

## ***The House I Live In (1945)***

By Art Simon

“The House I Live In” emerged out of a dinner party conversation at the home of Hollywood producer Frank Ross. Among the guests were director Mervyn LeRoy, screenwriter Albert Maltz and Frank Sinatra. Maltz was at the height of his screenwriting career, having scripted the war-time dramas “Destination Tokyo” and “Pride of the Marines.”

The impact of the latter had not been lost on Sinatra, who in late August 1945, wrote a letter to Maltz telling him he was “the best god-damn writer around.” Sinatra had been particularly impressed by the film’s anti-prejudice message, and he told Maltz it was in line with his own recent efforts to combat race prejudice. Indeed, by this time in his still young career, Sinatra had to become thoroughly associated with a campaign for racial understanding.

Undoubtedly, Sinatra had in mind a scene in “Pride of the Marines” in which Al Schmidt, a Marine blinded while fighting in the Solomon Islands, is confronted by his buddy and fellow soldier Lee Diamond. After Schmidt says no one will want to hire a blind man, he asks his friend what he’s got to worry about, telling him he’s in one piece. Diamond responds by saying he is returning to a world where he won’t be hired because “my name is Diamond instead of Jones, because I celebrate Passover instead of Easter.” Diamond beseeches Schmidt, “Do you see what I mean? You and me, we need the same kind of a world, we need a country to live in where nobody gets booted around for any reason.”



*Frank Sinatra in “The House I Live In” from The Library of Congress [collection](#).*

Maltz’s contribution on this front stretched beyond the movies. He had authored the founding editorials for the short-lived magazine “Equality” with warnings about antisemitism and fascist tactics to use racial division as a leading wedge against democracy.

At the party, and knowing where Maltz stood on these issues, Ross suggested a script for a short film that could visualize Sinatra’s recent advocacy work. Two weeks later, Maltz had completed the script for “The House I Live In,” one focused not on race relations but on antisemitism. But this was in no way an escape to safe territory.

Historians have identified 1945 as the high-water mark for domestic antisemitism in the United States, and as it turned out, the film would frequently be screened at rallies or community meetings in which race prejudice was the central issue. In other words, “The House I Live In” entered the social conversation at a time when the “theory of the unitary character of prejudice,” to use the phrase coined by historian John Higham, had considerable

currency, the notion of that an attack against one minority group was an attack against all.

Maltz pinned his script on, and took its title from, a song written by fellow communists Earl Robinson and Abel Meeropol (credited in the film as Lewis Allan). Robinson is best known for “Ballad for Americans” and “Joe Hill,” Meeropol for “Strange Fruit,” the song immortalized by Billie Holiday.

All of the big-name talent on the film contributed their work for free.

Directed by Mervyn LeRoy and shot on the RKO lot, the film begins with Sinatra in the studio recording the love song “If You Are But A Dream,” after which he takes a cigarette break in the alley. He steps outside just in time to stop a group of boys preparing to beat up a classmate. The reason for the assault? The toughs don’t like the boy’s religion. Sinatra goes to work convincing the gang that religion makes no difference, as he puts it, “except maybe to a Nazi or somebody who’s stupid.”

Maltz’s script makes the argument for religious tolerance first on simple biological grounds. As Sinatra puts it, “your blood’s the same as mine, mine’s the same as his.” And he tells the boys God created everyone the same regardless of their nationality. But the second tact is strategic and patriotic. He retells the story of the Haruna, a Japanese ship bombed by a Flying Fortress crew three days after Pearl Harbor and asks the boys if the mission should have been canceled because the pilot and the bombardier had different religions—Colin Kelly was a Presbyterian and Meyer Levin was a Jew. Adult film-goers would have remembered this event as front-page news four years

earlier. In 1941, the sinking of the Haruna had been framed as Kelly’s heroics, a pilot who made sure his crew jumped to safety before going down with the plane. In Maltz’s re-telling, it is now a story of religious cooperation, exemplifying an America whose strength is built on everything the defeated Nazis hated—ethnic brotherhood. As with Diamond’s education of Schmidt in “Pride of the Marines,” in “The House I Live In,” it falls to a child of immigrants to explain the meaning of America to its WASP citizens.

Ultimately, though, Sinatra wins the boys over with his voice. None of them recognize him as a famous singer so it is not the power of his celebrity that brings them round to his message. In contrast to the film’s first song, sung to the microphone and an unseen audience, Sinatra sings “The House I Live In” in an alley to “the people,” that emblem of the Popular Front to which Maltz’s politics on the issue were indebted. The song’s lyrics, “All races and religions/That’s America to me,” summarized Maltz’s approach to fighting antisemitism; to avoid the image of Jews as specific targets and instead broaden the definition of America as inclusive of all minority groups. A subtle detail toward the end of the film suggests that, in fact, the song might be the next one Sinatra is recording because the music comes up just as he opens the door to the studio. Thus, in this song, the popular singer and the committed social activist are united, Sinatra’s professional and political pursuits intersect. Sinatra bids the boys farewell with “so long men.” The boys have come of age in these ten minutes as they come to respect religious difference and recognize the nation’s pan-ethnic composition as one of its strengths.

"The House I Live In" was awarded an honorary Oscar in 1946 and the song would become a personal anthem for Sinatra long before "My Way." But just over a year later, Maltz's contribution to the war-effort and the spirit of this film would be dismissed and he would be dragged before the House Un-American Activities Committee, imprisoned on contempt charges and blacklisted. He would not earn another screenplay credit until 1970.

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