

# EMISFÉRICA

## ***“You Make Me Feel So Young”: Sinatra & Basie & Amos & Andy***

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In 1965, Frank Sinatra turned 50. In a Las Vegas engagement early the next year at the Sands Hotel, he made much of this fact, turning the entire performance—captured in the classic recording *Sinatra at the Sands* (1966)—into a meditation on aging, artistry, and maturity, punctuated by such key songs as “You Make Me Feel So Young,” “The September of My Years,” and “It Was a Very Good Year” (Sinatra 1966). Not only have few commentators noticed this, they also haven’t noticed that Sinatra’s way of negotiating the reality of age depended on a series of masks—blackface mostly, but also street Italianness and other guises. Though the Count Basie band backed him on these dates, Sinatra deployed Amos ‘n’ Andy shtick (lots of it) to vivify his persona; mocking Sammy Davis Jr. even as he adopted the speech patterns and vocal mannerisms of blacking up, he maneuvered around the threat of decrepitude and remasculinized himself in recognizably Rat-Pack ways. Sinatra’s Italian accents depended on an imagined blackness both mocked and ghosted in the exemplary performances of *Sinatra at the Sands*.

Sinatra sings superbly all across the record, rooting his performance in an aura of affection and intimacy from his very first words (“How did all these people get in my room?”). “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Jilly’s West,” he says, playing with a persona (habitué of the famous 52<sup>nd</sup> Street New York bar Jilly’s Saloon) that by 1965 had nearly run its course. Where the Basie band is concerned, though, this intimacy completely depends on the mediations of Amos ‘n’ Andy’s Kingfish, as in patter such as this (track 9). The Jersey sons of Hoboken and Red Bank, respectively, greet each other in the alienated language of minstrelsy in a context, nonetheless, of real musical rapport (cf. a few bars of “One For My Baby”— track 6). Indeed, blackface—or blackvoice, if you want—is exactly turned to the account of interracial connection on Sinatra’s part; minstrelsy here becomes the lingua franca of black-Italian musical kinship. This isn’t as crazy as it might seem today—plenty of black people found *Amos ‘n’ Andy* funny, even if, as LeRoi Jones put it long ago, they never confused its characters with themselves. And if there is now a nostalgic black-bourgeois vogue of reclaiming minstrelsy, for example critic Margo Jefferson’s embrace of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* in the pages of the *New York Times*, it’s also true that interracial interaction has, for the last two hundred years, been mediated through the culture industry’s languages of race (Jefferson 1994).

Still and all, *this is 1966*. One is reminded of this abruptly when, in riffing on Dean Martin’s drinking habits, Sinatra quips that “I would say, roughly, that Dean Martin has been stoned more often than the United States embassies.” Bombs were dropping on North Vietnam early in ’65; massive anti-war activism had materialized; SNCC had revolutionized the Civil Rights Movement. And Sinatra is making like Jolson in front of

another of the great geniuses of 20th-century music, Count Basie. Sinatra's New Frontier charisma is deeply compromised by these turns. As though to keep hold of a street credibility attenuated by success and demanded by the interracial context, Sinatra goes lowbrow (track 9). You can even hear the band laughing. Don't get me wrong: who would want a sanitized situation of "anti-racist" sincerity here? And yet the self-mascotting of Sammy Davis within the Rat Pack comes to this. One doesn't forget, either, that when in 1957 Louis Armstrong spoke out against the outrages in Little Rock, Sammy did his part to shut Pops down, launching headlines on the order of "Armstrong Doesn't Speak For Negroes." Spook securely planted by the door, Sinatra can proceed apace. The interesting thing is that what is disavowed in the figure of Sammy Davis comes roaring back in Sinatra's own voice. I mean, of course, the inhabitation of a black male body—Kingfish, to be sure, maybe Billy Eckstine too, but in any case an imagined persona simpatico with the rocking band sharing the stage. "Run and hide," says Sinatra at one point as the band gears up into overdrive; "run and hide." Run and hide, and go black, too, just to be on the safe side.

Doing so ironically, but predictably, affords Sinatra the street Italianness perfect for the threatening surroundings—outside as well as onstage. The long monologue at the center of *Sinatra at the Sands* clarifies the stakes here. Listen to it in its entirety for its movement of mind, facts of feeling, and intimate urgencies (track 9). At once affecting autobiography and low shtick, this 12-minute piece is every bit as cunning and calculated as Sinatra's singing. It's a narrative of up-from-Hoboken that nevertheless lays claim to the rough, working-class arena in which Sinatra was raised—"the qualms and traumas of life"—and which suffuses his mature persona, however polished that might be. Sinatra's father, the Rutgers English major, is Kingfish in dagface; his son's crisp diction, the way he has of biting off phrases and clinching words, owes everything to immigrant English—weird English, Evelyn Ch'ien calls it (2005)—owes everything to immigrant English subsumed, transformed, and at some level disavowed. The disavowal comes in Sinatra's insistence on "class," as in his earlier remark about the rebuilding of the Sands. It comes as well in his shunting of what there is in him of the father's voice onto blackface, its equal and opposite number.

But it's the singer's advancing age that I think most accounts for the surge of blackface all across *Sinatra at the Sands*. Note first the following. Hard upon a crack about Sammy comes the remark about his own age, as though the two were somehow linked in Sinatra's mind, the body's advancing age, and perhaps Sammy Davis too, portending a compromised potency that I would argue is resolved in blackface. As ever, blackface is the realm of white fun, and combined with the Vegas pleasure-dome of broads and boozing, both of which Sinatra heavily boosts in his stage patter, it offers access to a reaffirmed masculinity facing the hard realities of fifty years on Earth (track 7). It's worth saying that even blackface is sublimated in the exquisite swing of moments like this (track 6). Saying so, though, doesn't mean Sinatra's hard-bitten persona isn't floated on the wings of racial desire. The relationship of persona to masquerade is vexed and complicated, and thinking about it with regard to Sinatra is useful since the persona seems so sui generis—3 o'clock in the morning, no self-pity about the hard knocks, drink in hand, an adult singer for other adults, as Gary Giddins once remarked. Basie's restraint

and economy are the perfect foil for this act, which makes clear how much the persona abuts cross-racial masquerade. If only because the Amos 'n' Andy bits are so outrageous and laughable, Sinatra's singing persona seems all the more refined. It may well be, though, that the two masks have more in common than we thought.

Thomas J. Ferraro has argued precisely this in a fabulous essay called "Urbane Villager" (Ferraro 2004). The dichotomy between the crass Jersey boozier and the classy singer of American standards is false, as it is between the racially challenged jokester and the swinging vocalist. Why, then, do writers routinely tout Sinatra's civil-rights commitments, which are indeed there in the record—think of Sinatra's Popular-Front anthem "The House I Live In" (1945), or his refusal to stay in segregated hotels without Sammy Davis Jr.—while making no attempt to link these with the problematic performative politics that produced the Rat Pack? (For a telling and excellent exception, see Roediger 2006, 235-44.) I don't think you can excuse stage practice by way of the star's offstage persona. Bruce Springsteen is closer to the mark in hailing Sinatra's "deep blueness": "while his music became synonymous with black tie, good life, the best booze, women, sophistication, his blues voice was always the sound of hard luck and men late at night with the last ten dollars in their pockets trying to figure a way" (qtd. in Ferraro 144-45), a structure of feeling that for me encompasses not only Sinatra's classiness and working-classness both but also his general indebtedness to canons of African-American swing, the embrace of which Sinatra was all too aware—hence his handling of it through blackface.

Sinatra was always singing to his mother, John Gennari has forcefully argued (Gennari 2004). She was the social-psychological root of his relation to his audience—hence its intimacy but also, Gennari suggests, its crisis of masculinity, always on display. Dino was the *real* gangsta; Sinatra was the mama's boy. Mammissimo, it's called, and it returns Sinatra to a primal scene every time he sings—to a mammy. Sinatra is always in a kind of masculinist drag. And it's this drag act—Frank Sinatra, an American, one of the roughs, a cosmos—that requires just a little help from his black friends, a fact that *Sinatra at the Sands* very usefully helps clarify.

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