SINATRA: THE MEN AND THEIR MUSIC HOW TO LOOK AT THE PHASES – AND PHRASES -OF HIS LIFE

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THE LATE SAMMY CAHN, A GOOD FRIEND OF Frank Sinatra as well as one of his favored songwriters, said Sinatra's musical career could be broken down into four phases.

"When he was young, in the '40s, he was a violin," said Cahn. "In the '50s, the Capitol and Nelson Riddle years, he was a viola. By the '60s he was a cello and when he got to the '80s, he was a bass. "The music was still sweet. It was just played on a different instrument.

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There are almost as many ways to dissect Frank Sinatra's music as there are to analyze his off-the-field life.

But as he marks his 80th birthday today, with a stampede of salutes and adulation to which he may or may not be fully attuned, the Sinatra focus seems to have shifted back to music.

This is good, because without the music, no one would much care about the other stories, even though a fair number of them are true.

The ABC-TV salute to Sinatra Thursday night, with a lineup of artists that includes Little Richard, Hootie and the Blowfish, Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan, will cause many viewers to wonder whether Sinatra is quietly doing the same double-take they are. Still, it is a musical event, a way for singers to say and show that they owe more to Sinatra than it might appear on any surface.

In New York, radio station WQEW (1560 AM) finishes up an 81-hour Sinatra "A to Z" special tonight around 7 and how many artists could stand up to an 81-hour run? (Anyone who says "Grateful Dead," please report to reeducation camp.)

No, the legacy of Frank Sinatra is rooted in the most basic and flattering of notions: He knew how knows how to sing a song.

Sinatra always said he drew his earliest inspiration from Bing Crosby, whom he saw in the early '30s when Crosby was reinventing the delivery of popular song.

As a pioneer in electronic microphones, Crosby no longer had to belt out his songs like Al Jolson or Rudy Vallee.

His voice only had to reach the mike, so he could almost whisper, if he chose, and that's the element of Crosby's style that Sinatra adopted.

In 1958, Sinatra told Ebony magazine he had also learned from Billie Holiday, whose phrasing was exquisite, and there are elements of Mabel Mercer in some of his work.

Most critics think Sinatra took his most important lessons from bandleader/trombonist Tommy Dorsey, who lured Sinatra away from Harry James in 1939 and showcased him into such a star that two years later Sinatra went solo.

Sinatra often told interviewers how he worked in those early years to develop the lung power (and thus breath control) necessary to execute the things he wanted to do with songs.

One of those things he wanted to do was to phrase lyrics as Dorsey phrased instrumental lines.
On the other hand, Will Friedwald, author of the acclaimed new Sinatra study "The Song Is You," argues that James also deserves credit for helping shape Sinatra: "Certainly, Dorsey's long-breath method of extending notes became extremely useful to Sinatra, but Dorsey could get neither as blisteringly hot nor as swaggeringly sentimental as James, and Sinatra later could and did.
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Like all great singers, Sinatra was a sponge. A sponge with an obsession. Just as he built that lung capacity by swimming laps underwater in an Olympic-size pool, 15 years later he would sit with Nelson Riddle months before a recording session to explain exactly how he wanted each song to sound.
The music, then, was hardly a random accident.
It was the execution of a vision.

Vibraphonist Emile Richards tells Friedwald of watching Sinatra sing one of the climactic stanzas in "Ol' Man River" "Tote that barge / Lift that bale / Get a little drunk and you land in jail" and then, unlike every other singer, plunge right into the first line of the next stanza "I get weary . . . " without pausing for a breath.

"He was weary," says Richards. "I tried doing that and it was almost impossible. Hearing him do it gave me chills or made me cry every time.
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Sinatra's pure vocal range was never extraordinary. Friedwald traces its boundaries from a high F, two F's above middle C, in his Columbia recording of "The Song Is You," down to the low G he hit in "Ol' Man River" during the '60s.

But while that's almost two octaves, his everyday working range was much smaller, underscoring the

fact that the genius of Sinatra has always been rooted in technique, which is in modest measure a natural gift and in much larger measure the product of relentless, plain old hard work.
That’s how all the Franks, violin to bass, made it sound easy.

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