

Exhibition Reviews

Sinatra: An American Icon.

Curated by Bob Santelli and Jaqueline Z. Davis.

Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts,
Lincoln Center, New York City, New York.

March 4–September 4, 2015.

The year 2015 is the centenary of the birth of Frank Sinatra (December 12, 1915–May 14, 1998), and the year saw dozens of cultural moments commemorating this milestone in American history. *Sinatra: An American Icon* was one of the most ambitious moments, placing its subject in the larger context of American musical, political, and cultural history. With the collaboration of the Sinatra family and Frank Sinatra Enterprises, it was also one of the most intimate. The result was a fascinating installation, one that caused the viewer to think about Sinatra's central role in American and Italian American history.

The exhibition was organized chronologically and thematically. It was comprised of about two dozen small theatrical sets with a variety of themes, from the personal and private to the musical and performative aspects of Sinatra's career. Upon entering the exhibit, a viewer first noticed cases displaying several of his many gold and platinum records. Another early section was devoted to his family and to Hoboken, New Jersey, Sinatra's hometown. Here, a young Sinatra grew up within the boundaries of Monroe, Grand, Jefferson, and Garden Streets where you can find his church, a bakery, his childhood home, his father's firehouse, and the family-owned saloon. A small glass display case housed such personal items as his father Marty's wallet and other family keepsakes. Nearby was the replica of an American living room of the period, complete with daily newspaper, checkers set, and the most important item: the radio. Before being displaced by the television, the radio was the family hearth, bringing together three generations of a family in one spot daily, and it made Sinatra famous in the late 1930s and 1940s. Due acknowledgment was made of The Hoboken Four, the Rustic Cabin Nightclub in New Jersey, and the group's big break on *Major Bowes Amateur Hour*. More than one early microphone was showcased, reminding viewers of how Sinatra learned to use the new technology to benefit his voice and develop an intimate relationship with his listeners.

Sinatra's early success with the orchestras of Harry James and Tommy Dorsey was documented, and, through the display of bobby sox and shoes, as well as responses to fans who had written to the Sinatra Fan Club, so was the teenage pandemonium (perhaps partially manufactured) at the Paramount Theatre in New York City in the early 1940s. The exhibition made an interesting contrast between Sinatra and the reigning king of the crooners, Bing Crosby. Sinatra had first heard Crosby live in 1935 and resolved to be a singer. His eventual eclipse of the Irish American star said something about a changing America and the prominence of Italian American singers in the middle third of the twentieth century; Crosby commented, "Sinatra is a singer who comes along once in a lifetime. But why did it have to be my lifetime?" Perhaps most impressive for music scholars was the re-creation of Studio A at Capitol Records

Tower in Hollywood, where Sinatra recorded many of his signature records. Here, one could listen in on a recording session as Sinatra insists upon impeccable craftsmanship from himself and his fellow artists.

Clips of various films showed Sinatra on the silver screen, starting with musical fluff and transitioning into serious turns in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), and *Von Ryan's Express* (1965). Many viewers would be surprised that Sinatra's first Academy Award was not for his role as Private Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). He won an Honorary Academy Award for his role as a singer taking a break during a recording session and confronting prejudice and bigotry in *The House I Live In* from 1945, just a month after World War II ended, a short film that may be viewed online in its twelve-minute entirety.

Sinatra was indebted to the work of the very finest musicians, and the exhibit is to be commended in noting his recognition of African American musicians such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. Sinatra's lifelong commitment to civil rights and combating anti-Italianism and anti-Semitism is noted in his 1987 lifetime achievement award from the NAACP, his 1975 visit to Jerusalem, and his 1985 winning of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Some sections were a bit disconcerting. Displays devoted to Tina Sinatra, Frank Sinatra Jr., and Sinatra's amateur paintings didn't measure up. And Jack Daniels Whiskey—Sinatra's favorite drink and a corporate sponsor—got its very own display case. Despite these missteps, a display of a 1940s bowtie sewn by young wife Nancy Sinatra and a mannequin sporting Sinatra's tuxedo from his later career lent both poignancy and power to the exhibit by reminding us of Sinatra's physical presence and charisma. Even as a young boy, the only son of Marty and Dolly, known on the streets of Hoboken as Slacksy O'Brien due to his father boxing under the Irish surname, Sinatra was careful to cultivate what Italians call *bella figura*, which is more than just the American idea of a "good impression."

Fundamentally, Sinatra represents a complex problem for Italian Americans. On the one hand, he defied all the negative stereotypes common since the great wave of immigration to the United States. Once he took the stage or entered the recording studio, all those negative traits disappeared and he was the consummate professional; yet at the bar or in the casino, the street kid would come out, especially if taunted as he often was by the gossip columnists. Later in his career, of course, he was above all this. "The Kid" became "The Voice" and then head of the Rat Pack who morphed into "The Chairman of the Board," almost Olympian in his disdain for the pettiness of the earlier years.

The exhibition catalog was a disappointment in that it does not explain the various displays, but a recording and earphones in the exhibit gave viewers a more complete story to accompany each station. The catalog did mention all those who participated in bringing the exhibition together and includes a Walking Tour map of Hoboken and Manhattan, pinpointing nearly three dozen important spots in Sinatra's life, from the Rialto Theatre in Hoboken to Patsy's Restaurant in Midtown Manhattan. The brief explanations of these locales function almost as a mini-biography of the singer.

The exhibition was an unusual joint production between three institutions: the GRAMMY Museum in Los Angeles, the New York Public Library, and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Viewers could have their picture taken with the exhibition logo and emailed

to them instantly, and they could sing along with Sinatra in a (luckily) soundproof booth. In conclusion: This show was an eclectic mix of the serious, the scholarly, and the archival along with the mischievous, the moving, and the marvelous.

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Tutta La Famiglia: Portrait of a Sicilian Café in America.

Curated by Harris Fogel.

University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

October 2-23, 2015.

Paul Cary Goldberg began documenting La Sicilia Café in Gloucester, Massachusetts, soon after he moved to that city eight years ago. He was a regular patron of the café and came to know and admire its owners and clientele as he photographed it regularly.

Tutta la Famiglia: Portrait of a Sicilian Café in America, in both its form and subject matter, is a classic example of humanist documentary photography, a genre informed by a universalizing take on the human condition that brings together high artistic standards and deep concern for one's subjects. In keeping with the traditions of the genre, the photographs are black and white, relatively small (by contemporary standards), and presented formally in bevel cut mats with ample white space and clean black frames. Although the images are entirely digital in their production, they are virtually indistinguishable from black-and-white silver gelatin prints made from film negatives. This is Goldberg's intention, and he carries it off well, especially given the fact that this is his first digital project. Indeed, he says that learning how to work digitally was one of his motivations in initiating it.

Goldberg's photographs primarily depict the clientele of the La Sicilia Café individually and in groups. Many are portraits of near-studio quality in their composition and lighting. There are also exteriors and interiors of the café, including some interesting details of its furnishings, decorations, and products for sale. From all indications, Goldberg must have been regarded as a regular and welcome presence in the environment; the subjects seem comfortable being photographed, even unaware of the photographer.

These details aside, the salient question for the readers of this journal might be how well does Goldberg represent *italianità* (or perhaps even *sicilianità*) in this set of photographs that he calls a portrait of a Sicilian café? Furthermore, how much do his images inform the discourses of immigration, such as the preservation of traditions balanced against social and cultural adaptation?

Certainly, a majority of photographs in the series, especially the portraits, do not read as particularly Italian. Yes, most of the faces are vaguely Mediterranean in character, but some look Greek or even Middle Eastern, which is not surprising given Sicily's diverse gene pool. The *italianità* of the subject matter is established most firmly by contextual images including exteriors of the café, one quite delightful photo of two