

underanalyzed in the film; toward the end it receives a brief poetic homage in the context of the patron saint's festival, where the townspeople's subjectivity as "us" in relation to an outside "them" seems to emerge most concretely.

Like a thread woven through the footage, we see the Nasuto brothers jogging across the Manfredonian landscape. The running becomes an ambiguous metaphor: of running in place but also the possibility of running away. On a \$26 budget, using a borrowed camcorder, and apparently with no prior training, they have succeeded in producing a stimulating and pleasurable documentary that offers an insider's view, something akin to an autoethnography of the emigration dilemma. In Italian and in English (alternating subtitles between the two languages), the film could easily be used to accompany class readings and lessons on conditions in the Mezzogiorno, on the condition that it be balanced with works that instead draw attention to the historical and structural factors that play into what here appears to be simply a matter of individual choice.

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Sinatra: All or Nothing at All.

By Alex Gibney.

Jigsaw Productions, 2015.

240 minutes. Streaming format, color.

I have a few bones to pick with Frank Sinatra Enterprises, particularly about its tolerance of bad digital remastering, but Alex Gibney's recent biopic, *All or Nothing at All*, broadcast on HBO, is not one of my issues. Using performance footage from the 1971 L.A. "Retirement Concert" as a self-reflexive frame, the documentary represents Sinatra's life and career in their well-known yet still engaging, near-mythic trajectory, with a significant degree of grounded detail. There are no claims to radical innovation, to new psycho-social or musical-theatrical insight; and if its semiofficial sponsorship from Sinatra's family and friends courts the charge of hagiography (a word that both academics and journalists use with contempt), its celebrations are not the kind that white-wash the nastiness and its damages. Indeed, part of the biographical power comes from forthrightness regarding the flip sides (his horrific oversensitivity, preemptive condescension, and callous self-indulgence) of Sinatra's massive temperamental strengths (including genre-transformative confidence, generosity of mind and wallet, and fierce discipline to musical craft), while the movement of Sinatra's eyes in interviews (especially with Walter Cronkite) marks continuing evasions and disarming admissions. Several dozen voices—all of the family, especially first wife Nancy and

Frankie, Jr.; a veritable gang of his co-workers in music and film; a bobby-soxer; a Paramount Theater usher; memoirist Pete Hamill; the infamous Judith Campbell (the mistress whom mobster Sam Giancana shared with President Kennedy); and a sultry-toned Gina Gershon reading quotes from Ava Gardner—tell the story, with several scholars to fill in facts or nudge interpretation. Of course, there are missing pieces—most of the recording history and its technologies, the 1942 musicians strike, Sinatra’s uncanny whistling, not to mention persona non grata George Jacobs (his former valet)—but more is here than the familiar, including a charming TV interview with his parents, a convinced black male audience at Lorton Prison in Washington, D.C., and a libidinous “Night and Day” from the film *Reveille with Beverly* (1943). Heavily advertised and reviewed, *All or Nothing at All* is meant as “a television event,” in memorial anticipation of the 100th anniversary of his birth in December 2015. At that the documentary succeeds: It is, I believe, an utterly acceptable, often compelling, overview of the life and career—and a bit more.

A prodigious amount of work went into the four hours—three editors and a small army of archivists—that cover each of the turns in the life and the career: his youthful singing ambitions in Hoboken; the early days as a boy singer, first with Harry James and then with Tommy Dorsey (whom he outshines on stage); his first marriage to Nancy and the children and the unending infidelities; the “swoonatra” of the solo career, including films made while World War II raged; pre-civil rights protests; the Gardner melodrama amid the postwar downfall of Tin Pan Alley; and trouble with Sinatra’s voice. This is already a lot of ground to cover—James Kaplan’s (2010) *Frank: The Voice* takes 700+ pages to get this far—but the best is yet to come, what Frank Jr. calls “the rising of the Phoenix from the ashes”: the epochal recordings at Capitol in the wake of winning the Oscar for *From Here to Eternity*; the press and FBI hounding about Mafia friends; rock ‘n’ roll; civil rights; the Rat Pack; the ups and downs at Reprise; falling in and out with the Kennedys; the kidnapping of his son; secretly marrying then soon divorcing 21-year-old Mia Farrow (who in a brilliant conceit takes over the narrative commentary for fifteen minutes); retiring to great fanfare then coming out of retirement to command concert stages all over the world and even the national jukebox—with “New York, New York”—one last time.

What can be done in a four-hour documentary that is *not* better done in print? After all, Francis Albert Sinatra has been the subject of a dozen full-length biographies (one of the better ones, *All or Nothing at All*, is by music critic Donald Clarke [1997]) as well as myriad memoirs from (former) friends, lovers, and employees, terrific books covering the singing, the records, and the concerts, still others interested in the movie star, excellent compilations of journal pieces and academic analysis (kudos to Stanislao Pugliese 2004), not one but two exhaustive encyclopedias (Ackelson 1992; Mustazza 1998), and too many coffee table books to count (some of them with great photos and memorabilia). What, in particular, might be of relevance to Italian American studies? More than I would have thought.

Consider, first, the time-honored, overtly Italian American subjects. Gibney does not present Sinatra as a lonely, neglected latch-key child hungry for attention and praise but sees Dolly (Frank’s mother) in *mammismo* (the overly close bond of a son to his mother) terms closer to those of scholar John Gennari (2001): as a tough mother love, Italian-style, a midwife who knew how to save young women’s lives, a master

of regional dialects who knew how to broker votes and cop jobs, and the provocateur of her son's ferocious drive. These terms are admittedly close to Sinatra's own, thus the object of our due suspicion, yet the snapshots and interview clips bear Gennari's argument out—all the way, if you can read the signs, like the photograph of Frank as a young boy leaning on a car while Dolly rests her hand on his shoulder.

Prejudice experienced, prejudice fought: The film credits Sinatra's activism to his firsthand knowledge of media stereotyping, Hoboken segregation, and New Jersey shantytowns. Harry Belafonte for one speaks truth to power, including the alienation that African American entertainers felt at the Rat Pack's ethnic buffoonery and the forced Tom-ification of the prodigiously talented Sammy Davis, Jr. Yet he also takes pains to emphasize Sinatra's deepening involvement with black musical culture, including various forms of support for the musicians themselves, often tactfully quiet, and his vocal support for civil rights and social decency, "before it was fashionable." As Belafonte relates, Sinatra would get so pissed off at Jim Crow-era Las Vegas that he "assigned a goombah" to run interference for each of the black musicians in his band, and that took care of that. An old-style corner-boy solution if ever there were one.

The film underscores scholarship by Phil and Tom Kuntz (2000) that he was hunted by the FBI and plagued by the sensationalist press, and it counteracts Mario Puzo's deliberately fanciful account of his release from the personal-service contract to Dorsey (33 percent of his lifetime income!) with a real-enough tale of economic blackmail in which Henry Jaffe of the American Federation of Radio Artists threatened to ban Dorsey from the radio! Sinatra surely was not smuggling cash to Cuba for the Mafia, columnist Lee Mortimer's reckless speculations to the contrary, but he did work as a bridge between chieftain Sam Giancana and Senator John F. Kennedy (who wanted cash, the union vote, and even Giancana's girl—at least he did until after the election, when brother Bobby, now attorney general, froze out both the mob and Sinatra). The mobsters, by the way, made it a point of respect to travel to Las Vegas and spend like crazy when Sinatra was in town, and they would religiously check their guns at the city door unless The Chairman ordered otherwise.

A decent degree of complexity attends almost all of the key biographical issues, with subtle clues serving even when the mainline does not: That's my first point. But it is not just the career and life but the sound and especially the "look" that comes through in the documentary. Through the cavalcade of images, what registers is Sinatra's magisterial physical effect (even at his skinniest—we are treated only to a joke or two, thankfully), which—perhaps because my Neapolitan Sicilian father looks like Sinatra—is intimately tied to an Italianness of body and gesture and even, to a certain extent, of affect. To my eye, Sinatra's "it takes one to know one" attitude encompasses a complex of Italian alpha-male traits, including manic-depressive rhythms of expression, a dandiness of dress yet casualness of posture, an "always on" attentiveness to women, plus profound comfort with children and working men. We know about his anger and defensiveness, his generosity and charm. But many of the snapshots and video clips give you a sense of something else: wit and timing; the seriousness of his ambition; facing down tough-as-nails Bing Crosby; his physical comfortableness with African Americans, especially musicians; his class vulnerability, once and still a high-school dropout; and, approaching the first retirement, his

discomfort with the counterculture of the 1960s, when he found himself “no longer the hippest person in the room.”

As with the framing conceit, the primary tactic with Sinatra’s music is to present the recordings as a commentary on his life. Sinatra singing “in the background” succeeds in taking the measure of his mood throughout—with only a few performances heard and/or seen without interruption and with only a few songs directly commented upon (for example, Nelson Riddle’s astonishing last-minute, late-night arrangement of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” as well as the heart-breaking origin of songwriter Ruth Lowe’s “I’ll Never Smile Again”). Using Sinatra recordings as background, even for a documentary on Sinatra, is tricky business, as the director and editors must have known—since Sinatra is not easy listening despite what the record bins (or some search engines) say, and *The Voice* constantly threatens to take over whatever medium deploys it. Nor is there time to give more than a hint of singing technique (Dorsey’s trombone and lessons from vocal coach John Quinlan but not the modeling of Billie Holiday, Mabel Mercer, and others), changing recording technologies (the invention of the microphone, but not the shift from shellac to vinyl, or from metal to tape mastering) and studio practice (except for the early days with Riddle at Capitol Records), with nothing about the history of Tin Pan Alley and Sinatra’s retrospective consolidation of what we now call the Classic American Songbook. In the spoken commentary, much is made of Sinatra’s loneliness, his shyness, and his restlessness—all true, but not quite enough is said, to my understanding, of what happened at the microphone, on stage, or in the studio, where he—in public performance—came into himself, with and for others, in oracular intimacy and a singular majesty. Still, we can *feel* it: The power of the music gets through—not so much the dramatic complexity of each song (Charlton Heston called them “four-minute movies”) as the soundtrack of a life, circling back to the earliest recordings (Rodgers and Hart, the Gershwins, Cole Porter) while updating the tradition, too (buddies Cahn and Van Heusen, et al.). What emerges musically is the D’Acierno (2004) paradox: that Sinatra’s singing constitutes a Romantic self-commentary on his mythic American life, a life that nonetheless applies profoundly, somehow, to all lives, or at least to those of men. That was his art—why Sinatra really matters. After Alex Gibney’s *All or Nothing at All*, it is time to take five and listen to Sinatra sing, especially on vinyl.

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