

Karen McNally. *When Frankie Went to Hollywood: Frank Sinatra and American Male Identity*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 248pp. ISBN-13: 978-0252075421 (pb).

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At the beginning of her fascinating study of the development of the persona and mythology that surrounded Frank Sinatra, Karen McNally clearly states her theme: “With Sinatra’s cinematic performances as its central focus, this book explores the ways in which Sinatra’s star image consistently challenges postwar notions of American male identity through its engagement with contemporary debates in Hollywood and the wider culture and by exposing the limitations on the ways in which American masculinity is defined” (2). Perhaps the key to her discussion is her exploration of Sinatra’s shifting images of the male as the culture changed from the post World War II years through the sixties, when a very different image of the American male and of Sinatra in particular emerged. As the author notes, this image was renegotiated as the nation moved through the Eisenhower years, the rise of suburban America, and the turmoil created by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Traditional definitions of masculinity were altered by such events and by the emergence of such new stars as James Dean and Marlon Brando, and even established male stars, like Gregory Peck and James Stewart displayed aggression and disturbance.

Sinatra’s screen image underwent a complete change from his first roles in mediocre musicals to the actor who commanded major attention from critics and viewers in his award-winning performance in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). It has become part of show-business mythology that Sinatra, whose career has been almost obliterated by the early fifties made a spectacular comeback in films, singing, and his own persona. From his working-class Italian roots in New Jersey, Sinatra would always retain something of the tough neighborhood guy, and he used that image brilliantly both in the covers for his new albums in the fifties and in the roles he played on the screen. McNally’s comparison of Sinatra who played the role that John Garfield had played in the original version of *Young At Heart* (1954) about fifteen years earlier is particularly engrossing as it examines the new male identity of fifties culture especially when compared with a pre-War image. He introduces a “dark negativity” (32) to the film that alters the tone and contrasts markedly with the sunny upbeat personality and performance of co-star Doris Day. The darkness that Sinatra invariably carries with him expressed the working-class alienation from postwar prosperity and the suburban dream and presents an alternative class identity for the cinematic male” (42).

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is its tracking of Sinatra’s political roles, from the liberal performer in the ten-minute film, “The House I Live In,” to the Reagan years when his Democratic past—and his closeness to the Kennedy clan—had shifted completely. It is again part of the mythology that he was deeply hurt by the Kennedys who feared his alleged connection with the mafia. McNally shows how much of these stories are untrue. Although he would always support Civil Rights, by 1974 he publicly

endorsed Richard Nixon for president and virtually no one could remember that he had campaigned for Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in 1947. He had been attacked in those years by the Hearst press, and like other liberal stars, including Humphrey Bogart, he backtracked and began attending "Stop Communism" rallies. Sinatra even offered to testify to J. Edgar Hoover to identify "subversives," but Hoover rejected his bid.

In McNally's discussions of Sinatra's film roles, she makes an important point about his screen image: "Women's emotional identification with Sinatra, brought about by his musical expressions of vulnerability, has a feminizing effect on his image at a time when representations of heightened masculinity seem more expected or appropriate" (92). One of the best sections of the book is her discussion the "hybrid image of post-war masculinity" (97), when people were looking for screen images with whom they might sympathize or identify. Sinatra's personal life provided the public with many occasions for sympathy as well as anger and distaste. His marriage and divorce from Ava Gardner brought his own emotional tension to the forefront of his image and indeed, helped to created the persona that perhaps we most remember: his cigarette, his tilted fedora, the colors on his best new album covers (*Only the Lonely*, *Come Fly With Me*, *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*).

McNally provides a detailed discussion of the film *Suddenly* (1954) where Sinatra plays a killer. Interestingly, a few days before he shot Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald had seen that film, which Sinatra then withdrew from public showings for twenty years. Her discussion of *Some Came Running* is equally detailed, as she points out that Sinatra's World War II veterans represent emotional vulnerability as an integral element of the postwar American male's identity (132).

In her conclusion, McNally described the new Sinatra who is "Chairman of the Board" and his role in the Rat Pack. He had been named *Playboy's* favorite male singer of the fifties and was referred to as a "love god" and "sex idol," so that his screen characters were connected to the *Playboy* persona. McNally does excellent analyses of his films of this period, particularly *Pal Joey* (1957) and *The Tender Trap* (1955).

But by the sixties, the sense of Sinatra's emotional vulnerability was no longer in evidence. He seemed to have returned to his immigrant roots, but he was always fighting racism. He wanted to do a film with Albert Maltz, one of the original Hollywood Ten, but the criticism was insurmountable, and he could not proceed with it. He went on to found Reprise records and to do a weekly television show (for one year) where one of his guests, Elvis Presley, sang a duet with an apparently uncomfortable Sinatra. He continued to make films, including *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), one of his best.

McNally sums up her work with an important passage that concludes her study: "Sinatra presented a fascinating star persona that illuminated the complexities of postwar culture and challenged dominant images of the American male." This study, as I have suggested is valuable, readable, and important, and my only regret is her repeated use of academic terms, like "objectification" (more than a dozen), "performativity," and "foregrounding." They are unnecessary, especially in such a vital and engrossing work.