

Frank Sinatra at 100 – The Italian-American Experience: Man, Music, Legend

Why Sinatra Matters by Pete Hamill

Review by John Esposito

We find ourselves on the eve of what would have been Frank Sinatra's 100th birthday on December 12, 2015. The most famous singer of the twentieth century died 17 years ago at the age of 82. The passage of time has not dimmed the devotion many have for the legendary

movies; an HBO documentary; a dazzling gallery exhibition at Lincoln Center; a symposium at Hofstra University; and a star-studded CBS television special.

Stripping away the entire semblance of the latest Sinatra offerings, one needs to search no further than the pages of

unfortunately, the project never came to pass.

I spoke with Mr. Hamill several weeks ago about his bestseller, written as an extended essay and biographical sketch. I asked how their friendship developed and what he had gleaned about Sinatra's art and legend from the inside. Hamill opines that Sinatra may have seen something of himself in him. Both grew up in an urban environment, Sinatra in Hoboken and Hamill in Brooklyn. Both are sons of immigrant parents, from Italy and Ireland. Both are high school dropouts, and both held ringside seats to the bigotry and prejudice that beset their neighborhoods. While Sinatra was leery of the press, he trusted Hamill, possibly for all these reasons.

A master storyteller, Hamill begins his tale during a rainy midnight in 1970, spent in the company of the singer and his friends at a favorite New York watering hole, P.J. Clarke's. Conversation turned from Hemingway, to boxing, and to politics. Then the jukebox played Billie Holiday's version of I'm a Fool to Want You, co-written by Sinatra, reputedly about his anguished love affair with Ava Gardner. When the hour reached 2:25 am, Sinatra stared at his glass of bourbon, shook his head and said, "Time to go." They all rose, went to the side door and followed Sinatra

into the night.

Pete Hamill's splendid tribute spans the bulk of three periods in Sinatra's life: early Hoboken days spent as an only child and loner; Tommy Dorsey and the meteoric rise to stardom; the fall to oblivion compounded by the marriage breakup with Nancy, troubles with Ava, the lost voice, and suicide attempt. Then the great comeback, and prosperous Capitol years with Nelson Riddle. While Bing Crosby sang of cheery optimism, Sinatra's songs of loneliness and loss were filled with emotion and tension that spoke to both women and men.

And yes, Hamill explores the mob stories while asserting the absurdity that hoodlums made Sinatra a star. Sinatra elaborated, "Did I know those, guys. Sure I knew some...working in saloons. And saloons are not run by the Christian Brothers. I didn't meet any Noble Prize

winners in saloons." For thirty years law enforcement agencies investigated him and never found evidence for a single indictment.

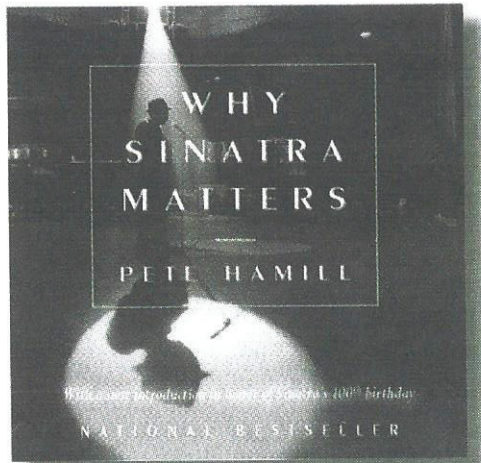
Hamill makes a convincing argument that Sinatra's entire career was shaped by the immigrant experience which fueled his notorious volatility and permeated his art. He never witnessed "the snarling bully of the legend," but rather "an intelligent man, a reader of books, a lover of painting and classical music and sports, gallant with women, graceful with men."

While a testament to the rise and acceptance of Italian-Americans, this engaging book is a deserving keepsake for the children and grandchildren of all immigrants and future arrivals, because above all, it speaks to perseverance and determination in fulfillment of the American dream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Esposito is a freelance writer. He has been published in the Star Ledger, The Bergen Record, Greenwich Time (Connecticut), Stamford Advocate (Connecticut), Philadelphia Inquirer, and local papers including the Morris County Daily Record and the online paper, NewJerseyNewsroom. Mr. Esposito lives in New Providence, NJ with his wife and two children. Mr. Esposito previously interviewed Pete Hamill on four occasions dating back to 2004, for his earlier books: "Downtown, My Manhattan," "North River," "Tabloid City," and "The Christmas Kid and Other Brooklyn Stories." His complete interview with Pete Hamill discussing Frank Sinatra can be viewed on his website: www.PieceworkJournals.com



entertainer, a man who remains an essential part of their lives. A partial explanation for this is certainly the man's mystique, but it is primarily because of the incredible body of work, which has sealed his legacy in the world of popular music.

It is not surprising the centennial year has flooded us with an endless collection of memorabilia: insightful books weighing in on the entertainer's career and personal life; repackaged music CDs, DVDs of the 'live' performances, and

a slender, intelligent volume, *Why Sinatra Matters*, to gain an honest perspective on his important accomplishments. Written in 1998 by award-winning journalist, Pete Hamill, this unique homage was reissued in October with a refreshing, new introduction.

A legend in his own right, Hamill was introduced to Frank Sinatra in 1963 by sports columnist, Jimmy Cannon. The two men developed a casual and respectful relationship. At one point, Sinatra asked him to write his autobiography, but