CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Frank Sinatra: Jazz Actor

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Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.708 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

Most of the literature about Frank Sinatra is about his musical career and barroom brawls. Those books and articles generally portray the singer as a man who expressed the contradictions of his inner life-his tenderness and romanticism, as well as his aggressive and menacing macho side--through his music. In regard to Sinatra's film acting career, every note he sings, every line he recites, and every gesture he makes demonstrate Stanislavsky's central credo that an actor must live the part every moment he's playing it. Although Sinatra never formally studied acting at the Actors Studio, he did rehearse every night with Montgomery Clift while shooting *From Here to Eternity.* Those "Methodist" lessons built his Oscar-winning performance around "affective memories," or "sense memories," storehouses of unconscious emotions from his personal live, in order to construct the fictional character Maggio. And, if nothing else, Sinatra expressed his inner struggles in *both* his singing *and* his film roles.

Keywords: Sinatra; acting; performance

Frank Sinatra: Jazz Actor

Frank Tomasulo

In ancient Greece, tragedy was established as an official form in 586 B.C.; comedy was accepted some fifty years later, in 535 B.C. Inaugurated as separate forms, with their own respective codes and conventions (and symbolic masks), the two genres remained apart for centuries, until television fashioned the synthetic genre, the "dramedy." For the most part, though, in the theater and, later, the cinema, performers tended to work in drama *or* comedy. Movie actors and actresses were often typecast in the manner prescribed by V. I. Pudovkin (126-131) and the Hollywood studio system. When stars ventured afield and played roles "against type," the results have often been disastrous.

Consider the thwarted thespianism of only *some* of the *musical* artists who tried their hands at movie acting: Mariah Carey, Neil Diamond, Willie Nelson, Janet Jackson, Elvis Presley, Paul Simon, Madonna, Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, Olivia Newton-John, Lyle Lovett, Madonna, and Bobby Darin (who actually received an Oscar nomination for *Captain Newman, M.D.*!). Of course, some musicians-turned-actors have given excellent performances in films: Jimmy Cliff, Art Garfunkel, Cher, Will Smith, Russell Crowe, Diana Ross, Kris Kristofferson, Courtney Love, and Bing Crosby.

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"Playing against type" can be difficult, because it involves retooling both one's "instrument" and the Hollywood publicity machinery. As an example of an artist who overcame the barriers between cinematic genres, I'll focus today not on a screen artist who moved from spectacular triumphs in music to tackle highly dramatic (and comedic) movie roles, winning an Academy Award and an Oscar nomination along the way. I'm referring to Francis Albert Sinatra.

Most of the literature about Frank Sinatra is about his musical career and his barroom brawls. Those books and articles generally portray the singer as a man who expressed the contradictions of his inner life-his tenderness and romanticism, as well as his aggressive and menacing macho side-through his music. His private persona was no doubt multifaceted; he was quick-tempered, pugnacious, and sometimes vicious (a proto-punk rocker) yet he was also compassionate, loyal, and generous. He was a passionate New Dealer and civil rights crusader *and*, later, a Reaganite, and he no doubt drew on all those personality contradictions in his musical and movie careers. One author attributes this inconsistency to a "Jekyll-and-Hyde personality" (Winston 253). As the "Chairman of the Board" himself once said, "Being an 18-carat manic-depressive and having lived a life of violent emotional contradiction, I have an over-acute capacity for sadness as well as elation" (qtd. in Interview 7, Sinatra, 1967). He added,

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"Whatever else has been said about me personally is unimportant. When I sing, I believe I am honest."

In Sinatra's case, every note he sings, every line he recites, and every gesture he makes demonstrate Stanislavsky's central credo that an actor must live the part every moment he's playing it (56-62). Although Sinatra never formally studied acting at the Actors Studio, he did rehearse (and drink heavily) every night with Montgomery Clift on the set of *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) (Sinatra 97). "Methodists," of course, built their performances around "affective memories," or "sense memories," storehouses of unconscious emotions from their own personal lives, in order to construct their fictional characters. The goal was to bring authenticity and immediacy to the performance. And, if nothing else, Sinatra expressed his inner struggles in *both* his singing *and* his film roles.

In January 1944, James Agee published these observations about a 28-year-old actor who was playing his first important screen role: "He has weird fleeting resemblances to Lincoln, which I think may help out in the audience subconscious ... Through most of the film, [he] is just a sort of male Mary Pickford, a mock-shy, poised young man. . . . At the end [of the movie], he stands without visible support among clouds, in an effect which can only be described [as] an erotic dream and swells from a pinpoint to a giant" (68).

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Lincoln and Eros (and Mary Pickford) all in one? It seems impossible, but if Agee was overreaching a bit in invoking Lincoln, his was nonetheless the first important notice of how the movies would provide a stage for the contradictory public image of Frank Sinatra: a combination of plain-spoken honesty, childlike naiveté, and flowery romanticism, of overt virility, All-American innocence, and tender rapture. Speaking to the Eros side of the equation, film and movie critic Stephen Holden once said that "Sinatra exalted the erotic with a dedication that made it a world unto itself" (67).

From the mid-1940s through the late 1970s, Frank Sinatra was a constant presence on the American screen. During those years, he developed just as much as an actor and a movie icon as he did as a singer, or as a figure of tabloid fascination. He matured and grew more scarred, more dangerous, more pensive, and, arguably, more profound. His trajectory was from the dreams of an irresponsible and foolishly romantic youth through the cocky braggadocio of young adulthood to the wisdom of a lapsed romantic. Even his light baritone *bel canto* voice became more rounded and deeper, perhaps coarsened by cigarette smoking. It would be a simplification to say that early Sinatra songs and films represent the experience of youth and that his later works represent the experience of experience, yet there is some use-value to the concept. And while the singing Sinatra has been studied and dissected ad infinitum, and the

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private and political Sinatras have been thoroughly chronicled, the cinematic Sinatra has not been fully evaluated or appreciated.

Curiously, even though musical stardom gave Sinatra his start on the screen, music was not necessarily at the core of his filmic success. Sinatra had significant roles in some forty-five films over 35 years and made brief appearances in twenty others. Of his principal parts, just over a dozen were in full-scale musicals. In his other dramatic, comedic, and romantic performances, he sang the title song or another tune in only fourteen. So, by and large, the screen Sinatra was an actor proper, not a song-and-dance man, whose films bore as much relation to the life of the off-screen man as to his recording career.

And Sinatra's acting was varied and versatile, like his private life. He contributed to musicals, dramas, action-adventure films, and comedies. His film work closely paralleled his singing career. As he grew older, he became more serious and introspective, even more personal, as a vocalist. He'd been "a poet, a pirate, a pawn, and a king"; he'd been "up and down and over and out." In movies, he turned from youthful singing roles to significant, dramatic parts during the 1950s that established him as a serious actor.

Sinatra's first film appearances were not technically acting performances at all. In *Las Vegas Nights*, *Ship Ahoy*, *Reveille with Beverly*, *Higher and Higher*, and *Step Lively*, he was

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cast as himself and mainly just sang. In most of these pictures, he played a jug-eared, canary-voiced, rail-thin singer named Frank Sinatra, and the closest that he came to acting was to show up on set. His celebrity guaranteed that he would be a sensation on screen.

Most of the early films Sinatra made in this vein were for RKO. But soon he found himself at MGM. Under the paternal (and mercenary) eye of Louis B Mayer, Sinatra played singing sailors, a singing baseball player, a singing soldier, and a singing bandito in *Anchors Aweigh* (George Sidney, 1945), *On the Town* (Gene Kelly & Stanley Donen, 1949), *It Happened in Brooklyn* (Richard Whorf, 1947), *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (Busby Berkeley, 1949), and *The Kissing Bandit* (Laslo Benedek, 1948).

In order to discuss Sinatra's versatility as a screen performer, I'll first establish his initial "type," or prototype: the skinny, pleasant, and boyish light baritone who beguiled bobbysoxers and even some men in his early movie roles in *Anchors Away* (1945) and *On the Town* (1949). The fledgling actor relied on a charming and seemingly ingenuous unselfconscious projection of self. The formulaic musical roles of the 1940s basically created a film persona that exactly mirrored the then-current public persona of Sinatra as "the Voice," a crooner of romantic ballads on records and in public appearances with big bands. Certainly, his physical presence was a part of that early image: his mop of hair foregrounded by a limp curl, sunken eyes, caved-in

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cheeks, scrawny neck, golf ball Adam's apple, jug-handle ears, anorexic physiognomy, throwaway mannerisms, careful vocal intonations and breath control, and frightened smile.

Figure 1: Anchors Aweigh (1945)

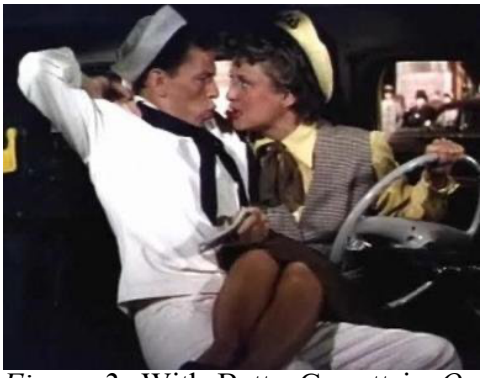

Figure 2: With Betty Garrett in *On the Town* (1949)

These characteristics were the basis for Frank Sinatra's early sexual appeal. He seemed to exude a primal neediness and longing for motherly affection that produced a kinship with his fans, especially young women. In several of his films, he played opposite a strong female character who has to teach him about adult love. Actress Betty Garrett played that role twice: in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, she chases after him, aggressively overcoming his reticence, and in *On the Town*, she pursues him all over New York City in her taxi, before landing him on the top of the Empire State Building.

Later, by the time of *Guys and Dolls* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1955), that sweet early persona had matured and darkened in his portrayal of Damon Runyan's Nathan Detroit, but his sweet side came out in his impassioned and devoted singing and talking about his girlfriend Adelaide (Vivian Blaine). (Incidentally, Sinatra really wanted the leading role of Sky

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Masterson, which went to Marlon Brando. Old Blue Eyes didn't think Brando had much of a singing voice – and he didn't.) Although both *On the Town* and *Guys and Dolls* are both glossy MGM musicals, the latter deals with a lumpenproletariat milieu of crap games, card sharps, and hustlers. Although both movies feature love songs addressed to a beloved who remains on screen, there is a marked change in the Sinatra persona as Nathan Detroit over his ingenue role in *On the Town*: his costume, facial expressions, mannerisms, demeanor, and even his singing voice have matured in the six-year period between those releases.

Switching to drama: in 1951, Sinatra appeared in *Meet Danny Wilson* (Joseph Pevney, 1952), a rather dark variation on the fluffy, boy-singer-makes-good stories that Sinatra had made at RKO. *Danny Wilson* was made at Universal, and the change in studios was just one result of the free fall into which Sinatra's singing and movie career had plunged in the preceding few years. His marriage had been wrecked by his affair with Ava Gardner; his voice was failing him; his bobbysoxer fan base was deserting him; and he had been released by his record company, his radio network, his talent agency, and his movie studio, MGM.

Coincidentally, Sinatra's desperate offscreen predicament was echoed in the plot of *Danny Wilson*, a film about a nightclub singer whose skyrocketing career is launched by a group

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of gangsters who eventually turn against him. The film announced the arrival of a new screen Sinatra--an actor who crooned, not a crooner who played in movies.

Legends about horses' heads aside, gangsters probably didn't land Sinatra his next role, the one that remade him as an actor and, indeed, as a man: *From Here to Eternity* (1953). (Most reliable accounts suggest that Ava Gardner put in a good word for her ex, and that he improvised well at his audition/screen test for director Fred Zinnemann.) Sinatra didn't sing at all in *From Here to Eternity*; in fact, only seven of his remaining three dozen significant movie roles would be in musicals. Instead, he became a bona fide screen performer in a series of roles in which he played down-beaten, tough-hearted men who didn't always come to happy ends. He could be called the “first jazz actor,” although a case could also be made for Marlon Brando.

As a case in point, consider Sinatra's portrayal of Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*. In the poignant death scene of the thin, feisty, and ill-starred underdog, Maggio, the mise-en-scène underscores the pathos of this Pietà-like situation, the result of a severe beating by Sergeant Fatso (Ernest Borgnine) in the brig. So, Maggio's nemesis is his exact opposite in physical type.

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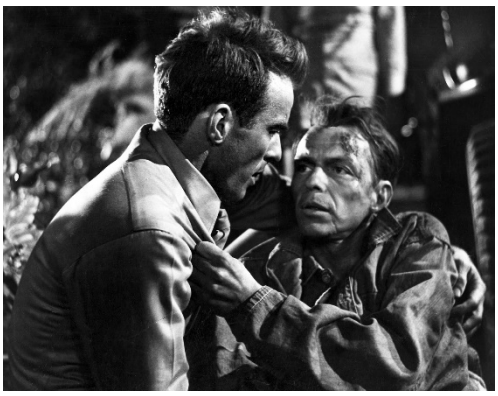

Figure 3: Maggio (Sinatra) with Prewitt (Montgomery Clift) in *From Here to Eternity*

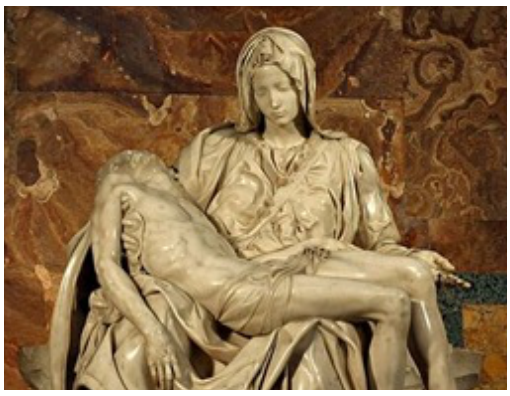

Figure 4: *Pietà* (Michelangelo, 1498-1499)

The singer's growth as a dramatic actor is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in *Suddenly* (Lewis Allen, 1954), the story of an attempted assassination of the U.S. president. In this movie, the star's usually upbeat persona is turned upside down as he plays John Baron, a psychopathic killer who holds hostage and menaces a nuclear family while setting up his rifle for the assassination from their living room window.

Figure 5: Sinatra prepares to shoot the U. S. president in *Suddenly* (1954)

Figure 6: Frank Whaley as a Lee Harvey Oswald lookalike in *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991)

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Interestingly, Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly watched *Suddenly* a few days before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Sinatra's buddy. When Sinatra learned of this, he immediately withdrew *Suddenly* from TV distribution and forbade the re-release of *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962), which is also about political assassination (Kelley 328).

Examining some of Sinatra's roles in the middle and later phases of his acting career, we can see dark parts as a psychopathic would-be assassin in *Suddenly*; the doomed piano player of *Young at Heart* (Gordon Douglas, 1955); the heroin-addicted jazz musician and card sharp in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Otto Preminger, 1955); the sadistic gunman of *Johnny Concho* (Don McGuire, 1956); the egoistic nightclub performer in *Pal Joey* (George Sidney, 1957); the war-scarred soldiers and veterans of *Never So Few* (John Sturges, 1959); *Some Came Running* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958); *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960); and *The Manchurian Candidate*; the bankrupt widower in *A Hole in the Head* (Frank Capra, 1959); and the cynical showbiz legend Joe E. Lewis of *The Joker Is Wild* (Charles Vidor, 1957). This gallery of luck-depleted small-timers was a far cry from the true-life circumstances of the rich and powerful musical and screen artist who created them. But, then, Sinatra had always been able to evoke in music the same blend of self-confidence and resignation, contempt and caring,

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that marked all of these film antiheros. In the 1950s, he had Nelson Riddle's arrangements to soften the brassiness of his voice; in the movies, there was soft lighting and a background score.

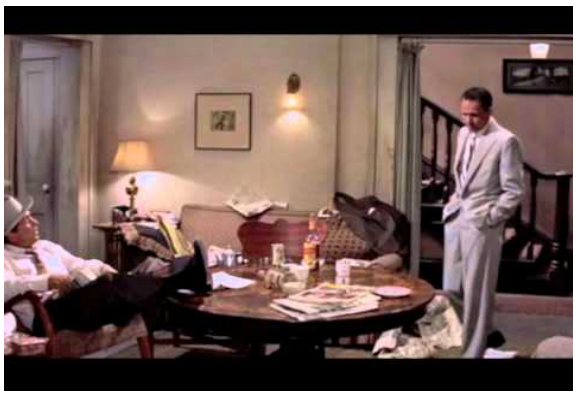

Figure 7: Sinatra plays Dave Hirsh, a troubled author, back from the war, in *Some Came Running* (1955)

Figure 8: Major Bennett Marco (Sinatra) in a somber mood in *The Manchurian* Candidate (1963)

Sinatra made a dozen films after *Robin and the Seven Hoods* (Gordon Douglas, 1964)--dramas, mostly about cynical cops and soldiers, with a couple of lame comedies thrown in. And if some did well at the box office--*Von Ryan's Express* (Mark Robson, 1965), *Tony Rome* (Gordon Douglas, 1967), and *The Detective* (Gordon Douglas, 1968)--none expanded Sinatra's screen persona appreciably or had any important relation to his music. Like the record business and the ever-changing calculus of what is hip, the culture had passed Sinatra by, and the middle-aged roles he played resembled his later stage shows: reprises of his glory days, when he seemed to be just going through the motions (and forgetting the lyrics). In *Tony Rome* and *The*

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Detective, he played a “Ring-a-Ding” detective who usually had a drink and a dame at his side, whether in Miami or New York.

Figure 9: A puzzled Tony Rome with Jill St. John in *Tony Rome* (1967)

Figure 10: Det. Joe Leland (Sinatra) with Jacqueline Bissett in *The Detective* (1968)

Like musicians, actors are interpretive artists. They take material created by others and run it through the prism of their instincts, training, and life experience. In some cases, the results can seem candid and naked (as in many of Sinatra's heart-wrenching melodic solos and some of his film performances), controlled autobiography, so to speak--self-revelation in the service of the text. Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* posits a theory that can account for the creative force of strong interpreters. Whereas "weak" interpreters of a text present readings that, however competent, are slavishly faithful to the original, a "strong" interpreter experiences a relationship with the text that could be characterized as "Oedipal" in combining equal elements of attraction and aversion. A strong interpreter like Sinatra, whether in song or cinema,

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possesses the understanding to preserve the original along with the individual integrity to personalize it and make it his own.

And some such interpreters, like Sinatra, who become designated as "master storytellers," must necessarily have a complete if innate grasp of the text and its presentation as well as of acting theory. Even in his singing career, the narrative style of his ballads suited Sinatra's dramatic instincts, as well as his musical ones. This combination of elements--narrative, musical, theatrical, psychological—is what constitutes his well-renowned "phrasing" of musical lyrics . . . and movie dialogue.

Analysis of Sinatra's technique and musicianship is, by itself, inadequate to account for his special genius. The primary, overriding consideration in any study of his nuanced phrasing must be the "text." Sinatra's is an art of interpretation, the encounter between a strong reader and a strong text. Many of the assessments of Sinatra following his death in 1998 have centered on the seeming paradox of a performer equally renowned for his fidelity to the composer's intentions and for his ability to stamp his personal identity on any piece of music (i.e., his “scatting” and “doobie doobie doo”). As John McDonough has observed, "There's no interpretative art if one is interpreting only one's self" (19). But it is just as misleading to credit the singer for submerging his own ego to the composer's intent as it is to regard the song as a

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mere vehicle for the attributes of the singer. Rather, the singer is like a screen actor, less concerned with adapting himself to the role in the song as making the song expressive of his own image. He creates a believable persona, which, in the narrative-dramatic context of the song, is capable of convincing the listener of the song's emotional "truth." This sincerity (or, to be cynical, this sincerity *effect*) is precisely what Frank Sinatra brings to his best film roles. In this respect, Sinatra's phrasing goes beyond questions of interpretation to the rhetoric of characterization. To admire his phrasing is to be drawn to the force of personality behind it.

Yet, despite my speculation that Sinatra learned some form of the American Method from Montgomery Clift, it is reported that he got the plum part of Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* over Eli Wallach and other trained dramatic actors because of an improvisation he performed at his screen test: Sinatra realized that he was acting poorly in the test and decided to ad lib a bit of business to liven things up. So, he took two olives out of a martini glass prop and rolled them down the bar like dice. This apparently impressed director Fred Zinnemann so much that he cast Sinatra for the role on the spot.

By all accounts, Sinatra was able to bring his off-screen misfortunes to the screen in *Eternity*. Co-star Burt Lancaster opined that "His fervor, his anger, his bitterness had something to do with the character of Maggio, but also with what he had gone through in the last number

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of years: a sense of defeat and the whole world crashing in on him" (qtd in Zehme 220)--that he had bottled up inside came out onscreen. Again, this laying bare of his soul is precisely what had made Sinatra a success as a crooner (Kahn 48). (Incidentally, Montgomery Clift's portrayal of Robert E. Lee Pruitt in *Eternity* contains the same sort of gentle/tough masculinity that Sinatra limned to an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.)

Although in this case he allegedly got the best acting part of his career by switching gears after several unsuccessful takes at his screen test, Frank Sinatra was known in the film business as a "one-take Charlie," that is, as an instinctual performer who was reluctant to repeat takes in order to improve his performance (Sinatra 111, Wilson 135). He felt that he was most natural, freshest, and at his sharpest on the first call of "Action," perhaps because of his experience as a live performer, where you usually only got one chance to get it right. Sinatra did everything to avoid retakes, claiming "The key to good acting is spontaneity--and that's something you lose a little with each take" (qtd in Rockwell 131). That reliance on spontaneity is another reason for characterizing him as a “jazz actor.” Fred Zinnemann referred to Sinatra as "a total rebel," who relied "completely on his own spontaneity rather than careful rehearsal" (qtd. in Talese 95). Needless to say, this one-take attitude often made for tensions on the set with numerous directors and co-stars.

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One exception to this one-take rule was his Academy Award-nominated performance as Frankie Machine in Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Preminger got Sinatra to rehearse and do scenes over and over again by telling him that he needed to do so in order to help co-star Kim Novak learn her lines. According to Preminger, "When he was working with beautiful, blond Kim Novak, Sinatra . . . would do twenty-five or thirty takes" (qtd. in Wilson 149).

Figure 11: Sinatra and Kim Novak stare deeply into one another's eyes in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955)

Figure 12: An intense moment in a high-stakes dice game with Marlon Brando in *Guys and Dolls* (1955)

But unlike a Fred McMurray, for instance, who only played two decent roles in his entire career, both for Billy Wilder, in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Apartment* (1961), Frank Sinatra has given us 6-7 great performances and another half-dozen really good ones in a 35-year film career. And, his major claim to fame as an artist was as a musician! In fact, it could be argued that it is precisely the *dramatic intensity* of his art--whether in concerts, recordings,

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or on screen--that made Frank Sinatra such a phenomenon. In short, both his art and heart combined to such a degree in his best work that he *is* the lovelorn balladeer of the songs *One for My Baby* and *I'm a Fool to Want You*, just as he *is* Angelo Maggio, Nathan Detroit, and Frankie Machine. This kind of intimate identification and involvement with a role can be studied at the musical conservatory or at the Actors Studio but it can also be learned instinctively, from life. As such, Sinatra is a "natural" actor, whose musical performances no doubt assisted him in preparing for screen roles; after all, as a singer and stage personality, he used costumes, cosmetics, choreography, vocal intonation, and body language--all part of the screen actor's trade. Thus, his apparent artlessness on screen was based on years of preparation of his dramatic "instrument." So, for Sinatra, the transition from song to screen was more natural than the other way around. "Actors who can't sing can't switch to our side," he once said. "But there's no reason why a singer can't go dramatic. A singer is essentially an actor" (qtd. in Rockwell 122).

Late in life, Sinatra admitted that every single time he walked on stage to sing his hands trembled (qtd. in Petkov 6). This insecurity, reflected through the prism of the artist's instinct, comes out in his screen performances as well. That creative dialectical tension between the polished façade of the cool, cocksure, "Ring-a-ding-ding" Las Vegas swinger and the lonely, troubled, and unfulfilled Italian boy from Hoboken is the key to understanding Frank Sinatra's

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comic and tragic personas and, I might suggest, such “bisociative” contradictions (to use Arthur Koestler's term) can be found at the basis of most excellent screen performances. Many of Sinatra's most memorable characterizations—Angelo Maggio in *Eternity*, Frankie Machine in *Golden Arm*, Joe E. Lewis in *The Joker Is Wild*, Dave Hirsh in *Some Came Running*, Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls*, and Joe Leland in *The Detective*--were portrayals of men whose tough-guy façades hid an inner vulnerability and angst. Even the overtly hard-hearted and brutal John Baron of *Suddenly* reveals a childhood neediness. In addition, many of these characters start out as self-centered cads, only to learn a great deal about themselves, and those life lessons make them more responsible, mature, and endearing individuals in the process.

Nonetheless, the frail and underfed kid of his early career often projected a streetwise masculine persona, whose sexual allure may be based in part on black imitation and appropriation, while at the same time conveying a lyrical sensitivity and vulnerable softer side that belied the brashness. This second-hand blackface combines with ethnic Italianate gestures and speech patterns to produce a decidedly contradictory image.

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Figure 13: To overcome his addiction to heroin, Frankie Machine (Sinatra) undergoes "cold turkey" in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955)

Figure 14: Joey Evans (Sinatra), an alcoholic womanizing nightclub singer in *Pal Joey* (1961), must kick both habits to get back on top. (Rita Hayworth)

Remember Agee's comparison of Sinatra with Mary Pickford? Gender masquerade is another important quality in Sinatra's performance. And the vulnerability of his "cold turkey" scene in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (accentuated by the high angle of the camera) shows the inklings of the "new" maleness that resulted from the wartime deployment of women in the factories and other social factors. Acting gender, for Sinatra, was just a continuation of his public persona as a vocalist. Like Al Jolson, Sinatra had the ability to "cry" his lachrymose lyrics of lament and thus convey a gender presentation as essential to his image as his "manly" fascination with booze and broads.

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