

Frank: The Voice.

By James Kaplan.

New York: Doubleday, 2010.

786 pages.

That Old Black Magic:

Louis Prima, Keely Smith, and the Golden Age of Las Vegas.

By Tom Clavin.

Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010.

224 pages.

Amore: The Story of Italian American Song.

By Mark Rotella.

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

320 pages.

“Music has always been and continues to be one of the primary forms of Italian American expression and the area of perhaps its strongest contribution to the common culture because it involves the spheres of classical as well as popular music,” observe Robert Connolly and Pellegrino D’Acierno, in their essay “Italian American Musical Culture and Its Contribution to American Music” (1999, 387). Three recent titles focus on Italian-American music making during an era that Connolly and D’Acierno characterize as “the long farewell to bel canto,” from the 1930s to the early 1960s, when Italian-American pop singers, and especially crooners, exerted “a certain hegemony over American popular singing” (417–418). The peak years of Italian-American prominence in American popular music also were those in which the children and grandchildren of immigrants “entered mainstream American life and culture,” as Mark Rotella observes in *Amore: The Story of Italian American Song* (xvi). “To listen to American pop music” from that era, Rotella writes, “is to listen to the voices of Italians as they assimilated into American culture” (xviii).

James Kaplan’s *Frank: The Voice* is another addition to the voluminous documentation of the life and career of the most famous of Italian-American vocalists. Has any American singer been written about as extensively as Francis Albert Sinatra? Is there anything more to be said about an artist who, as Kaplan acknowledges, is “perhaps the most chronicled human in modern history” (720)? Kaplan proves that indeed there is. Even though this doorstep of a book is not a full life—it concludes with Sinatra winning the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for *From Here to Eternity* in 1954—Kaplan has written the best—indeed, in this reviewer’s estimation the definitive—study of Sinatra’s life and art, a masterful synthesis of existing literature, scholarly and journalistic; new interviews; and astute assessments of Sinatra’s recordings. Kaplan employs novelistic techniques that occasionally raise the reader’s eyebrows, particularly in the lengthy, sexually candid recounting of Sinatra’s turbulent relationship with Ava Gardner, but his narrative approach and his vivid prose, which has its own brand of swing, also make the very long book immensely readable.

Kaplan portrays Sinatra as an Italian American with a strong sense of *italianità* and a keen sensitivity to ethnic slights. The author, who is Jewish, deeply identifies

with Sinatra as an ethnic American who experienced prejudice from WASP America. He quotes newspaper accounts in which journalists referred to Sinatra as a “greasy” Italian and as a “wop” singer, the blatant bias startling to encounter today, when Italian Americans, though still subject to cultural stereotyping (often self-inflicted), have assimilated and are generally regarded as bona fide Caucasians. Kaplan situates Sinatra’s left-wing, Popular Front-era politics (and his later Democratic Party liberalism) in the context of his own sense of ethnic injury, his reflexive identification with underdogs, and his hostility to WASP conservatism. Kaplan reminds us that at one time Sinatra was a rebel figure in American popular culture. During the McCarthyite 1950s, conservative newspaper columnists repeatedly attacked Sinatra as un-American, conflating his ethnicity, his assertive sexuality, and his politics.

That Sinatra was put upon by bigots, however, doesn’t alter the fact that the man’s character had “spectacular” flaws (720), as previous biographies, most notably Kitty Kelley’s sensationalistic *His Way: The Unauthorized Biography of Frank Sinatra* (1986), have established. He exploited and betrayed friends, lovers, and musical associates; as Kaplan observes, “the story of Frank Sinatra’s life is one of continual shedding, both of artistic identities and of associates and intimates who had outlived their usefulness” (138–139). This behavioral pattern was rooted in his childhood, with his passive and ineffectual father, Sicilian-born Martin Sinatra, and his domineering mother, Natalina Garaventa, known as Dolly, whose family came from a town near Genoa. Sinatra’s birth was traumatic; he was yanked from his mother’s womb by a forceps-wielding doctor who tore and scarred the left side of Sinatra’s face, neck, and left ear. Sinatra retained a lifelong bitterness over the circumstances of his birth: “They just kind of ripped me out and tossed me aside,” he remarked to a girlfriend (5). Dolly, “a woman he seems to have hated and loved, avoided and sought out, in equal measures, throughout his life” (6), alternately coddled and abused—sometimes physically—her son. “If the primary relationship was up for grabs, so was every subsequent relationship,” whether romantic or professional (10).

The “Mafia connections” his critics decried were real; Sinatra had lived near and known gangsters when he was growing up in Hoboken, New Jersey, and throughout his career he palled around with hoodlums. (Kaplan, however, definitively debunks the myth that Mafia coercion won him the role of Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*. It was Ava Gardner’s insistence, not a horse’s severed head, that convinced Columbia studio chief Harry Cohn to give Sinatra the part.) He disingenuously claimed that gangsters were simply people whom he encountered in his line of work: They owned and patronized the nightclubs where he performed. But in 1950, Sinatra came to the attention of Senator Estes Kefauver and his Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce. Kefauver had photographs showing the singer in the company of Charlie “Lucky” Luciano and other notorious criminals. Kefauver’s chief attorney wanted Sinatra to testify on camera, which as Kaplan notes, “would have blown the singer’s career right out of the water” (459). But Sinatra’s attorney persuaded Kefauver’s chief investigator to let him testify, in “absolute secrecy,” in a law office in Rockefeller Center. Sinatra was evasive in his testimony, denying he had had business relationships with Luciano or any other mobsters. Kefauver’s investigator was convinced Sinatra was lying, but he realized the singer would never admit any complicity with gangsters. (Nor did he have any hard evidence of such involvement.)

The investigator recommended that Sinatra not be called to testify publicly, and Kefauver, concerned that his hearings were turning into a media circus, agreed.

Frank: The Voice presents in unsparing detail Sinatra's character flaws and bad behavior, but Kaplan, unlike lesser biographers, and especially Kelley, shows how this deeply flawed individual, through force of will, tenacity, and artistic genius, overcame daunting setbacks to establish himself as the premier American male singer of the twentieth century. Kaplan ably recounts Sinatra's career, from his earliest days as a Bing Crosby imitator to his stints with the big bands of Harry James and Tommy Dorsey, to his 1940s stardom as the idol of screaming bobbysoxers (the fan hysteria, Kaplan reports, was largely orchestrated by Sinatra's then-manager), to his precipitous decline in the late 1940s, culminating in his resurgence as the mature chronicler of erotic longing and loss in the 1950s who, collaborating with the gifted arranger Nelson Riddle, recorded such brilliant and enduring albums as *Songs for Young Lovers*, *In the Wee Small Hours*, and *Only the Lonely*.

Kaplan draws substantially from *Sinatra! The Song Is You: A Singer's Art*, Will Friedwald's 1997 authoritative analysis of Sinatra's musicianship, but his own critiques are insightful and judicious. He provides an engrossing account of Sinatra's 1953 recording of "Young at Heart," a good but not great Carolyn Leigh and Johnny Richards composition that "was a paean to rebirth, the ideal soundtrack to Frank Sinatra's matchless comeback" (674). Kaplan notes, "everything about this recording was perfect." The then-cutting-edge recording technology, Sinatra's "diction, phrasing, and pitch-perfect tone, not to mention the gorgeousness" of the instrumental backing and Nelson Riddle's arrangement, transformed an unexceptional song into a pop classic.

Louis Prima, the New Orleans-born son of Sicilian immigrants, didn't reach the rarefied artistic heights that Sinatra attained. But, like Sinatra, Prima was unapologetically "ethnic" in an era when few performers of any background stressed their ethnicity. His innovation was to blend elements of *italianità* and African-American idioms, at first jazz and, later in his career, rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll. His exuberant, carnivalesque persona and performing style have influenced such disparate artists as the American rock star David Lee Roth and the Sicilian trumpeter, vocalist, and bandleader Roy Paci. Sinatra and Prima exuded a sexuality that WASP America found both exciting and unsettling, but Prima was a far more antic and ribald figure than the soulfully erotic Sinatra. Tom Clavin, in *That Old Black Magic: Louis Prima, Keely Smith, and the Golden Age of Las Vegas*, quotes a promoter as saying, "When Prima shouted, 'Let's have a jubilee,' a lot of those sex-starved dames would practically have an orgasm. I think they thought he was shouting, 'let's have an orgy' in that hoarse, horny voice of his" (40).

Whereas Sinatra was subjected to ethnic bigotry as an Italian American, early in his career the dark-skinned, kinky-haired Prima was sometimes regarded as racially indeterminate, a "mulatto," or even a light-skinned African American. In 1934, a New York nightclub owner, thinking Prima was black, refused to hire him. Prima performed at Harlem's Apollo Theater, whose audiences loved him, and the music industry publication *Billboard* called his group "a hot Negro orchestra" (41). Clavin observes that "Louis Prima sang and moved like a black entertainer filled with the combined spirits of jazz, blues, and pop" (41). Prima, who had been influenced by African-American

musicians since his childhood and socialized comfortably with them, almost lost an important job in Las Vegas in 1954 because he was angered by the mistreatment of a black performer.

Like Sinatra, Prima loved and respected jazz musicians. (Both men learned crucial lessons from them about vocal timbre and phrasing, rhythm, and swing.) Prima's major influence was Louis Armstrong; while growing up in New Orleans, he frequently heard Armstrong play, and he often cited the older man as his hero. Clavin underestimates Prima's musicianship, noting that he never attained the brilliance of Armstrong. But how many Satchmo-influenced trumpeters have? Prima's jazz credentials were hardly negligible. He was a skilled trumpeter who, in the decades before his apotheosis as the Dionysius of Las Vegas, led swing groups and big bands, and he also was a composer whose "Sing! Sing! Sing!," recorded by Benny Goodman, became one of the biggest hits of the swing era. Prima also made a number of fine jazz albums, including several with the virtuoso clarinetist Pee Wee Russell. But the recordings for which Prima is best known—besides his signature tunes "Just a Gigolo" and "That Old Black Magic"—are his macaronic mixes of African-American musical language and Italian-American comedy. The ethnic references in his song lyrics, in English and pidgin Sicilian, delighted Italian-American fans. Consider the titles: "Baciagaloop (Makes Love on the Stoop)," "Felicia no Capicia," "Zooma Zooma," and his paean to a pizzeria waitress, "Angelina" ("I eat antipasta twice/Just because she is so nice").

That Old Black Magic centers on the roles Prima; his wife, vocalist Keely Smith; and their bandleader, saxophonist Sam Butera, played in developing Las Vegas into a major entertainment center during the 1950s and early 1960s. Their Vegas sojourn began inauspiciously, with the Sahara Hotel offering them a two-week engagement in the Casbar Lounge, a side room that held only 150 people. But in 1953, the newlyweds Prima and Smith were living hand to mouth, so they jumped at the opportunity and made the most of it: Two weeks turned into a six-year engagement. Audiences responded enthusiastically to their act, which exploited the peculiar chemistry between Prima and Smith: he all irrepressible energy and bawdy humor, as he cavorted wildly, blew his trumpet, and sang, while Smith, assuming an air of stolid indifference, stood stock-still while she sang, refusing to acknowledge his antics except with the occasional dry retort or put-down. (The act, as Clavin notes, was the prototype for Sonny and Cher's.) Clavin somewhat overstates the importance of the Prima-Smith act in establishing Las Vegas as a show business mecca; as Kaplan observes, Sinatra played a far more critical role: "In a very real way, Sinatra built Vegas: not only was he present at the creation, but he was responsible for it" (656). But Prima and Smith were signifiers of uninhibited fun and hipness before the modern rock era arrived with the Beatles: "In the years before the British Invasion, their act, 'The Wildest,' represented what was captivating, romantic, and downright sexy in American music" (Clavin 2).

Amore, Mark Rotella's impressionistic history of Italian-American popular music, follows the schema set forth by Connolly and D'Acierno (1999) in their essay for *The Italian American Heritage*, beginning with opera and Neapolitan song, passing through the crooners and on to middle-of-the-road pop, doo-wop, and rock. Each chapter is devoted to a particular song and its singer, with Rotella using the songs

to make larger points about Italian-American immigration, culture, sexual mores, and assimilation. He concentrates on the Italian-American pop recorded from 1947 to 1964, from the end of the big bands to the Beatles, an era he calls “the Italian decade” because “it was during this time that Italian Americans entered mainstream American life and culture” (xvi).

Rotella frankly admits his impulse is nostalgic: “Why do I yearn to recapture the experiences of my parents and grandparents?” He longs for that era because “there really was a distinctive Italian American style—cocky and tender, tough and vulnerable, serious and playful, forward-thinking and nostalgic—and it is found nowhere so powerfully as in the music” (xviii). Rotella’s portraits of Italian-American pop singers are more descriptive than analytic and for the most part lively and engaging. Most of the chapters are just the right length; the forgotten crooner Alan Dale (born Aldo Sigismondi in Brooklyn) doesn’t merit more than the four pages Rotella devotes to him. Several profiles, however, are frustratingly brief. Rotella interviewed Sam Butera and 1950s pop star Frankie Laine not long before their deaths, but both chapters are less substantial than their subjects deserve. Regarding the best-known artists—Sinatra, Prima, Tony Bennett, and Dean Martin—Rotella adds little to what already has been written about them. Too often, Rotella’s nostalgia for the time when “there really was a distinctive Italian American style” clouds his critical judgment. Many of the singers whom he profiles—Perry Como, Martin, Mario Lanza, Vic Damone, Al Martino, Connie Francis, and others—made recordings that were sentimental, insipid, burdened with syrupy orchestrations, and rhythmically inert. The Italian-American singers whose work represented a fruitful encounter between their own cultural backgrounds and African-American music, which in the 1950s came to dominate American popular music—Sinatra, Bennett, Prima, and rockers such as Dion Di Mucci—made music that remains vital, long after the passing of the Italian-American decade.

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Works Cited

Connelly, Robert, and Pellegrino D’Acierno. 1999. “Italian American Musical Culture and Its Contribution to American Music.” In *The Italian American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*, edited by Pellegrino D’Acierno, 387–490. New York: Garland.