



Sinatra, a Morality Tale.

Joey Skee (May 14, 2008)



Musings on Italian-American masculinity, power, and bullying on the tenth anniversary of Frank Sinatra's death.



I hated Sinatra growing up.

Aesthetically, the “Kid from Hoboken” ran counter to the '60 gestalt of the rock singer/songwriter expressing his (the reigning model was masculine despite Janis, Joni, Grace, and others) personal views of relevant topics like the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. No trivial Tin Pan Alley commercial love for me! In addition, my perception was that American crooning was a racist rip off and a diminishment of black musical styles that went unrecognized and unremunerated. Politically, Sinatra was the epitome of the reactionary white ethnic who opposed the various progressive movements that emerged during the 1960s-1970s.

There was an additional dimension to my aversion to Sinatra. My father detested him.

The stated reason had nothing to do with taste, politics, or the hedonistic Vegas life style. Rather it was Sinatra’s mean-spiritedness and abusive personality that my father found offensive. He didn’t like how Sinatra took advantage of his power to dominate and intimidate others, especially women. My father’s observations on the Jersey singer were invariably couched as a morality tale importing a valued life lesson to his first born male child: This is how not to be a man.

Sinatra’s (and Dean Martin’s) infamous 1983 intimation of an Atlantic City card dealer, Kyong Kim, to break New Jersey casino laws and his racist comment, angered my father. Kim, along with three coworkers, was suspended from her job without pay and the casino was fined \$25,000. While implicated as the cause of the violation, Sinatra and Martin were not fined. New Jersey Casino Control Commissioner Joel Jacobsen denounced Sinatra as “an obnoxious bully” with a “bloated ego.”

The cautionary tale I recall the best, in part, because I heard versions of it from other Italian Americans over the years, was the one about Sinatra’s vindictive sabotaging of singer Jimmy Roselli’s career after the latter refused to perform at a 1969 benefit organized by Sinatra’s mother Dolly. Biographer David Evanier provides a version in *Making the Wiseguys Weep: The Jimmy Roselli Story* (1998), which involves perceived slights, acts of disrespect, and bruised macho egos. The oral versions I heard over the years, while slightly different, all made the same point: “Do not act like this man.”

In his now classic treatise *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian Americans* (1974), Richard Gambino argues that the Italian-American ideal of masculinity can be characterized by the phrase *l'uomo di pazienza*, the man of patience. But his purported principle was not always the lived experience of numerous women and children who dealt daily with the abuse and violence of patriarchal power. Writers Lorenzo Carcaterra, Rachel Guido deVries, Gianna Patriarca, Vittoria Repetto, Karen Tindori, and others have penned verse, novels, and memoirs to expose, purge, and heal their personal stories of psychological and physical brutality. Others have taken other measures to address the problem. For an example closer to home, Drs. Emelise Aleandri and Gloria Salerno, former staff members of Queens College’s John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, sued the City University of New York (CUNY) because of what they considered the “psychological abuse” and the creation of “a workplace that was hostile to women” at the hands of their then supervisor Joseph Scelsa, according to *The Clarion*. The May 2005 edition of this newspaper, the official organ of the Professional Staff Congress union representing CUNY faculty and staff, reported that Aleandri and Salerno settled their seven-year-long discrimination lawsuit against CUNY for over \$1 million.





I have come to love Sinatra the singer, embracing his rich, expressive masculine tenor. Recent scholarship by Gerald Meyer and John Gennari has helped me to appreciate Sinatra's once progressive politics and his influence on African-American artists. But as Fred Gardaphé writes in *From Wiseguys and Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (2006), the "redirection and redefinition of Italian-American masculinities" calls for "the absence of macho," a new state he christens "zero." As someone who grapples with his own bullying tendencies, I impart to my children their grandfather's cautionary tale of the Chairman of the Board's abusiveness and all the other Italian-American thugs in an effort to relegate the remnants of such patriarchal violence to the annals of history.

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