



Remembering Blue Eyes

The Sinatra Treasures: Intimate Photos, Mementos, and Music from the Sinatra Family Collection by Charles Pignone (Bullfinch Press, \$45.00)

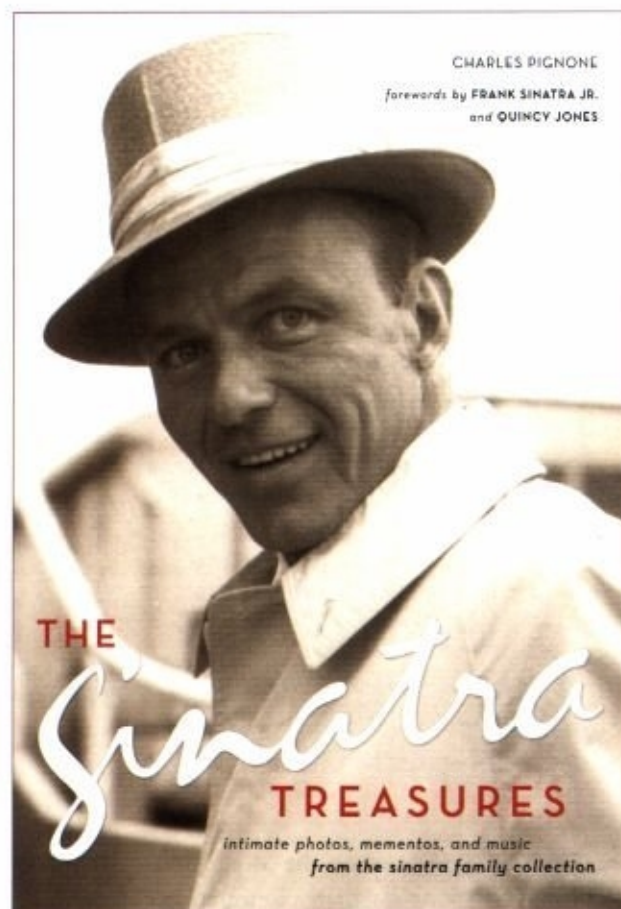
REVIEWED BY KEVIN MADIGAN

A new Sinatra biography offers words, photographs, vintage memorabilia and a CD

As befits the man's stature and complexity, a multitude of words have been put on paper about Frank Sinatra over the past 60 years. They have covered the gamut, from respected biographies to family reminiscences to sleazy attempts at making a buck off the singer's convoluted legacy. Of the more recent efforts, a favorite of mine is *The Way You Wear Your Hat*, by Bill Zehme, a classy take on what made Frank Frank. Subtitled *The Lost Art of Livin'*, Zehme delved into style and substance in equal measure. Then there is Gay Talese's classic story *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold*. It appeared in *Esquire* magazine in the early sixties and still stands as a brilliant piece of writing.

Now we have *The Sinatra Treasures*. What makes it distinct from other tomes is the blessing and assistance from members of Sinatra's family and close associates. Frank Jr. writes a foreword, as does frequent collaborator Quincy Jones. Charles Pignone, the author and assembler of the book, can be considered an authority in that he heads the Frank Sinatra Society of America, a fancy name for the official fan club.

The aim of this book, according to Pignone, is "to impart a small slice of the Sinatra magic and history in its pages." Indeed, this book is not a biography per se but a lavish collection that



THE VOICE. c.1940. Before Frank Sinatra's face was known across the country, he was simply, as his chair advertises, "The Voice." Courtesy *The Sinatra Treasures* and Bullfinch Press, 2004.

includes some fine photography, an excellent CD and numerous artifacts. These mementos augment different phases of Sinatra's life along with plentiful quotes and anecdotes from many who knew him and worked with him over the years. The author states in his introduction that, but for space limitations, the book might have weighed a thousand pounds. Such is the extent of available material in the family's possession. This trend of including removable bits and pieces of memorabilia and souvenirs from a subject's life is gaining momentum in the world of publishing. It's not without appeal, if done well. A fine example is a book that came out last year on John Lennon, and is one of the precious few instances in which his widow, Yoko Ono, has shown some integrity.

The items inside *The Sinatra Treasures*, all carefully housed in transparent envelopes, cover a fair bit of territory. There are program scripts, a fan magazine from 1943 called *Frank Fare*, concert tickets, backstage passes and letters to and from the likes of Jerry Lewis and Cary Grant. There is even a menu from Puccini's, a Beverly Hills restaurant that Sinatra partially owned.

If you're looking for a balanced portrait of Frank Sinatra, though, you've come to the wrong place. Nary a mention is made of his questionable friendships, his infamous ill-temper or frequent absentee-father status. Ava Gardner, the presumed love of his life and clear inspiration for his best work (during the 1950s when he recorded for Capitol Records), is nowhere to be found. To be fair, those and other controversies have been covered ad nauseam for decades. But for those of you still wondering, Sinatra was not a Mafiosi. Did he know people who were? Of course. He knew lots of people, from all walks of life. But no, he was no gangster. Gangsters don't give vast amounts of dollars to charity, and anonymously at that. Nor do they sing that well. In fact, Sinatra seldom aligned himself with a particular group or creed. He was not above supporting whichever president happened to be in the White House at the time, regardless of party affiliation. Many of his relationships were, at best, expedient.

Bandleader and former employer Tommy Dorsey once said of him: "Frank is the most fascinating man in the world, but don't stick your hand in the cage." For all that, introspection was not beyond him. He called himself a "schmuck" for smoking. He respected his friend Dean Martin enormously because Martin was one of the few people who didn't acquiesce to him.

The CD that accompanies the book contains other insights into what made Sinatra tick, and provides a number of examples of that famous trait of his—brutal honesty, laced with plenty of humor. A lengthy and funny monologue, from a 2:00 a.m. appearance at Las Vegas' Sands Hotel in 1966, has him saying of Martin: "He is stoned more often than the United States embassies around the world!" But Sinatra's kindness towards fellow musicians also comes through, when he tells his audience of several other acts performing on the Strip that are worth seeing. Sarah Vaughn, especially, gets a ringing endorsement: "Damn! She's good. I was gonna throw in the towel and quit singing completely the other night when I heard this girl," he says. He also talks about turning 50 and becoming a grandfather, discusses his fondness for chicken soup and recounts his childhood and career in considerable detail, chuckling all the way. It's interesting to hear the contrast between this confident, brash performer and the polite, deferential newcomer in the early interviews. In fact, his very first radio interview is included (it took place in Australia) as is his reaction, on Bing Crosby's radio show, to winning an Academy Award (for *From Here To Eternity*).

The best interview on the CD, though, is one where he talks about his craft. He discusses syncopation, delivery and the importance of the lyric. "The written word is first," he says. "I'm not belittling the music behind me, but it's really a backdrop, a curtain, actually. A lot of singers never learn about reading the song properly." He fondly remembers getting advice about diminuendos from Luciano Pavarotti and learning techniques for improving his voice (or the "reed," as he liked to call it) from trombonist Tommy Dorsey. Sinatra proudly

of his influence on the trumpet player: "He [Davis] listens to the vocals and finds out things he can do on the trumpet," he says on the CD.

Other gems on the CD include a beautiful, early version of "None But The Lonely Hearts" and a recording session for the song "Roses of Picardy." Ever the perfectionist, he calls out briskly: "One more, please, right away" at the end of the first, seemingly impeccable, take. There is also a spoof on the song "High Hopes," done for the Kennedy For President campaign of 1960. Crosby is featured again, along with Bob Hope, in a sketch staged for soldiers abroad, most of which involves making fun of Sinatra's puny physique. Calling him a "bag of bones," Hope introduces Sinatra to the troops with: "And now, for all you men in the armed forces who happen to be 13-year-old girls, we bring you . . . the first atom ever split, Frank Sinatra!"

Sinatra came to be in the era of radio, and it suited him well. Then again, he fell in easily with all mediums, embracing the arrival of television and going on to become an accomplished and successful film actor. He knew his worth, certainly, but described himself simply as a baritone. His contradictions were many, as this book amply demonstrates. He hated the song "My Way"—and rightfully so—although many consider it his signature tune. He knew whenever he "hit a clam" (sang a bad note), but he continued to perform on the concert stage perhaps a little too long past his prime. But we shouldn't quibble. In this book, Pignone has achieved his goal—he offers a taste of "that certain something that was Sinatra." ~

Kevin Madigan is an Atlanta writer, translator and teacher. His articles have appeared in *Creative Loafing*, *Atlanta Business Chronicle* and *MTV Online*.