restaurants Piccolo’s and Leo’s Grandevous are lined with images of Sinatra, and his songs are in regular rotation. Frank Sinatra Drive offers some of the best views of the New York City skyline. It should come as no surprise that the Hoboken Historical Museum’s exhibition *Sinatra: The Man, The Voice, and The Fans* has taken a celebratory approach to the city’s most famous son in anticipation of what would have been his 100th birthday, December 12, 2015. The exhibition is only one of the many ways the city has been observing the centennial of Sinatra’s birth, beginning in June 2015 with the annual Sinatra Idol Contest.

As the first panel indicates, the focus of the exhibition is “the intimate connection experienced by generations of Sinatra fans.” The story of his fans is intertwined with a largely linear retelling of Sinatra’s rise that took him from Hoboken to Hollywood and beyond. The trajectory and themes of his life are familiar: Sinatra’s youth in Hoboken, his big break with the Harry James Orchestra, the war years, his marriages, the foray into politics with John F. Kennedy and later Ronald Reagan, and the ups and downs of his career as a singer and an actor. In keeping with the focus on the fans—and particularly the hometown devotees—the exhibition begins with a nod to the Sinatra Idol Contest and other centennial events and concludes by circling back to review how his hometown mourned Sinatra’s passing and commemorated his life. For a modestly sized exhibition, it covers a good deal of ground.

There are some gems here: audio of Sinatra introducing himself during an early appearance with the Hoboken Four on the radio program *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* (“I’m Frank, we’re looking for jobs, how ‘bout it?”); mimeographed copies of the newsletters of fan clubs from across the country and Canada, each with its own name—The Slaves of Sinatra, Frankie’s Followers, Frankly Impressed—filled with prose and poetry extolling the crooner, first-person accounts of sightings, and other reportage. Visitors are treated to tidbits of information on subjects such as Sinatra’s signature bowtie in the 1940s. According to a caption of a Universal International publicity photo, “His modified Windsor, with its artful nonchalance, has become the Sinatra trademark.”

The exhibition relies heavily on photographs, artifacts, and ephemera explained through wall text. Movie posters, publicity stills, original album covers, excerpts from magazine articles, even a display case devoted to “Sinatrabilia,” such as coffee mugs and vanity plates, are included. Digital displays make it easy to review documents including handwritten fan letters. Visitors can also spend time on headphones listening to and watching video interviews with contemporary fans. Of course, there is ample opportunity to hear Sinatra sing, notably in the Sinatra Lounge, where visitors enter a mid-twentieth-century living room facsimile to sit down on the couch and watch footage such as Sinatra’s moody rendition of “One More for My Baby” filmed in black and white, with Sinatra at a bar, in raincoat and fedora, singing to a poker-faced bartender.

As the above examples suggest, there is much to delight the Sinatra fan here, but the exhibit creates the expectation that it will also help the viewer understand what

drives the fanaticism it documents. The curator highlights the degree to which Sinatra's handlers cultivated his celebrity. It was his publicist, George Evans, who coined the moniker The Voice. Evans also wrote the "first major public relations profile" in 1945 that depicted Sinatra, a notorious womanizer, as a family man and arranged to have screaming fans on hand at his appearances. Though acknowledging that his publicist and others were "stoking a fire that was already there," there is little attempt to understand the source of that fire beyond an initial reference to a singing style "that brought the listener inside the song, alongside the singer." Some contextualization of The Voice would have enhanced the visitor's appreciation of Sinatra's talent: for example, attention to his technical virtuosity, which he self-consciously developed, as well as to his eclectic musical influences, from bel canto to Billie Holiday.

Sinatra the man, a famously complex figure, also comes off as somewhat flat. Beyond the dutiful mention of his drinking and womanizing, Sinatra's dark side is occluded. The exhibition does not fully flesh out Sinatra's character, which surely contributed to his notoriety, if not his popularity.

While the exhibition acknowledges Sinatra's Italian American heritage, the role of ethnicity in his life is not a significant theme. It figures mainly in a consideration of his famous wartime short film, *The House I Live In* (1945), a plea for ethnic tolerance as a counter to Fascism in Europe. According to an interview at the time, which appears in the exhibition, here is how Sinatra explained his interest in promoting tolerance: "Where I grew up, out in Jersey, a bunch of tough guys used to throw rocks at me and call me 'dago.' And I used to hear them call other kids who happened to be Jewish or colored by equally dirty names. I decided when I grew up I'd do something to stop such things. I've never forgotten." (Although this excerpt and a small section on his involvement with the civil rights movement speak to Sinatra's racial views, the tolerance promoted by the film was not extended to "coloreds," an idea that would have been unacceptable at the time.) A caption to a 1948 newspaper "advertisement against bigotry" that includes photos of Sinatra and five other celebrities accompanied by a one-word description ("Jew," "Negro," and in Sinatra's case, "Immigrant's Son,") notes: "Sinatra took a stand against discrimination early in his career, often referring to the prejudice he had experienced as the child of Italian immigrants."

The exhibition then considers Sinatra's ethnicity only within the context of discrimination. It does not consider Sinatra's particular significance for generations of Italian American fans for whom he has been much more than a singing sensation. This was especially so during the World War II era when Italian Americans were still trying to achieve greater acceptance. Sinatra's success at that moment was a breakthrough for Italian Americans no less than for himself. As author and journalist Gay Talese put it, Italian Americans like himself in that period had "Frank Sinatra to thank for making us feel like respected citizens" (Talese 2015, 58). Instead, the fans explored here are homogenized into an indistinguishable whole (with the exception of the "bobby-soxers" whose behavior inspired yet another alias for Sinatra—Swoonatra). This leaves little opportunity to consider his appeal to specific groups. Nor is the fan commentary presented very revealing, emphasizing Sinatra as a regular guy, "the kind of person who goes in for the Sunday funnies and the little things of life," according to one fan letter perhaps reflecting the creation and marketing of America's first teen idol rather than any particular appeal. Contemporary fans such as the two women in

the video presented at the end do little more than express their devotion to the man and the music.

In short, as an ode from his hometown to a star and his fans, the exhibition succeeds, but for those looking for greater insight into the man and the voice, it is only a starting point.

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#### Works Cited

Talese, Gay. 2015. "On Sinatra." *New Jersey Monthly*, December, 58.