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Frank Sinatra: The Popular Front and an American Icon

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ABSTRACT: Frank Sinatra, a vocalist who helped raise American popular music to an entirely new level, is one of the most chronicled celebrities of modern times. Nonetheless, the extent of his involvement with the left has gone largely unreported. Sinatra played an active role in a score of Popular Front organizations. In contrast to most other celebrity leftists, he also actively fought against racism and intolerance by speaking widely, including at high schools where racial incidents had occurred. Vicious red-baiting contributed to an astounding downward spiral in his career, and caused him to distance himself from the left. Despite harassment of various kinds, Sinatra maintained close ties to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party until 1972, when he abruptly moved to the right. Sinatra's association with the Popular Front suggests that its influence was far wider and that its repression was more comprehensive than is generally recognized.

FRANCIS ALBERT SINATRA was “one of the most chronicled celebrities of modern times . . . the focus of oceans of ink and miles of film and video footage” (Kuntz, 2000, xi, 40). Indeed, Sinatra may be the most documented entertainer in history. Aside from innumerable biographies, articles, and documentaries, he has been the subject of a scholarly conference and an encyclopedia. Despite this obsession to detail the ebb and flow of the life of “The Voice from Hoboken,” relatively little attention has been paid to his brief, yet intense, involvement with the political left, which among other things caused the United States government to deny him security clearance to perform before the troops in Korea, and led to an

extensive inquiry to determine whether he should be indicted for perjury because on his passport application he affirmed that he had never been a member of a subversive group (FBI Files 62–83219–28 and 36, 211–232, 244).

From 1944 until 1948, Sinatra not only contributed financially and gave his name to progressive causes and organizations. He also did what few celebrity progressives did in that period: he publicly confronted racism, prejudice, and red baiting. (“Progressive” here refers to those who, although not Communists or even Communist sympathizers, were comfortable working together with Communists toward common goals.¹) Sinatra’s connections with the left ended abruptly, when he became the target of a red-baiting campaign that contributed to an astounding downward spiral in his career.

The political part of Sinatra’s life — activities, associations, and avowed beliefs — grew out of his early experiences and reverberated throughout his life, in ways large and small. Sinatra’s “left phase” not only clarifies the trajectory of this American icon, it also sheds light on the Popular Front (in both its political and cultural manifestations) and its repression in the postwar period. It shows how widespread Popular Front politics were, and reveals how relentless and vicious was the repression that defeated this movement.

Although only one of its eight chapters, “Sinatra and Communism,” addresses the issue of Sinatra’s involvement with the left, *The Sinatra Files: The Secret FBI Dossier*, edited by Tom Kuntz and Phil Kuntz, has added to the public record this component of Sinatra’s story. The 1,275-page dossier that the agency first opened on him in 1943 is the product of a 40-year surveillance on the single most famous and influential vocalist of American popular music. The largest part of Sinatra’s FBI file is comprised of reports linking him to “the mob”;

1 “Progressive” is an imprecise term. At the turn of the 20th century, it was used to identify a mostly middle-class urban reform movement that saw changes in the political structure (primary elections, referendum, recall, proportional representation) as creating the means for resolving the evolving urban society’s pervasive poverty and political corruption. The settlement house workers also termed themselves “progressives.” Running on a populist platform in 1924, Robert La Follette’s presidential candidacy on the Progressive Party line revived this term. In the Popular Front period “progressive” was used in distinction to “liberal,” which connoted a closer loyalty to capitalism and adherence to a definition of democracy limited to political and legal rights. The last time the term was used in American political parlance was in the name of the Progressive Party, whose 1948 Presidential candidate, Henry Wallace, polled an extremely disappointing 1,157,000 popular votes (2.4% of the total). Soon after its 1952 candidate, Vincent Hallinan, polled only 140,000 votes, the Progressive Party disbanded.

however, nearly 25% of the files is devoted to Sinatra's involvement with the left. *The Sinatra Files* contains leads that can help to reconstruct this slighted period in the life of the singer who raised American popular music to an entirely new level. However, by failing to independently assess these sources and by publishing the unevaluated and undigested materials that were stuffed into the FBI files, the editors of *The Sinatra Files*, however unintentionally, further disseminate hearsay evidence, which was collected and used for the purpose of isolating and disabling individuals and organizations that advocated a leftist political agenda.² Here we will take another look at the relevant sections of Sinatra's FBI file.

Early Life and Background

Sinatra's early life predisposed him to the left. His parents were both immigrants from Italy — his mother, Natalia (Dolly) Garaventa, from a village near Genoa; his father, Anthony Martin Sinatra, from Sicily — who settled in Hoboken, New Jersey (Fagiani, 1999, 20, 23). Located directly across the Hudson River from midtown New York, this mile-square waterfront city had a well-earned reputation as a tough working-class town. In the 1930s, Hoboken was the most densely populated city in the United States. Its 60,000 people formed ethnic sub-communities where Italian Americans had supplanted German and Irish Americans as the largest ethnic group (Federal Writers' Project, 1989, 262–269). "I was brought up in a tenement," Sinatra remembered, "in a very poor neighborhood. It was a real melting-pot, a cross-section of every racial group in the country" (Lowenfels, 1945, 3). He was referring to Hoboken's poorest section, its southwest corner (the only area of the city where wooden tenements predominate), which was an Italian urban village with its own national Catholic parish, St. Francis, and its annual *fiesta* (Proctor, 91–94).

Anthony Martin Sinatra fought as a prizefighter before being injured, and then worked in Hoboken's shipyards. Dolly Sinatra, who served as the Democratic Party's leader for Hoboken's Third Ward,

² An effective, albeit brief, effort to assess Sinatra's leftism is Jon Wiener's "When Old Blue Eyes Was 'Red': The Poignant Story of Frank Sinatra's Politics," published in the *New Republic* in 1986. Another treatment of Sinatra's connection to the left is an entry in William Klingaman's *Encyclopaedia of the McCarthy Era*. For an example of how the FBI files can be judiciously and effectively used as a source, see Mitgang, 1989. See also Vidal, 2001.

was the political godmother of the neighborhood, and accumulated 87 godchildren. During the Great Depression, her ability to deliver 600 votes at election time enabled her to secure for her husband a prized city job in Hoboken's Fire Department (Talese, 113–15).

Sinatra connected his left commitments and activities to his mother's political activities. He explained:

My mother is what you would call a progressive. She decided she didn't want to be just a housekeeper and studied nursing and is now a graduate nurse. She was always interested in conditions outside her own home. My father, too, but he was the more silent type. (Lowenfels, 1945).

Dolly's politics were not directly associated with the left. She served as a loyal liege in the Hoboken fiefdom of Frank ("I am the law") Hague's political duchy of Hudson County. In its zeal to elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt to a fourth term, the Communist Party actually endorsed Hague's mayoral candidacy (Norman, 1943, 946). This was conceivable because for all of its corruption, this old-fashioned machine practiced a populist politics that made blatant class appeals, and its carefully balanced tickets acknowledged the predominant nationalities residing in these communities. Nonetheless, Sinatra stepped out on his own when he joined in with openly left groups and initiatives — something that was not customary to Hudson County's political culture.

We do not know to what extent, if any, Sinatra was influenced by the radical traditions operating within the Italian American community. Although the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927 brought about a near-total collapse of the previously thriving anarchist movement, it still existed as a strong cultural undercurrent, especially among first-generation Italian Americans. Moreover, both the Socialist and the Communist movements attracted significant numbers of adherents from this community (Cannistraro, forthcoming). Although there is no evidence of a Communist presence in Hoboken's Little Italy, in the adjacent town, Union City, there was a left center, the United Italian Co-operatives, which among other things housed a lodge of the Garibaldi–American Federation, which was the Italian-language section of the International Workers Order, a Communist-led mutual aid society. *L'Unita del Popolo*, the Communist Italian-language weekly, regularly published May Day greetings from the Co-op and reported on the activities of the lodge. In 1941,

for example, it reported that in “the elegant hall of the Italian Cooperative” 150 persons saw a play “Frutti di Guerra,” which was performed by a dramatic group from another lodge. As late as 1949, the lodge was still functioning by hosting a talk on the Italian elections (which was a fundraiser for *L’Unita*), and the screening of an Italian movie sponsored by the Garibaldi lodge. At this point, we do not know whether the Sinatra family had any contact with the Italian Cooperative, the Garibaldi lodge, or whether they read *L’Unita* (*L’Unita del Popolo*, 1941a, 1943b, 1949g, 1949h).

Sinatra, the Popular Front, and the Left

Sinatra’s involvement with the left coincided with the Popular Front at the height of its influence, which was also the advent of its repression. The Popular Front strategy joined the left and the center in an alliance to defend democracy against fascism. It gained enormous support and prestige because of the wartime military alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union and the role of the American left in fighting racism and anti-Semitism as well as fascism abroad. In the United States, the Popular Front was perhaps best enunciated in Vice President Henry Wallace’s 1942 speech where he asserted that the world was entering “The Century of the Common Man,” a new era where the danger was racism and the solution internationalism (Culver, 2000, 275–280). This politics flourished in the left New Deal coalition that intermingled Communists and much larger groups of left-leaning people. Politically, the Popular Front was epitomized by the CIO unions and especially by formation of its Political Action Committee in 1944, which was undergirded by the CIO (and some AFL) unions. Other key components included the American Labor Party in New York and scores of fraternal and cultural organizations, as well as a wide range of publications. Communists and progressives — albeit for a brief moment — were at the very fulcrum of political influence (Abt, 1993, 83–84, 87).³ In

³ Among the most important of these organizations was the International Workers Order (IWO), a mutual benefit organization which at its peak in 1947 claimed 186,000 members organized into 2,500 lodges and a foreign-language press in over 20 different languages with a circulation of more than 400,000. The American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born and the International Labor Defense (which sponsored an influential publication, *Labor Defender*) were national organizations that widely impacted public opinion and influenced legislation.

the graphic arts, movies, theater, poetry, prose, and music, the Popular Front used working-class characters and settings, folk material, and ethnic and racial minorities in its production so that popular culture became elevated and high culture became more accessible (Denning, 1997).

Sinatra was involved (as a sponsor, contributor, speaker) with a score of Popular Front organizations, including the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, the Free Italy Society, the American Crusade to End Lynching, and the American Society for Cultural Relations with Italy, as well as publications such as the *New Masses* (Kuntz, 2000, 58–60; *L'Unità del Popolo*, 1947a). In December 1946, he served as the master of ceremonies at a dinner, broadcast over radio and sponsored by the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, at which Joe Louis was honored as a “great fighter and a great American” (*Daily Worker*: 1946a, 10; 1946b, 10; 1946c, 8).

Sinatra became especially visible in the struggle to oppose Congressional contempt citations of the “Hollywood Ten,” the screen writers who, during hearings conducted in the fall of 1947 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), refused, on First Amendment grounds, to answer inquiries about their political beliefs and associations. Sinatra joined a long list of Hollywood stars — including John Huston, Gene Kelly, Katharine Hepburn, Burt Lancaster, Ava Gardner, and Henry Fonda — in the Committee for the First Amendment, which fought back against HUAC (Caute, 1978, 614). The Voice from Hoboken added his signature to a petition of over 300 Hollywood luminaries, which held that “these hearings are morally wrong, because any investigation into the political beliefs of the individual is contrary to the basic principles of our democracy.” On October 25, he joined a large and enthusiastic crowd of Hollywood celebrities (including Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Rita Hayworth, Groucho Marx, Gene Kelly, and Frederic March) at Ira Gershwin’s home to organize additional activities (Buford, 2000, 80). Together with other movie personalities, including Judy Garland, Sinatra performed in a radio broadcast on November 22, 1947, entitled “Hollywood Fights Back” (Kuntz, 2000, 57). He flew to Washington with Humphrey Bogart, Groucho Marx, and Lauren Bacall to show support for the Hollywood Ten (Navasky, 1980, 80). In explaining his opposition to the Committee’s inquisition, Sinatra stated:

Once they get the movies throttled, how long will it be before the Committee goes to work on freedom of the air? How long will it be before we're told what we cannot say into a radio microphone? If you make a pitch on nation-wide network for a square deal for the underdog, will they call you a Commie? . . . Are they gonna scare us into silence? I wonder. (Kahn, 1948, 19.)

Here, in his own voice, "The Voice" tied the defense of leftists, some of whom were known Communists, not only to a defense of free speech in the abstract, but also free speech as an instrument for advocating for the "underdog." Although the FBI had immediately branded the Committee for the First Amendment a "Communist Front," Sinatra could not know that an informer had recorded the license numbers of those attending the meeting at Ira Gershwin's house, nor that Gershwin would later give California's Un-American Activities Committee the names of those who had attended the meeting at his home (Buford, 2000, 80, 82).

The left organization that Sinatra was most closely associated with, however, was the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (ICCASP), an expression of Popular Frontism that acted almost as a talent agency for the left (Kuntz, 2000, 83; Caute, 1978, 31).⁴ Founded in 1944, the initiating sponsors and members of the board of the ICCASP included James Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, Albert Einstein, Langston Hughes, Thomas Mann, and a long list of Hollywood celebrities including Bette Davis, James Cagney, and Orson Welles (MacDougall, 1965, 112). It was at a September 12, 1946 meeting in Madison Square Garden sponsored by the ICCASP that Henry Wallace made his speech enunciating his insistence on peaceful co-existence with the Soviet Union, which led President Harry Truman to remove him as Secretary of Commerce. Sinatra spoke and/or performed at any number of the ICCASP's functions. On October 28, 1945, he sat on the dais, along with Oscar Hammerstein and other celebrities, at a dinner in honor of the sculptor Jo Davidson (at which \$22,000 was raised), where the keynote speaker, Harlow Shapley, the

4 Although the ICCASP was never placed on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations, the California Committee on Un-American Activities included it on its list as a "Communist front." Later in 1947, the ICCASP folded into the Progressive Citizens of America, whose purpose was to promote the Wallace campaign. In 1949, a somewhat smaller group of prominent literary figures and scientists (but no Hollywood celebrities) headlined the National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions, whose major accomplishment was the organization of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, held at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City in March 1949.

director of the Harvard Observatory, warned that the development of the atomic bomb meant that “the planet is too small for competing nationalities” (*Daily Worker*, 1945a, 9; *PM*, 1945a, 7; *PM*, 1945b, 200; MacDougall, 1965, 112). On May 16, 1946, at a Madison Square Garden rally sponsored by the Veterans Committee of the ICCASP, the “Kid from Hoboken” argued: “The minute anyone tries to help the little guy, he is called a Communist.” In 1946, at a time when the organization was taking a left turn leading to the formation of the Progressive Party, he was elected as one of its Vice Presidents (others included Fiorello LaGuardia, Archibald MacLeish, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Jo Davidson) (Kuntz, 2000, 47, 59–60, 80–90).

The Cultural Fight Against Racism

Sinatra’s unique contribution to this movement is epitomized by his starring role in *The House I Live In*, a ten-minute short film that connected to the Popular Front not only Sinatra’s celebrity but also his artistic gift. It also brought him together with a trio of important Communist artists to create a dramatic setting for the song of that title. The song was composed in 1942 by the ardently left composer, Earl Robinson, who also wrote *The Ballad for Americans* and “Joe Hill,” two of the most important musical expressions of the Popular Front in the United States. Before Sinatra sang “The House I Live In” in the film, according to Robinson, its greatest success was its performance at the 1943 May Day rally in New York City (Robinson, 1998, 151–52). The other creative artists engaged in this production were equally committed leftists. The lyricist Al Lewis (pseudonym for Abel Meeropol), a New York City high school teacher and Communist Party activist, had also written other left songs, including “Beloved Comrade.” Lewis was the composer of “Strange Fruit” (whose lyrics had originally been published in *The New Masses*), a Billy Holiday standard that marked the emergence of Popular Front cabaret blues. Abel and his wife Anne (who had directed a nursery school and worked with “latch-key” children in Harlem) provided a home for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s sons, Robert and Michael, after the execution of their parents in 1953. The Meeropols, neither of whose natural born children had survived infancy, were able to legally adopt the Rosenberg children in 1957 (Margolik, 2000, 31, 37, 138–39; Denning, 1997, 35, 323; Meeropol, 1975, 223). Albert Maltz, the screenwriter for *The*

House I Live In, was an important cultural figure in the Communist Party's ranks, who (aside from his extensive screen credits) was an O'Henry Award winner whose short stories were widely anthologized (Navasky, 1980, 81). Together they created a way to disseminate this Popular Front anthem to the widest possible audience.

In the film, Sinatra is standing outside the back of a theater smoking a cigarette between rehearsals, when he rescues a boy from a youthful mob that intended to assault him because "we don't like his religion." After telling them, "My father came from Italy, but I'm still an American," he sings the title song and the boys depart as friends of their intended victim (Sinatra, newspaper clipping). This veritable hymn for the Popular Front opens by dismissing "a name, a map, the flag" as the meaning of "America to me." In a little more than 200 words, its lyrics insist that America is "The town I live in, the street, the house, the room. . . . But especially, the people." The "people" of this song are "all races and religions . . . the grocer and the butcher, . . . the worker by my side." In addition, America becomes a place where each citizen has "the right to speak my mind out." Sinatra, in a manner not significantly different from the way he sang any other song, evokes a racially and ethnically pluralistic America of producers determined to press forward with a social democratic project.⁵

This short film, and especially Sinatra's performance, was acclaimed, and in 1945 he was awarded a special Oscar. Sinatra donated his royalties from the film and RKO gave all its proceeds from it to the California Labor School in San Francisco (which in 1947 the Attorney General placed on his list of subversive organizations) and other organizations fighting discrimination (Robinson, 1998, 155). Three months later, on August 22, Sinatra made a studio recording of the same Alex Stordahl arrangement that appeared in the film, which was released as a Columbia single (Mustazza, 1995, 46).⁶ As

5 During the McCarthy era, "The House I Live In" became part of Paul Robeson's standard repertory. Prevented from singing in major concert halls or on the radio because of the blacklist and unable to travel abroad because his passport was revoked, he sang the ballad at Black churches with a bite and enunciation that made it a sacred song of a beleaguered and dwindling movement. The lyrics of Robeson's version differed from those in Sinatra's. For example, America is described as: "a land of wealth and beauty with enough for all to share." There is also mention of Frederick Douglass and "the people who just came here," which given his ties to the immigrant experience is oddly omitted from Sinatra's version (Omega Classics).

6 This version of "The House I Live In" is available on *Frank Sinatra Sings His Greatest Hits* (Columbia Records), and *Frank Sinatra with Alex Stordahl and His Orchestra, 1944-1945* (Cedar CD 398).

early as July 1947, a witness before HUAC testified that “short films [*sic*] by Frank Sinatra are also featured [by] the road show and film entertainment of an agitational nature” by the International Workers Order (Hearings, 1947, 106). *L’Unità del Popolo* used *The House I Live In* to raise funds. In Cleveland, a “festival” in support of the weekly, which featured the film attracted 195 participants (*L’Unità*: 1947b, 3; 1947c, 2).

Sinatra did not limit his attacks on bigotry to the movie screen; in real life, he repeatedly confronted intolerance. In 1945 he made 30 appearances around the country, speaking against prejudice. He took up this cause because, as he explained to an interviewer for the *Daily Worker*, “since I seem to have some influence among a certain section of the population (broad grin), I felt I ought to use it to do whatever I could to promote racial unity in our country” (Lowenfels, 1945, 3). In Carnegie Hall on March 21, 1945, he presented a 20-minute speech at the World Youth Rally. This assembly represented a typical Popular Front effort which brought together liberals such as New York City Council President Newbold Morris and representatives of the United States, French, and British armies with left cultural figures like Orson Welles and the dancer Pearl Primus (*Daily Worker*, 1945b, 8; 1945c, 5; 1945d, 4; *PM*, 1945c, 12; *New York Times*, 1945, 17). Its sponsors included liberal organizations such as the American Jewish Congress as well as left organizations such as the American Slav Congress, which had close ties to the Communist Party (Ryan, 1990, 45, 347; Thayer, 67, 554).⁷ Speaking at this assembly, Sinatra told the young people that “when I was going to school over in Jersey, a bunch of guys threw rocks at me and called me a little ‘Dago’. . . . I know now why they used to call the Jewish kids in the neighborhood ‘kikes’ and ‘Sheenies’ and the colored kids ‘niggers.’ That was so wrong.” Sinatra then related this to the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews and Catholics, which he argued they carried out in order to “weaken the people they wanted to defeat and enslave.” He concluded by declaring that “this country that’s been built by many

7 Soon after its founding in April 1942, the American Slav Congress had affiliations from fraternal, mutual benefit, and trade union organizations comprised of all the Slavic nationalities with a combined membership of 10 to 15 million. During the war years, the Congress mobilized public opinion in favor of the opening of a Second Front and collected material support for Russian War Relief. The American Slav Congress was placed on the Attorney General’s list in 1951.

people, many creeds, nationalities and races . . . [should] never be divided . . . and can never be conquered” (Sinatra, 1945; FBI File 62–83219–6, 43, 116).⁸

On October 23, 1945, Sinatra spoke at two convocations at Benjamin Franklin High School, which was located in the heart of Italian Harlem, as part of a process of healing and repair following an outbreak of violence by Italian Americans against African American students that had occurred there on September 28, 1945. The campaign to close the racial breach was organized by Leonard Covello (the first Italian American high school principal in the New York City public school system and an important educational philosopher and practitioner), who together with East Harlem’s Congressman Vito Marcantonio worked to defuse the tension and repair the damage to the reputation of the school, which had gained widespread recognition as a model for intercultural education and racial tolerance (Meyer, 1989, 54–66). The printed reports of this assembly relate that the only song he sang was “Aren’t You Glad You’re You”; yet, at least two interviewees who attended the school at the time remember him singing “The House I Live In” (*PM*, 1945d, 14; *Daily News*, 1945, 4; *Daily Worker*, 1945e, 4). This campaign’s finale was the organization of a contingent of 600 Franklin students carrying placards announcing that they were of various races and nationalities. The youthful marchers stepped along behind a huge banner which proclaimed that they were “Americans All.” The dramatic demonstration of racial and ethnic solidarity was widely reported in the city’s press. The *New York Mirror* noted that “a burst of applause greeted a float on which one of the girls from [Benjamin Franklin] High School personified the Statue of Liberty . . . flanked by banners reading: ‘Americans All — Negro, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant’” (*Tribune*, 1945, 6; *Daily Mirror*, 1945, 6).

On November 1, 1945, shortly after the release of *The House I Live In*, Sinatra stood before a rowdy and antagonistic audience of white high school students in Gary, Indiana. They had been boycotting

8 Sinatra’s FBI File noted that *Narodni Glasnik*, the Croatian-language Communist newspaper, reported that the Croatian section of the International Workers Order had published a pamphlet entitled “The Idea of Americans,” based on Sinatra’s Carnegie Hall talk, that could be purchased at the rate of 60 cents per hundred, which was issued in a second printing of 25,000 copies.

classes in support of the demand for an all-white school that had been proposed by a white-only PTA, which had broken away from the official PTA led by the wife of a Communist Party organizer. Staring down the unruly crowd with his arms folded, he commanded silence. He then shouted: "I can lick any son of a bitch in this joint." Of course, he also sang "The House I Live In" (Weiner, 1986, 22). In a short time, the students' hostility gave way to cheers. Nonetheless, his impassioned plea for tolerance failed to end the strike (Kuntz, 2000, 42). When he was interviewed about his campaign for tolerance, he related it to his own background: "I know the setbacks kids get from economic and educational shortages. Nobody will ever know how much I hated not going to college." When his press agent prompted, "How about the concert tour you're planning to raise a fund for youth centers?" Sinatra replied: "Later, we'll try to give a place to meet. Right now, we must give them a meeting place for their minds" (Sinatra, clipping, 1945; Meyer, 1996, 36–43).

Sinatra's activities brought him praise and accolades from the left. On December 6, 1945, by the unanimous approval of the Award Committee, because of his "crusade that included innumerable lectures, radio talks, and magazine articles all culminating in his movie short *The House I Live In*," the left-leaning Newspaper Guild of New York honored Frank Sinatra "for his courageous fight on behalf of all minorities," along with 24 other "Page One Personalities of the Year" (including Eleanor Roosevelt, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Jo Davidson) at a Madison Square Garden convocation (*Daily Worker*, 1945f, 11). On January 14, 1946, as one of 22 "peoples' heroes" (including Joe Louis, W. E. B. DuBois, Jacob Lawrence, Duke Ellington, and Paul Robeson), he was honored by the Communist cultural magazine *New Masses* for his "contributions towards [the creation of] an America for all peoples" (*Daily Worker*: 1946d, 11; 1946e, 8). Walter Lowenfels, the accomplished and highly regarded poet, who interviewed Sinatra for the Magazine Section of the *Daily Worker*, noted that *The House I Live In* was only one part of a campaign by Sinatra against "intolerance" and that aside from "Negro weeklies hardly a word about his crusade got into the press." Having recently returned from Gary, Indiana, Sinatra reported that the racial disturbance there was not spontaneous and that the student strike had been traced to a former German Bund leader. Sinatra told Lowenfels: "I'm in it for

life. . . . This is a fight I intend to stick with” (Lowenfels, 1945, 3; Caute, 1978, 203–4; Wald, 1998, 679).⁹

Storm Clouds Gather

Despite his immense celebrity, Sinatra’s involvement with the left bore grave consequences. In 1947, Lee Mortimer, a columnist for the Hearst newspaper chain, who had previously accused Sinatra of having a “penchant for veering to portside,” initiated the red-baiting campaign. Mortimer focused on Sinatra’s connection with “The House I Live In,” which he characterized as “class struggle or foreign isms posing as entertainment” (Weiner, 1986, 21–22). The political climate had changed since the Hollywood Ten were subpoenaed by HUAC; now few fought back against these slurs and innuendos. In his weekly column “Change the World,” published in the *Daily Worker*, Mike Gold (when he was not being self-referential, in ways that were alternately patronizing, bombastic, and far-fetched) compared the attacks on Sinatra to the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance (Gold, 1947, 6)! *L’Unita del Popolo*, saw the incident from a different perspective. Coming to the defense of the country’s most famous Italian American, it published a front-page headline: “We Are in Solidarity with Sinatra in the Struggle against Racism.” The article noted that: “For us Italian Americans, the Sinatra case recalls the brutal memories of the innumerable humiliations suffered, not so long ago, by our grandparents and parents.” The article also reminded its readers that Sinatra “has rendered great service to the fusion of all the components of the grand community of American people. He has spoken against Jim Crowism . . . against anti-Semitism, and against the denigration of his own people of origin” (*L’Unità*, 1947, 1).

On January 6, 1947, Sinatra wrote a two-column-length letter published in *The New Republic*, addressed to Henry Wallace, who was then

9 Lowenfels, whose writings spanned a half century, developed a writing style that “seemed to embody a transcendentalist perspective on the world” that attempted “to decode the physical reality by reaching to what he called ‘Reality Prime.’” Much of his poetry was published by Communist media; however, in the 1960s his reputation surged. In 1953, Lowenfels, along with five other Communist leaders in Philadelphia, was arrested and subsequently tried and convicted under the Smith Act. However, in what was a very early legal setback for McCarthyism, the Court of Appeals overturned his two-year jail sentence.

serving as its editor, where he expressed his concern that “people’s faces look almost as they looked in 1939.” He went on to explain that “prices are high and people are kicking about them,” and “fear seems to have more to do with the insecurity of everybody’s future.” He prioritized the need for “tolerance” among people of different backgrounds and then extended that attitude to “international understanding.” When he stated that “it was pretty easy to march with the liberals and the progressives in the years of Roosevelt,” there was an implied criticism of Harry Truman and an encouragement of Wallace to provide the type of leadership required in order to re-establish unity between “the liberals and the progressives,” that is, the major constituents of the Popular Front (Sinatra, 1947, 2, 46).

At least in part, this letter was in response to the formation of “Americans for Democratic Action” (ADA) on January 4, whose manifesto stated: “We reject any association with Communism or sympathizers with Communism in the United States as completely as we reject any association with Fascists or their sympathizers” (Culver, 2000, 434–35; Wreszin, 1984, 255–85). The ADA represented the Cold War liberals who not only refused to coalesce with the left, but who also saw the Communists and their allies as their enemies, equal to enemies on the right. From this point on, those who continued the politics of the Popular Front confronted ever-intensifying vilification and intimidation from an increasing number of sources: the federal, state, and even local government (the FBI, loyalty boards, legislative committees); anti-Communist leftists (Trotskyists, editors and contributors to *Partisan Review*, and right-wing social democrats within the trade union movement); the “Cold War liberals” (whose major center was the ADA); and the mass media and mass organizations (veterans’ groups and the Catholic Church) (Lieberman, 1995, 59–61).

Sinatra’s career began to rapidly spiral downward. In 1947, he was attacked in the press not only for his leftism, but also because of his associations with individuals involved with organized crime. The collapse of his first marriage to Nancy, his childhood sweetheart, and his relationship with Ava Gardner also aroused widespread disapproval. Sinatra knew what was in store for those who were labeled “red.” After defying HUAC in 1947, Albert Maltz was blacklisted and jailed. Yet, even worse was possible. All the while he was serving his term, Maltz feared that upon release he would be interned in the

camps that the McCarran (Internal Security) Act had established for all those, who “during time of national emergency” the Attorney General deemed subversive. Earl Robinson was in his words “gray listed,” that is, he did not lose any jobs; he just did not get any new ones, and his income declined from \$25,000 in 1945 to \$8,000 by 1950 (Robinson, 1998, 201–5, 217). Although Abel Meeropol had been called before the Rapp-Coudert Committee investigating left-wing activity at City College in 1939, he escaped the blacklist during the McCarthy era and was able to continue earning a living writing television commercials for Schlitz beer and Ford (Meeropol, 1975, 223, 249; Leberstein, 1993, 91–122). However, he experienced an even worse injury: an extended court battle ensued in order to obtain legal custody of the Rosenberg children. At one point, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, claiming the Rosenberg boys “were being exploited for fund-raising propositions,” convinced a judge in New York Children’s Court to remove them from the Meeropols’ care. Before Michael and Robert were returned to the Meeropols, they had been subjected to yet another trauma: placement in a children’s shelter (Margolick, 2000, 139). Although the decimated and damaged left could offer some limited support to the victims of the repression, singing in drafty union halls and shabby auditoriums was a prospect that must have chilled the very heart of the boy who had crossed over the Hudson River to see his name in lights on the Great White Way.

Sinatra’s involvement in these activities caused him to be cited in testimony before HUAC in hearings on “Bills to Curb or Outlaw the Communist Party in the United States” (Hearings, 1948). However, neither HUAC nor any of the other investigatory committees ever subpoenaed Sinatra (Cumulative Index). Consequently, he was never placed in a situation where, under oath, he would be asked to inform. Nonetheless, in the spirit of the raging witch-hunt, he did participate in politically purging activities. In April 1948, Sinatra joined Jimmy Durante and Joe DiMaggio in an hour-long show, in Italian, broadcast directly to the Italian people encouraging them to vote against the Communist Party in the first national election since the establishment of the postwar Italian Republic. Louella Parsons reported that 27 recordings of the program were made so that they could be “played in various parts of Italy in an effort to reach even the most remote parts of that troubled nation” (*Daily Mirror*, 1948,

5).¹⁰ By 1951, Sinatra participated in a rally held in Central Park sponsored by the “Stop Communism Committee,” whose mission was to fight against “Red influences in the entertainment world.” The FBI files do cite a report that “an intermediary” stated that Sinatra would be willing to volunteer to become an undercover informer for the FBI’s search for subversives; however, there is no way to determine whether or not this actually reflected Sinatra’s wishes (Kuntz, 2000, xii, xxvi, 33–34, 78, 81; *Daily Mirror*, 1948, 6).¹¹

Although the chronology is not entirely clear, there is some evidence that Sinatra’s leftism continued after his purported conversion to the official United States position on the Cold War. When interviewed about the blacklisting in Hollywood Betsy Blair recalls: “He didn’t care to know [what the money was going to be used for]. He didn’t want to talk about things. . . . [but] he was usually generous. If anybody was in trouble, he was very attentive and very generous.” Speaking about the period at least as late as the end of 1950, Ring Lardner, Jr., remembers Sinatra as part of a small group of “liberals . . . who continued staunch defense of our [that is, the Hollywood Ten] rights” (McGilligan, 1997, 412, 546).

Neither the FBI nor the Federal Government were satisfied with his public denunciations of Communism. In 1954, despite Sinatra’s protestations that “I’m just as Communist as the Pope!,” citing his “Communist affiliations,” the Army denied Sinatra security clearance to entertain troops in Korea at Christmastime. Much worse loomed. In 1955, when Sinatra applied for a passport, the Assistant Attorney General/Internal Security Division, William Tompkins, requested an investigation by the FBI in order “to determine whether sufficient evidence exists to warrant prosecution . . . inasmuch as the statements contained in his affidavit [that he had never been a member of the Communist Party or any other “subversive” organization], if false, would constitute a violation of Title 18, United States Code, Sections 1001 or 1542” (FBI Files, 244). What ensued was a remarkably painstaking inquiry involving the FBI’s offices in Albany, Philadelphia,

10 With the assistance of the State Department, this campaign was organized by the Catholic Church and Generoso Pope, the publisher of *Il Progresso Italo Americano*. In some way, this anti-Communist mobilization of the Italian American community served as a mass demonstration of its Americanism, so as to absolve it of any lingering taint of fascism and overall “foreignness.” At least in a public setting, this broadcast is the only instance where Sinatra was known to have spoken the Italian language.

11 For the most extensive discussion on Sinatra and *italianità* see Fagiani, 1999.

Chicago, Detroit, Newark, New York City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, as well as interviews with informants in Scarsdale, New York, and in California: Burbank, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Canoga Park, Malibu Beach, and West Los Angeles — all of this to determine whether a “vocalist” (his occupation as described by the FBI) would either face prosecution for perjury or be issued a passport. Ultimately, a 40-page report concluded: “The investigation fails to develop any positive evidence connecting SINATRA with the Communist Party or the Communist Party movement.” This Kafkaesque inquest, whose monetary cost can only be surmised, was generated by the anonymous testimony of three witnesses repeating hearsay speculation (FBI Files, 301–343).

The Post-HUAC Period: Sinatra Drifts to the Right

Despite his roughing up by HUAC and the ultra right, Sinatra continued to oppose racism and ethnic slurs. In both 1961 and 1963, he appeared at Carnegie Hall benefits for Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He remained a constant and valuable fixture of the Democratic Party’s liberal wing. In 1952, for example, he campaigned for Adlai Stevenson, sang the national anthem at the Democratic Party presidential conventions in 1956 and 1960, and supported Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 campaign (Mustazza, 1998, 285–89).

Nonetheless, by 1972, Sinatra had made a dramatic shift in his political allegiances. Henceforth he supported the Republican Party. In part, this was due to his being snubbed by John and Robert Kennedy after he had provided much financial support. Sinatra can also be seen as one of the millions of people of European ancestry who felt uncomfortable with the shift of the Democratic Party from traditional New Dealism to the social agenda of the 1960s. Now, he conspicuously associated with those Republicans who had been the architects and executors of the Red Scare, that is, Richard Nixon and later Ronald Reagan. Sinatra, who had defended the victims of the Hollywood witch hunts, now supped with Nixon who, as a member of HUAC, had once joined the interrogations and on the floor of the House upheld the subsequent contempt citations against Maltz and the other screen writers whom Sinatra had earlier defended. Sinatra now socialized with Reagan who, as President of the Screen Actors

Guild, as Confidential Informant "T-10," had actively informed on his colleagues, helping to identify victims (some of them Sinatra's friends and colleagues) for the Committee persecution (Morris, 1990, 355; Caute, 1978, 492; Mitgang, 1989, 15). Sinatra also must have known that the Committee meant not only the blacklisting of artists deemed too left; it also signified the end of the production of movies with social themes. It would take more than a decade before a short film such as *The House I Live In* could again conceivably have been produced.

"The House I Live In" disappeared from his repertory. It was not until the conclusive end of the McCarthy Era that it again reappeared in a 1964 patriotic album with Bing Crosby. In 1973, President Nixon invited him to perform "The House I Live In" at the White House (Weiner, 1986, 23). During his 1974 national tour, he sang this forbidden song at every stop, and included it in the album *Sinatra — The Main Event*. At age 75 he sang "The House I Live In" in support of the troops in the 1991 Persian Gulf War (Robinson, 1998, 156, 41–43). He ended his singing career with the 1994 release of *Duets II*, which electronically weds his version of "The House I Live In" to Neil Diamond's (Mustazza, 1998, 46).

One observer of the Sinatra phenomenon described the difference in Sinatra's later performances in this way: "Now when he does 'The House I Live In,' that creaky anthem of the New Deal, it sounds like empty Fourth of July oratory" (Brennan, 1995, 216). This leaves an important question unanswered: How could a song that was integrally tied to the left and presented as evidence of Sinatra's commitment to the left later serve as an endorsement of unreflexive patriotism? One major difference between these two periods was that during the Popular Front the left was contesting the nature of American democracy and even more to the point the very definition of American nationality; however, by the 1960s the left had become anti-patriotic, and the right had appropriated *all* the national symbols including those earlier fashioned by the left.

By 1960 when the blacklist in the movie industry was beginning to crumble, a few blacklisted artists were openly hired. Otto Preminger announced that Dalton Trumbo had written the screenplay of *Exodus*, and Stanley Kramer had retained Nedrick Young to write the scenario for *Inherit the Wind*. That same year, Sinatra declared in an

advertisement in *Variety* that he had hired Albert Maltz to write the screenplay for *The Execution of Private Slovik*, which was based on the story of a World War II veteran who became the first American soldier since the Civil War to be executed for desertion. Nonetheless, Sinatra reneged because of mounting pressure from the American Legion, the Catholic War Veterans, and the Hearst Press (*The Journal American*), which intoned: “You are not giving employment to a poor sheep . . . but to a real Communist pro” (Navasky, 1981, 327; Salzman, 1978, 129–30).¹² The young Sinatra had risked his career and confronted sources of real power in the United States in order to defend targets of the Red Scare and advocate for the equality of all this country’s peoples. Now, when he had reached the pinnacle of prominence and wealth, he retreated where others held firm.

Sinatra’s FBI dossier reveals a dismaying situation. At no time does it contain anything that even hints at an activity disallowed by the Bill of Rights. In a jumbled careless manner, it documents Sinatra speaking, contributing money, advocating, associating — First Amendment rights that form the foundation of this country’s Constitution. He helps raise money for the Republican refugees from Franco’s Spain, he joins those who argue for the continuation of United States cooperation with the Soviet Union, he helps raise funds (albeit under leftist aegis) for war-ravished Yugoslavia, but most of all Sinatra fights against intolerance (FBI file 62–83219 [Section 2], 322–23; FBI file 62–83219 [Section 1], 20). His file is stuffed with completely unevaluated material from anonymous informants and random newspaper clippings. Ironically, his FBI files contain references indicating that the movement he was a part of only engaged in constitutionally guaranteed activities. When the FBI interviewed a former functionary of the Young Communist League in the Los Angeles area, he reported that his only recollection of Sinatra’s name appearing in “CP circles was a frequently played recording played at CP affairs because it dealt with racial tolerance, a long-standing CP cause.” In a similar vein, another informant advised that from 1946 to 1947, when Sinatra was vice president and

12. Curiously, Salzman makes no mention of his subject’s work in the creation of *The House I Live In*.

a member of the board of directors of the Los Angeles American Federation of Radio Artists, he was “a member of the liberal faction of [the local]. He supported the liberal candidates whose platform emphasized unity, employment, labor laws, union corporation [*sic*] and welfare.”

The shabby files of the FBI were almost useless in a court of law, but they could be employed to lethal effect in hearings (such as the federal and state un-American activities committees, as well as immigration and loyalty hearings) where the rules of evidence did not apply. Moreover, these files served as source material (for example, the information that Mortimer used against Sinatra) for right-wing journalists who used them as a means of destroying the careers of leftists or causing them to cower and join in the witch-hunt. The FBI collected information from federal and state investigatory committees whose stated purpose was the creation of legislation, but which in fact operated as kangaroo courts where the punishment was contempt for those who refused to cooperate and loss of reputation and employment for those who availed themselves of the only due process right (aside from the right to legal counsel) that obtained, that is, the protection against self-incrimination afforded by the right to remain silent.

The FBI, together with the House Un-American Activities Committee, other federal and state “anti-subversive activities” committees, and private agencies such as Red Channels, functioned as part of an interlocking directorate for the political repression of the left. Their intent was to publicly identify suspected leftists, and especially those actually connected to the Communist Party, so as to isolate and disable a political movement in the United States. The FBI and the federal and state legislative investigatory committees operated as a shadow judiciary operating outside the parameters of the Constitution, which explicitly forbids bills of attainder (that is, laws intended to circumvent due process rights) and provides for due process rights such as the right to examine evidence and confront witnesses.

Sinatra was dragged into this Kafkaesque process and, without informing on colleagues, emerged with his career intact. The fact that to some extent he buckled says less about his character than about the power of this repressive system that was permitted to operate in a democracy.

Recap and Assessment

Grave damage to Sinatra's career and integrity was averted because HUAC never subpoenaed him and he was never blacklisted. Why these two potentially devastating actions never occurred must be inferred. At least part of the answer can be derived by briefly reviewing the remarkably similar case of Burt Lancaster. Like Sinatra, Lancaster (despite his English-Irish background) had been raised during the Great Depression in an Italian ghetto situated within a larger polyglot working-class community, Manhattan's East Harlem. In Hollywood he had associated with the left, including those individuals and organizations most clearly connected to the Communist Party. When the postwar repression began, he also became active in the Committee for the First Amendment and the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions. In ways similar to Sinatra's association with *The House I Live In*, Lancaster's involvement in the movie version of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* caused him to work together with avowed leftists on artistic material that was clearly connected to the culture of the Popular Front. Unlike Sinatra, during the Korean War Lancaster had never volunteered to perform for the armed services, so we do not know whether he would have been granted security clearance. However, like Sinatra he had difficulty obtaining a passport. In 1953, the U. S. government limited his passport to one year exclusively for travel to Mexico for the production of *Vera Cruz*. In contrast to Sinatra, however, Lancaster never broke with his progressive ideals and associations.

Walter Bernstein, the blacklisted screen writer, and Mickey Knox, the blacklisted actor, explain HUAC's failure to subpoena Burt Lancaster and the industry's refusal to blacklist him on two grounds: he was a star, and he was not Jewish. Bernstein noted that "an implicit anti-Semitism ran through the whole thing. They would go after a [John] Garfield much more than . . . this nice Aryan fellow." In a similar vein, Knox stated: "They never got a star. The only one was Garfield and he was Jewish." The actor Robert Ryan further corroborated this line of reasoning, when he was asked by Montgomery Cliff why, despite his vehemently anti-HUAC views, he had never been blacklisted. Ryan replied, "I'm a Catholic and an ex-Marine, Hoover wouldn't touch that combination" (Buford, 2000, 80–82, 97–98, 122, 145, 385, 390). It may very well be that Sinatra's status as a

star and his not being Jewish saved him from the worst punishments of the anti-Communist repression.

The editors of *The Sinatra Files* correctly assert that the “FBI was overstating their case when, in internal reports . . . it referred to Sinatra as ‘Communist sympathizer’ or a ‘CP fellow traveler.’” However, they themselves overstate their case when they insist that the FBI “had nothing on him but the ordinary activities of a liberal celebrity” (Kuntz, 2000, 40). For a four-year period, Sinatra was firmly in the camp of the Popular Front. That much is evident from his associations, activities, and spoken and written words. Most crucially, in 1947, he did not leave the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions in order to join the Americans for Democratic Action. Sinatra’s deep connection to the left New Deal and his genuine commitment to tolerance for people of all racial, religious, and national backgrounds caused him to expend a great deal of his celebrity and energy for organizations and causes dedicated to furthering the Popular Front agenda, as opposed to joining those forces that prioritized participation in the domestic and international anti-Communist crusade. The relentless repression of leftism, which was nowhere so thorough as in the entertainment industry, caused countless targets to remove themselves from the line of fire and even to renounce their former beliefs, activities, and associates. In the case of performers, there was no option of hiding behind a pseudonym, so that the blacklist meant the destruction of careers. Sinatra did not choose that course.

When Frank Sinatra moved to the right, he replaced “The House I Live In” with another theme song, “I Did It My Way.” This shift from a collectivist anthem, rooted in a mundane locale populated with working-class people of different races and nationalities, to a defiantly individualistic show stopper is a course that many — albeit in their minds rather than in their real lives — followed along with Sinatra. What remains moot is whether the Popular Front politics of the New Deal would have continued had it not been for the repression, which severely punished and stigmatized those who held these beliefs, destroyed the infrastructure of the left, and severed the Communists and the “progressives” from the CIO and the Democratic Party. Integrally tied to this question is whether the Popular Front culture would have continued. What is clear is that the politics and culture of the Popular Front were replaced with Cold War liberalism and a com-

mercial/individualistic culture. Both, in ways subtle and blatant, contributed to an obsessive and militant anti-Communism as well as to a set of values and concerns that by marginalizing the left ultimately rendered anti-Communism superfluous.

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