Framing “Our” Frank Sinatra

Stanislao G. Pugliese (October 30, 2015)

In many ways exemplary of the first-generation success story, Sinatra is also a paradoxical figure for Italian Americans. He both confirmed and challenged the common stereotypes of Italian-Americans. He—along with others such as Fiorello LaGuardia and Jo DiMaggio—changed how Americans viewed Italians, permitting earlier Americans to see that Italian Americans could indeed become assimilated. On the other hand, his sometimes boorish behavior at the bar or casino reinforced some of the worst stereotypes.

As America approaches the centenary of Frank Sinatra’s birth on December 12, Hofstra University hosts a six-day conference in November to assess his musical legacy and place in the country’s imagination. With keynote speakers Gay Talese and Pete Hamill, singers, musicians, journalists and biographers, as well as performances by Hofstra University music students, the conference

concludes with a scholarship concert with jazz legend Bucky Pizzarelli.

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Sinatra’s appeal rested not just on his masterful singing but on these carefully constructed images and myths. Sinatra was fully conscious of their construction although he was not always sure how much the myths depended on his consciousness of their construction. Pete Hamill, in his book Why Sinatra Matters recalls Sinatra musing late in life: “Sometimes I think I know what it was all about, and how everything happened. But then I shake my head and wonder. Am I remembering what really happened or what other people think happened? Who the hell knows, after a certain point?” And contrary to the cock-sure assertiveness of “My Way,” Sinatra at the end of his life was less sure of “his way” than at any time in his life. “Maybe that’s what it’s all about. Maybe all that happen is, you get older and you know less.”

In the arena of images available to us in framing “our” Frank Sinatra, I would here suggest another possible–although admittedly flawed–construction. Sinatra conflated within himself several of the stock characters of the tragicomic art form of commedia dell’arte. In some ways Sinatra resembles Arlecchino (Harlequin), the immigrant, with a primitive and simple personality who evolves into a smart, sophisticated character. To survive, Arlecchino must make use of his wits to best the arrogant and greedy characters he encounters. Flanking Arlecchino are the Zanni, poor immigrants, ever hungry, yet shrewd, insolent, masters at the art of arrangiarsi (“arranging” or “systematizing” oneself). In his own dexterous manner, Sinatra, too, exemplified the peasant and immigrant’s art of arrangiarsi. Brighello (the name comes from briga, “to fight”) is the first among the Zanni: Cunning and avaricious, he is the trickster who prefers young lovers. And personifying the tragicomic nature of the human condition, the Neapolitan Pulcinella. Agile, nimble, skillful, dexterous, adroit, clever, stoic yet a dreamer, Pulcinella is a victim of melancholy, the enduring disease of the Mezzogiorno, the Italian south. Melancholy–not to be confused with depression–can best be described as a pensive sadness or a sober musing that occasionally gives way to despair. And just as Pulcinella’s coppolone (sugar loaf hat) came to symbolize his character, Sinatra’s snap-brimmed hats, worn at various angles to indicate his mood, came to symbolize an American icon.

There is a certain character trait that is common in these personalities of the commedia dell’arte: they are always attempting to create and control anarchy at the same time.

In many ways, he represented the dilemma of the emigrant, torn from an impoverished, rural society that was paradoxically both intensely Catholic and yet deeply pagan, bereft of the benefits of modernity.

Sinatra was caught in the double bind confronted by all immigrants to America: The necessity of assimilating into American culture while retaining a distinct ancestral identity.

Sinatra managed, for most of his career, to sing on the right side of the fine line between pathos and bathos. The quality of pathos came from longing and loneliness. Hamill comes closest to the mark in arguing that “Sinatra had only one basic subject: loneliness.” Yet that is only part of the whole, for that loneliness was always accompanied by pathos, melancholy, and nostalgia for something (not just a woman) irreparably lost. In his embrace of longing, loss, and nostalgia, Sinatra

gave voice to the immigrant myth. “The core of the immigration myth,” writes Hamill, “is this: it was about the way people overcame misery, how they found their consolations, and, in the end, how they redeemed America in a time when America believed it was not in need of redemption.” Sinatra was one of the “agents of consolation”: Although he wasn’t as successful, the average Italian American could look to Sinatra as one of “us” who had climbed to the top without sacrificing the ethos and mores of the via vecchia (old way).

Immigrants from the Italian south, who never considered themselves Italians while in Italy, rediscovered a shared cultural history in America. If Machiavelli’s Prince argued that the state could be a work of art (or artifice), Baldassare Castiglione’s Renaissance manual, The Book of the Courtier, held that the self is a work of art. It was Castiglione who coined the term sprezzatura as the art of making the difficult appear easy. DiMaggio epitomized this on the ballfield while Sinatra exemplified sprezzatura on stage and in the recording studio. Although both were meticulous craftsmen who would work hours to perfect their craft, the appearance was one of unforced and spontaneous brilliance.

There are almost as many Sinatras as our imaginations may will into existence: the wise-ass scugnizzo from the streets of Hoboken; the vulnerable crooner who made the bobby soxers swoon at the Paramount; the self-destructive moth to the flame of Ava Gardner; the eternal Maggio and the Comeback Kid; the head Rat with rock glass in hand; the original “gangsta” epitomizing cool and a certain way with women; the ferociously proud Italian American; the Chairman of the Board; Ol’ Blue Eyes; civil rights spokesperson . . . . In short, Sinatra was the palimpsest upon which much of American culture was written in the twentieth century.

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