

“Songs for Young Lovers”—Frank Sinatra (1954)

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Essay by James Kaplan (guest post)*



Frank Sinatra

Frank Sinatra was all washed up in early 1953. A superstar from the moment he debuted with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in 1939, he'd been brought down to earth after the end of World War II by a series of personal and professional disasters, many of them his own creation. The nation's newspapers, as powerful as the internet before the internet, had been instrumental in Sinatra's unmaking, pillorying him for his flagrant infidelities to his wife Nancy with a parade of Hollywood beauties (culminating with the most beautiful of all, Ava Gardner) and for his brazen coziness with major organized-crime figures at a 1947 Mafia conference in Havana. Nor did it help that America's tastes in popular music had shifted after the war, from the yearning ballads that Frank sang so gorgeously to bouncy, escapist pop tunes: Sinatra tried to adapt but his heart wasn't in it. For a while the man who'd been known as The Voice developed severe--probably psychosomatic--vocal problems. His records stopped selling, and in short order he was dropped by his record company (Columbia), his movie studio (MGM), and his talent agency (MCA)--not to mention by Nancy, who divorced him in late 1951. Sinatra married Gardner soon after, but a year or so later, with her movie career on the upswing and his professional life in tatters, even Ava had begun to tire of him.

This was the state Frank was in when he met with Alan Livingston, Capitol Records' young vice president in charge of creative operations, to talk about a possible recording deal. Livingston later remembered: "He was meek, a pussycat, humble. He had been through terrible times. He was broke, he was in debt.... I was told he had tried to kill himself on occasion. He was at the lowest ebb of his life.... Everybody knew it."

Livingston wanted to sign Sinatra, but he wasn't doing it out of pity. Axel Stordahl, Sinatra's former arranger at Columbia, had been telling everyone who would listen, "Frank's singing great again." Few people wanted to listen, but the canny Livingston did. He signed the singer to Capitol under the kind of standard contract normally given to fledgling artists, with an advance

in the low three figures. When Livingston told his sales staff about the deal, every man in the room groaned.

Livingston raised his hands to quiet them. “Look,” he told his sales force, “I can only judge on talent. I can’t judge what people did in the past. I only know talent, and Frank is the best singer in the world. There’s nobody who can touch him.”

Alan Livingston’s coup was not only signing Sinatra but pairing him with the brilliant young arranger Nelson Riddle. Frank had never heard of Riddle, whom he first met on the night of April 30, 1953, when he recorded Riddle’s chart of Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen’s “I’ve Got the World on a String.” As the singer listened to the gloriously exuberant playback, he knew that something very new, and very big, was up, something rich and strange and quite extraordinary. It was as if he had awakened from a long winter into a spring unlike any he had ever imagined. And more: The words of the song had come true at last.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed, almost prayerfully, his eyes wide and blazing. “I’m back! I’m back, baby, I’m back!”

So he was. Along with several other singles Sinatra recorded that spring and summer, “I’ve Got the World on a String” was a hit on the “Billboard” charts. Then on Thursday evening, November 5, 1953, Frank walked into Capitol’s Melrose Avenue studios, shook hands with Riddle and producer Voyle Gilmore, and began recording his first album for the label, “Songs for Young Lovers.” Nelson Riddle was mainly there to conduct the musicians that night: a more established arranger, George Siravo, had written all the charts except one.

The hit singles had lifted Sinatra’s confidence. From the first song that evening, “A Foggy Day”--music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin--he established dominance. The voice was as magnificent as ever, but now he showed a rhythmic ease, a sense of play, that he hadn’t demonstrated for years. His tossed-off, Hoboken-bratty lyrical improvisations (“I viewed the morning with much alarm/The British Museum--it lost its charm”) told the world that while Ira Gershwin might be Ira Gershwin, Sinatra was Sinatra.

Sinatra’s voice also contained a new component: maturity. This year Frank had been through the crucible, emotionally and professionally. His “A Foggy Day,” from pensive verse (“I was a stranger in the city....”) to joyous chorus, is an autobiography in miniature, a masterpiece of phrasing forged from Sinatra’s inseparably intertwined life and art. “Ava taught him how to sing a torch song,” Riddle would say later. “She taught him the hard way.” In this one track, you can feel Frank and Ava’s actual agonies and ecstasies in the real London, just three months before. His voice has such a plaintive tremolo that you worry for his emotional well-being. On the song’s ultimate line, “and in foggy London town the sun was shining everywhere,” Frank sings the word “shining” not once, not twice, but *five* times in a row--sings it so passionately that you can feel the deep dark in back of the sunlight.

The one song not orchestrated by George Siravo, the first number Sinatra recorded the next night, was the pretty Johnny Burke-Jimmy Van Heusen tune, “Like Someone in Love.” Nelson Riddle had written the arrangement. Siravo’s charts were lovely, but this orchestration, with its

Debussy/Ravel-esque flute passages (the flute would soon become a Riddle signature), was something special: a gift from one lover of impressionism to another, and a promise of more complex beauty to come. Beginning with Frank's next album, he would work exclusively with Riddle for most of the rest of his Capitol career, creating a string of incomparable masterpieces. A great partnership had been born.

James Kaplan is a novelist, journalist, essayist, screenwriter, and biographer. His acclaimed two-volume life of Frank Sinatra, "Frank: The Voice" and "Sinatra: The Chairman," was published by Doubleday in 2010 and 2015. In 2019, his biography "Irving Berlin: New York Genius" was published by Yale University Press as part of its Jewish Lives Series.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.