

The Springtime of Frank Sinatra

by Nat Hentoff

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In 1940, I was 15 and my jazz record collection included the popular big dance band of Tommy Dorsey because "The Sentimental Gentleman of Swing" -- as the trombonist-leader was called -- had such sidemen as Bunny Berigan, Buddy Rich and the silvery clarinetist Johnny Mince. On ballads, I was also drawn to Dorsey's 25-year-old vocalist, Frank Sinatra, who had just joined the band that year.

He was not yet a jazz singer, but his phrasing -- which he later said had been influenced by Billie Holiday -- and his rhythmic ease flowed into the pop-jazz mosaic that Tommy Dorsey nurtured. As Sinatra later matured musically, and gained life experience, his singing added another quality of Billie Holiday's, as Carmen McRae described it: "She could make you visualize a song in a way that was just so clear."

The evolution of Sinatra -- who himself came to deeply influence both popular singers and jazz instrumentalists -- is celebrated in a four-CD set, "[Frank Sinatra: A Voice in Time, \(1939-1952\)](#)", available in stores or at [Amazon.com](#).

Even as early as his 1940s recordings with Tommy Dorsey, Sinatra put me, then and now, in an autobiographical reverie ("I'll Never Smile Again") -- and then, feeling like the first day of spring ("Oh, Look at Me Now").

In his appearances at New York's Paramount Theater in the 1940s, thousands of teenagers transformed him into America's first "Teen Idol." Years later, as reported in The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music, Sinatra, with uncommon immodesty, said: "It was the war years, and there was a great loneliness. And I was the boy in every corner drugstore who'd gone off, drafted in the war. That was all."

But until 1952, as Sinatra was focusing on the now largely finished "Great American Songbook" -- the core of America's popular music -- his recordings continued to top the hit charts. The lyrics and music of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, Rodgers and Hart, et al. were -- as Frank McConnell wrote in Commonweal on Frank Sinatra's birthday in 1995 -- among "the supreme accomplishments of our culture," and Sinatra was "the voice of that great tradition."

Hearing that tradition come alive again in this set, as he is framed by such master arrangers as Sy Oliver and Axel Stordahl, it is also clear what an accomplished musician Sinatra had become. In his exemplary notes for "Frank Sinatra: A Voice in Time," Will Friedwald quotes the producers of this essential

legacy, Didier C. Deutsch and Charles L. Granata: "Frank Sinatra was a musician who exerted extraordinary control over every facet of his music. From song selection and arrangements to his vocal approach and the color of his sound, Sinatra's discriminating taste guided the creation of every record he made."

In the late 1950s, I was a witness to Sinatra's demanding control of the music he made. At the Copacabana in New York, I was at his afternoon rehearsal of the orchestra for that night's gig. Conducting, he suddenly stopped a number, turned to the brass section and said to a trombonist: "You just played an E-flat. It should have been an E-natural."

I was surprised. His longtime guitarist told me Sinatra couldn't read music. "He must have perfect pitch," said another musician when I cited that rehearsal. In any case, as venerable jazz musicians used to say, Frank Sinatra had "big ears."

A number of jazz musicians have told me that too, and in a long ago Down Beat interview, Miles Davis said he had studied how to play ballads by listening to Sinatra's phrasing.

These recordings of the springtime of Frank Sinatra are not only "a voice in time," but also -- in his choice of songs -- a demonstration of how much this nation has lost with the Great American Songbook not being even a memory now to most of America's young -- and, maybe to future generations.

When I was in my early 20s, Duke Ellington -- my mentor in music and in life values -- urged me never to be locked into categories of music or the swirl of fashion. "There are only two kinds of music," he said. "Good and bad."

At the time, I thought he was being far too simplistic. But Duke was right. Of course, times and cultures change -- as do definitions among the young as to what is currently called "cool." But over decades and centuries, music is indeed essentially either good or bad. For me, Bach always swings; and when I'm immersed in Beethoven's late quartets, I'm also reliving scenes -- some of them newly meaningful -- from my life.

A reissue of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings of the 1920s will never rival in sales those of a "new star" rapper, nor will a legacy compilation of Bessie Smith, "the empress of the blues." But such recordings will always have a cluster of listeners here and around the world.

What is missing, however, from contemporary American popular music culture are the grace, the wit, the worldly wise honesty and irony, and the expectations of romantic fulfillment in such songs in "Frank Sinatra: A Voice in Time" as "She's Funny That Way," "Dancing in the Dark," "All the Things You Are," "Autumn in New York," "I Get a Kick Out of You," "September Song," "As Time Goes By," "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)" and "These Foolish Things

(Remind Me of You)."

It's possible, I suppose, that such timeless life stories of dreams and loss will be created in music again. After all, neither rock nor rap euthanized jazz, and a new generation may yet create its own extension of the Great American Songbook.