

Frank Sinatra—the voice for a century

BY BRUCE MENZIES

Frank Sinatra, thanks for making the music of your life the music of my life. Chairman of the Board, Old Blue Eyes, or The Voice, Francis Albert Sinatra was known by all those names, but one is indisputable: The Greatest Entertainer of the Twentieth Century. Whichever name you called him, if you attended one of his concerts you knew who was boss.

I hadn't thought too much about the Chairman until Twyla picked up her new Mary Kay career car. Bundled with the stereo was a trial subscription to Sirius XM satellite radio. One of the stations is called "Siriusly Sinatra." Listening to his music again got me thinking about 1993.

I had the privilege of attending two of his performances, including once in Las Vegas. In 1993 I made arrangements to meet an old friend Twyla and I had known while living in Brussels. My friend lived in California and I in Missouri so Las Vegas seemed a good place to reunite. Mr. Sinatra was still performing live shows in '93, however, age was creeping up on him (and clearly in the autumn of his years) so I thought if ever I saw him it should be sooner rather than later.

On Friday evening, May 7, 1993, we walked into the Crystal Room at the Desert Inn. I quickly realized who had a good job and that was the head usher. The usher seated you in proximity to the front in direct relation to the amount of cash tip you handed him. Being from Missouri and a big spender myself, I handed the fellow a crisp, new \$5 bill. I was taken directly to the nose-bleed section, far and away from the stage. The above photo was taken with a 135mm telephoto lens.

For the next forty-five minutes The Voice commandeered the evening, belting out all of his signature songs. He sang of great cities like New York and Chicago, love and loneliness in the still, wee small hours of the morning. The performance was a Sinatra *eclipse*, as Frank Sinatra Jr., conducted the orchestra. No matter Mr. Sinatra's voice was frail, no matter he read lyrics from a teleprompter, no matter he introduced his son the conductor—three times! Sinatra was bigger than his voice. He was a Mount Everest in show business. He just did what he did and the audience devoured it.

The following morning my buddy and I were having breakfast in the Desert Inn restaurant. A gentleman seated nearby was talking on his phone about Frank Sinatra. I asked the server who the gentleman was. She said he was Mr. Sinatra's manager. I immediately got up, walked over to him and introduced myself as Bruce Menzies from (*long pause*) Branson, Missouri. I told him there was an empty theater in Branson which would be perfect for Mr. Sinatra. He replied he'd thought about that and might check into it. I handed him my card and offered my services as his personal chauffeur if he ever came to the Ozarks. I never received that call. (I would also suggest Mr. Sinatra's concert was more appropriate for Las Vegas than family-friendly Branson.)

A few years after Mr. Sinatra's passing, I was in Chicago, Illinois. On Friday evening, September 7, 2001, I decided to make my way to Biggs restaurant on North Dearborn Street—the home of Jilly's. Jilly's was advertised as "Frank Sinatra's favorite bistro." It was named after his inseparable companion Jilly Rizzo. The piano room featured the "Sounds of Sinatra" live seven nights a week. (It was an uneventful meal.)

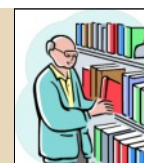
The next evening was my last Sinatra event—ever. From Chicago I took the Union Pacific North Line train to Ravinia Music Festival in Highland Park a few miles north of the Windy City. I paid my \$40 for pavilion seating and enjoyed the next three hours under the stars listening to the next best thing to the Chairman—his son. Frank Jr., was accompanied by several of the musicians that toured with his father for years. The concert was a tribute to the songs his father made so famous and to showcase his own singing prowess. Forever in the shadow of his father, Frank Jr., was quick to admit he knew why the audience was there. He understood it was Frank's world—he just lived in it. ■



PHOTO BY BRUCE MENZIES



Senior Moments Book Review

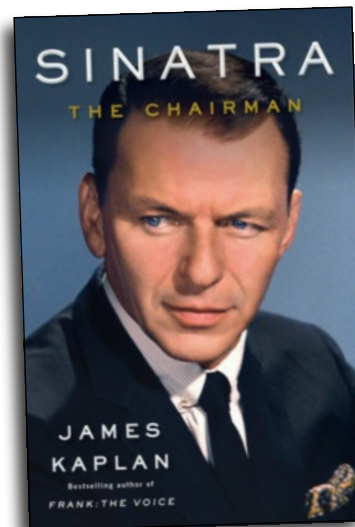


Sinatra: The Chairman

Publisher's Note: His body may have called it quits at age 82 in 1998, but his music and memory are still as fresh and vibrant as ever twenty years later, and not just with the gray hairs—like me.

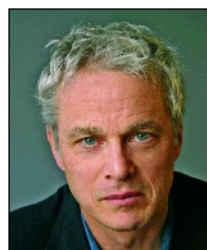
BY JAMES KAPLAN

Frank Sinatra, has been justly termed the "Entertainer of the Century." Kaplan goes behind the legend to give us the man in full, in his many guises and aspects: peerless singer, (sometimes) accomplished actor, business mogul, tireless lover, and associate of the powerful and infamous.



In 2010's *Frank: The Voice*, James Kaplan, in rich, distinctive, compulsively readable prose, told the story of Frank Sinatra's meteoric rise to fame, subsequent failures, and reinvention as a star of live performance and screen. The story of "Ol' Blue Eyes" continues with *Sinatra: The Chairman*, picking up the day after he claimed his Academy Award in 1954 and had reestablished himself as the top recording artist. Sinatra's life post-Oscar was astonishing in scope and achievement and, occasionally, scandal, including immortal recordings almost too numerous to count, affairs ditto, many memorable films (and more than a few stinkers), Rat Pack hijinks that mesmerized the world with their air of masculine privilege, and an intimate involvement at the intersection of politics and organized crime that continues to shock and astound with its hubris. James Kaplan has orchestrated the wildly disparate aspects of Frank Sinatra's life and character into an American epic—a towering achievement in biography of a stature befitting its subject. ■

(Book review courtesy of Anchor Books)



About James Kaplan: JAMES KAPLAN's essays, stories, reviews, and profiles have appeared in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, and *New York*. His novels include *Pearl's Progress* and *Two Guys from Verona*, a New York Times Notable Book for 1998. His nonfiction works include the first volume of his definitive biography of Frank Sinatra, *Frank: The Voice*. He lives in Westchester, New York, with his wife and three sons.