

The Pete Hamill Interview – November 11, 2015, Wednesday

Re: Why Sinatra Matters [1998 - Reissued October 2015 with New Introduction]

JE: Pete, it's a pleasure to speak with you once again. Would you believe this will be our fifth interview together since 2004?

PH: Isn't that amazing. And I still have a heartbeat (laughs). It's good to speak to you too, John.

JE: When we last spoke in 2013, you were getting over some health issues that seemed to continue for some time. How are you feeling now?

PH: Good, John. As it turned out, I ended up with two fractured hips, so I'm still working with a wheelchair and using a walker inside the house. A young man, who is my physical therapist, comes to the house five days a week. We do about two workouts, one about 11 am and one about 5 pm to build up muscle strength. I might have pain the rest of my life from the hips. I have no idea. I'm 80 now and don't want to take the risk of an operation in some way that ties me up in hospitals again.

JE: Well, I've been following stories that have appeared in the paper during the past two years written by people like your brother, Denis (*Denis Hamill, former columnist for "New York Daily News"*), that mentioned the very good progress you've been making. And now I'm pleased to learn that you're back in circulation and making appearances once again. In fact, were you at Hofstra University last evening? (*Mr. Hamill's appearance was part of a 6 day symposium on the life and career of Frank Sinatra*)

PH: Yeah, Gay Talese and I.

JE: How was it?

PH: It was really good, I thought. Good crowd and good mixture, students plus old folks.

JE: Terrific! My wife and I wanted to be there, but we couldn't make it. I'm glad it went well. We had tickets to see you and Bill O'Reilly last year at the 92nd Street Y (*in New York*) but it was canceled because I believe you were not feeling well. That would have been a good session between the two of you.

PH: He's been good. He came around to visit me at the house.

JE: Did he work for you in some capacity?

PH: No. He asked me for help years ago. He had written a novel and asked me to please read it for him, which I did. I made some various notes. This is before he became Bill O'Reilly, you know, he was still a reporter.

JE: Bill O'Reilly and I were taught by the same nun (Sister Mary Lurana) in different grammar schools, in Long Island where he went to school, and then a few years later when her order, The School Sisters of Notre Dame, transferred her to New Jersey where I went to school. He mentioned her in one of his books as having a significant influence on his early life. I can say the same about the good sister. It's a small world.

PH: Yeah.

JE: Before we begin speaking about your bestseller, "*Why Sinatra Matters*," I want to ask you briefly about a novel set in Brooklyn and Sicily that you were working on when the health issues came about. Do you still have intentions to publish that book?

PH: Yes, I've been back now working on it. And I'm thinking I might also write a 'back to Brooklyn' book because I'm considering moving back there after all these years. The circle home, you know. We'll see.

JE: And speaking of future books for consideration, I know you have a number of short stories (which appeared in the "*New York Post*" and "*New York Daily News*") that have never been published in book form. Considering you published a collection of such stories back in 2013 which made their way into "*The Christmas Kid: And Other Brooklyn Stories*," have you given any thought to releasing another book of these stories? And incidentally, two of the short stories that I enjoyed from the Daily News never made their way into "*Christmas Kid*."

PH: No kidding? I know I wrote a lot of those stories for the paper. I just didn't want to do two short story collections in a row. So if I can get to the Brooklyn book or finish the Sicily novel, then the one after would be another collection of short stories.

JE: That would be terrific.

PH: Then I can check with you to make sure the two stories you remember are in the collection (laughs).

JE: Now let's talk about Frank (*Sinatra*).

PH: Ok.

JE: When were you first introduced to Frank Sinatra? Was it through Shirley MacLaine (*actress*) or ... Jimmy Cannon (*New York sportswriter*)?

PH: No, it was Jimmy Cannon in Vegas. I was there for the Floyd Paterson-Sonny Liston fight in 1963. He introduced me to Sinatra after the fight. And Cannon said to me, "Come here. I want you to meet some guy." And then we all went to some joint after the fight. It was Sinatra and a couple of other guys. He and Cannon were friends. They were both insomniacs and so they talked a lot about books. And one of the books that Cannon recommended to Sinatra was "*Man with the Golden Arm*," which Sinatra loved and helped get made as a movie. It is one of Sinatra's

best movies. Later through Shirley I saw him a lot more, which made it easier for him to trust me. I wasn't going to run to tell Lee Mortimer what Sinatra said about him. (*Mortimer was a newspaper columnist who attempted to tie Sinatra to the Mafia and the Communist Party resulting in the two men having an altercation in Hollywood on April 9, 1947 outside Ciro's restaurant. Mortimer allegedly murmured a slurring remark as he passed Sinatra, resulting in the singer allegedly throwing a punch. Sinatra was arrested the following day on a battery complaint. The case went to court but was eventually settled privately.*)

Sinatra and I were friends really in New York. In other words, when he came here he would call me up. I never visited him in California and he had friends out there that I knew from here. Syd Zion, for example, was a friend who would go to Sinatra's home and stay for five days. (*Sidney Zion was a journalist, novelist and lawyer.*) I was not involved in that way. I think he liked me because like him, I was a high school dropout and I had done it more or less on my own, with a little help from my friends.

JE: The more I read about Sinatra it appears to me that he was an intelligent man.

PH: Yeah, he was. That's what I missed lately. I haven't read any of these big fat biographies.

JE: Kaplan has one of those biographies ("*Sinatra: The Chairman,*" is James Kaplan's second volume follow up to "*Frank: The Voice*" from 2010). I understand that he, like you, will also be appearing at Hofstra University.

PH: They have the Sinatra event going on there for two weeks. Last night was the first night.

JE: So you really weren't friends with Sinatra in the conventional sense, like buddy-buddy, but rather you met him a number of times.

PH: Yeah, he didn't stay at my house and I didn't stay at his, but I would see him and I liked him.

JE: In your book you mention that you never saw the cruel or bullish side of him that had been reported.

PH: Right. Which doesn't mean it didn't exist in different ways. It depended on the company, you know. You're out drinking with guys and some ass tries to push you up against the bar and question you about Momo Giancana or something. You get mad. (*Salvatore 'Sam' Giancana was a reputed crime boss.*)

JE: As you mention in the book, Sinatra told you that sure, he knew some of these guys, because from working in saloons like he did, you didn't meet any Nobel prize winners.

PH: Of course!

JE: I think his best retort was that if St. Francis of Assisi was working in saloons as a singer, he would have met the same guys.

PH: The other thing is that if the Mob could have made him a huge star, they had thirty-five other guys they could have made huge stars, but they had nobody because he was unique. He was somebody who was a star, in spite of, not because of the Mob.

JE: In your new Introduction to this latest edition of *Why Sinatra Matters*, which came out last month, you mention that law enforcement agencies investigated Sinatra for thirty years and never found evidence for a single indictment. And to quote you from the book, “In that world, he was a victim of stereotyping; the facts didn’t matter. He was Italian, right? Wrong. He was American.”

PH: Yeah. If suddenly Carlo Gambino walked into his dressing room for an autograph, what’s he going to say, “Get the f--- out of here.” Come on, you don’t do that. But to the law, Carlo Gambino showed up. And Carlo Gambino didn’t come to demand homage. If anything, he was just a fan like everybody else.

JE: You spend considerable time in the book, about 4 pages, beginning on page 43, talking about what you describe as the origin of the “Mafia myth” in the United States. I am referring to the singular atrocity that took place in Louisiana, specifically in New Orleans back in 1891 that drastically altered how many American felt about Italian immigrants and later Italian Americans, and basically changed the situation for them in this country. It is a very important read which places much of the early Italian experience into perspective.

PH: Of course. And what happened and led in Louisiana, there were always good Italian restaurants in New Orleans, because there was no Klu Klux Klan in New Orleans. The Klan was up in the country and Italians were attracted to Louisiana because of the government program that would give people land to be developed. And to peasants, the most important thing in the world was to own your own land for Christ’s sake. They went down there and left after that massacre. There are a couple of good books about it. After that massacre the Italians who had not gone home because they had the largest numbers of people, went home again. The guys would come work their asses off to make money and then they went home. The Irish went home. The Jews never went home. But the Italians did and part of it was the siren song of Mussolini in the twenties and they wanted to believe it was true.

JE: Your excellent book is about the accomplishments of Sinatra and the title, *Why Sinatra Matters*, is certainly appropriate. My father, an Italian-American, passed away more than 6 years ago. My wife and I gave your book to him as a birthday present a few years after its original publication. He was not necessarily the biggest Sinatra fan in the world, but he told me that it was one of the best books he ever read. It meant a lot to him.

PH: Good, John

JE: Although Frank Sinatra was 20 years your senior, and you were no more than 5 or 6 when he first hit it big in 1940 with songs like *I'll Never Smile Again* and *All or Nothing at All*, I sensed from reading the book that you felt a connection to him, especially after you reached your late teenage years and then going forward. Is that the case, and if so, was it because of the urban environments you both grew up in, Hoboken and Brooklyn, and because both of you were children of immigrant parents?

PH: You know what I think it was. I think it had a lot to do with Sinatra. First of all, it starts when he is born. He's born in 1915. The same year are born Billie Holiday (*jazz, blues, and torch song singer-songwriter*), Edith Piaf (*French singer, songwriter and actress*), Orson Welles (*actor, film director, playwright, film producer, and television and radio personality*), and Arthur Miller (*playwright and essayist*). It was this amazing houseful of American talent born in that year and all of them by the time they were ten were affected by the radio. For the first time the radio got organized at the stations and even networks were beginning to happen by 1925. It was the combination of things, including the phonograph records and the Victrola (the wind-up phonograph), which allowed Italian immigrants to hear music they never heard in the old country. They couldn't go in and listen to Verdi or Puccini (*Italian composers of operas*). They wouldn't let them in the opera house. They would say, "You can't come in here with shitty clothes like that. Get out of here." You know what I mean? So they discovered the amazing musical treasures of Italy here.

On Saturdays my mother would take my brother Tom and I on different trips, the waterfront, and Little Italy. When we ate Italian food we didn't want to eat anything else. We said, "What is this?" And compared to Irish food, for Christ's sake? Irish food was a descendent of British food, and they thought food was fuel, (*laughs*), not to be associated with pleasure.

JE: I think you once mentioned to me there was another tenant, an Italian lady who lived in your apartment building back in Brooklyn ...

PH: Mrs. Caputo! Yeah. I always said that we became Americans when Mrs. Caputo came across the hall and taught my mother how to make the sauce. (*laughs*)

That was the beginning for all the Italian immigrants, including Sinatra. You have to remember that Sinatra's first appearances that showed his name was on the *Amateur Hour* on radio. His notion of success was to turn on the radio and hear himself for the rest of his life.

JE: And listening to Martin Block (*disc jockey, who hosted the 'Make Believe Ballroom'*)

PH: Yeah, Martin Block.

PH: So that's when I began to hear Sinatra. I wasn't at *The Paramount* (*former showcase theatre at 43rd Street and Broadway, NYC*) with the little girls. I couldn't afford *The Paramount*.

JE: You spoke of Bing Crosby in your book, whose songs were more upbeat and positive, while Frank's sang of heartbreak and loneliness and "the girl that got away."

PH: Yeah. And particularly later, the reason I only talk in any detail about 2 of the women, Nancy (*Sinatra's first wife and mother of his 3 children*) and Ava Gardner (*Sinatra's second wife*), is because they affected the music. When he got knocked on his ass, part of the wounds were self-inflicted with Ava. You know. He got up! You know. He got up! He was not the same afterwards. And years later, John, by then, I was a columnist for the newspaper. I interviewed Ava Gardner. She was in town. I went to interview her. And where was she... at Frank Sinatra's apartment in the *Waldorf Astoria*. They were friends after all the heartbreak and anger.

JE: That's actually decent to hear. There doesn't always have to be bitterness after a divorce.

PH: No, of course not. She was living in Europe and came into New York for a couple of things.

JE: How was she? Did the interview go well?

PH: Yes. She was drinking a little. But it reminded me of something that Sinatra said to me. It's in the book, actually. He's talking about his mother, Dolly. And he told me she kept a small bat behind the bar his parents owned. He said, "When I got out of hand, she gave me a rap with that little club; then she'd hug me to her breast." He smiled and then said, "I married the same woman every time." (laughs) And so, when I interviewed Ava, she had with her a little dog that kept running around. And she had a copy of the Daily News rolled up. When the dog would run around she would yell at the dog. The dog wouldn't obey. Whack! She'd give the dog a whack with the rolled up Daily News. And it's just what Sinatra said, "I married the same girl every time."

JE: It sounds like she ruled the roost.

PH: Yeah. And Mia Farrow... all he ever said to me about her was "I still don't know what that was all about."

JE: I read somewhere that Mia has a good relationship with Sinatra's two daughters, Nancy and Tina.

PH: Might be. Yeah.

JE: Your book is a testament to the rise and acceptance of Italian Americans in the twentieth century with the likes of Fiorello La Guardia, Joe DiMaggio, and of course Sinatra.

PH: And he's the guy who got the man with the organ grinder with the monkey off the street. Sinatra made music urban. It was city music. That was the difference between him and Crosby. Crosby is very good, but he's from Walla Walla (laughs).

JE: Crosby had a great voice.

PH: And he had a wonderful relaxed style. If anything he influenced Dean Martin, not Sinatra.

JE: There has been so much written about Sinatra and “breath control” and using his voice like an instrument. And he once said that he was influenced by Billie Holiday. You mention some of this in your book. I know you are a Billie Holiday fan, but I don’t see how their two styles were actually similar. And I think you agree as well.

PH: Yes. What he did take from her was that he could take songs written by other people, Cole Porter, Arthur Schwartz, etc., all the great American songbook writers and make them into autobiography. They were suddenly his story.

JE: Sinatra liked to say in concert that he was one of the original saloon singers, but his songs were actually a combination of popular songs with a little jazz influence that were representative of what we now call the Great American Songbook. That’s how I see it.

PH: Yes. For example, I love the Nelson Riddle albums more than all the others.

JE: So do I.

PH: It’s no accident that Nelson Riddle before he became the greatest arranger of his time, was a trombone player. Sinatra was watching Tommy Dorsey and wondered how does he control his breath like that to sustain a note. And he watched the way he sucked air in the side of his mouth. But that’s what he was studying as a kid.

JE: I like those Capitol years with Nelson Riddle, too. In fact, I was reading Linda Ronstadt’s autobiography from a few years back. As everyone knows, she is a multi-talented singer, having done everything from pop, rock, country, opera, Mexican music, etc. And then she collaborated with Nelson Riddle in the early and mid-1980s to make three bestselling albums in succession, demonstrating her own love for the Great American Songbook. I think her choice of music at that time may have surprised some of her fans.

There is a section in her book where she expressed interest on recording this type of music, but didn’t know if Riddle was still working or even alive. And you told her there was really only one way to find out, and that’s by reaching out to Riddle herself and see if he would work with her on the project.

PH: Yeah. And she did and made those great albums.

JE: And to now learn that she can no longer sing is very sad because she has been such a terrific talent.

PH: It’s a tragedy.

JE: As we wind down our discussion today, I would like to read the eloquent closing paragraph from your wonderful book which says a great deal of why Sinatra matters to so many of us: “I

like the man who talked that way on a chilly night in New York. I liked his doubt and his uncertainty. He had enriched my life with his music since I was a boy. He had confronted bigotry and changed the way many people thought about the children of immigrants. He had made many of us wiser about love and human loneliness. And he was still trying to understand what it was all about. His imperfections were upsetting. His cruelties were unforgivable. But Frank Sinatra was a genuine artist, and his work will endure as long as men and women can hear, and ponder, and feel. In the end, that's all that matters."

PH: I believe that. He died in 1998 and here it is, seventeen years later with many tributes, like the splendid gallery show I went to at Lincoln Center earlier this year, which I mention in my Introduction. I hope they put a good book together.

PH: I will be at the 92nd Street Y on November 23rd.

JE: With Jonathan Schwartz?

PH: Yes.

JE: My wife and I expect to go. It should be a good evening with you two guys. I think Schwartz knows more about Sinatra than Sinatra knew about himself.

PH: That's exactly what Sinatra told me himself (laughs).

JE: I believe it.

PH: I hope to see you there.

JE: Pete, I want to thank you for doing this interview with me today. As always, it's been a real pleasure speaking with you.

PH: It was my pleasure, John. Thank you, and thanks for staying in touch.

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