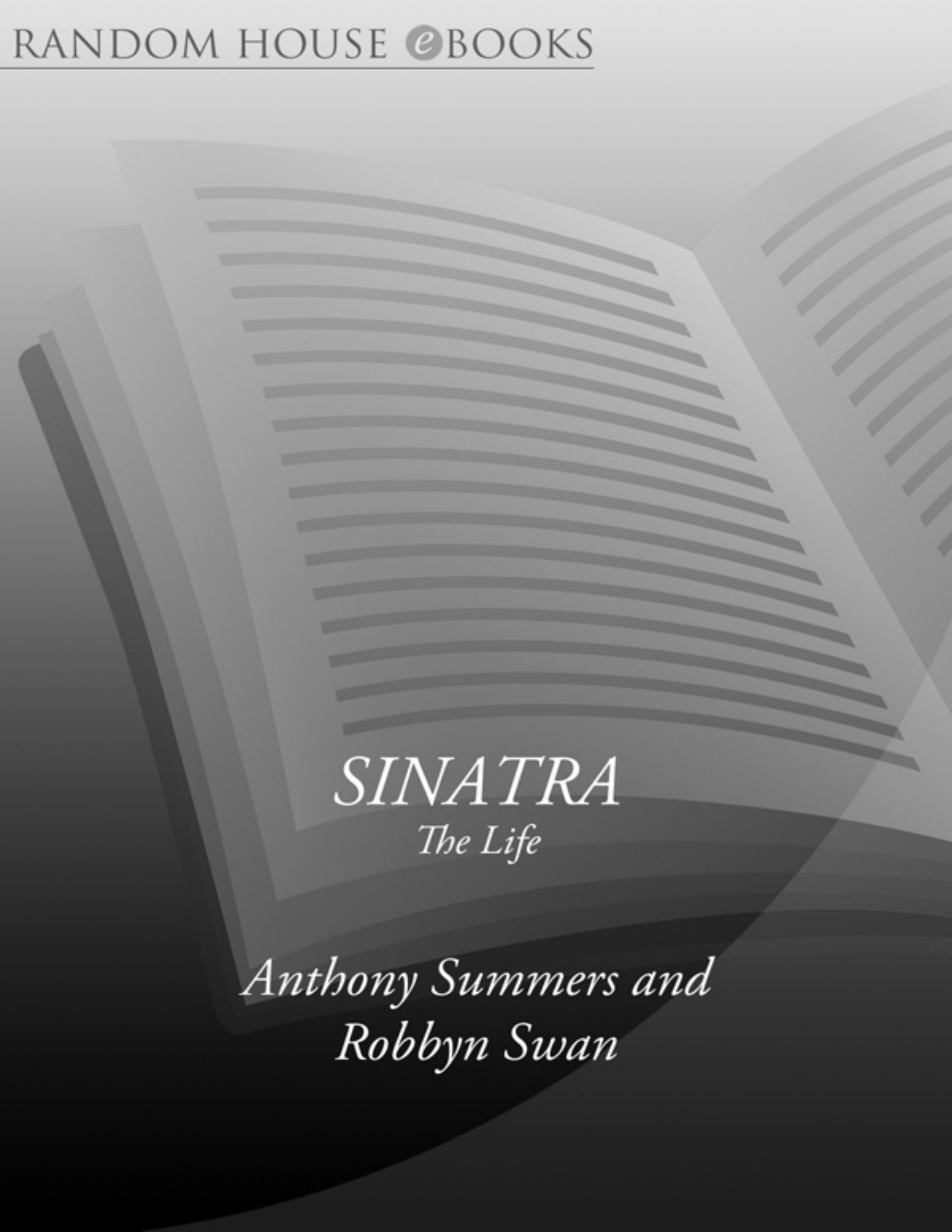
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



SINATRA

The Life

Anthony Summers and
Robbyn Swan

SINATRA

THE LIFE

Anthony Summers

and Robbyn Swan

Table of Contents

For Theresa Santore Swan
with love

“Right from the beginning, he was there with the truth of things in his voice.”

—Bob Dylan

Praise for Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan's

SINATRA: THE LIFE

"Anthony Summers never writes a book that fails to offer accurate material you will find nowhere else. No surprise then that *Sinatra: The Life* is one of the very few bona fide, three-dimensional portraits of an amazingly complex, interesting and sometimes god-awful guy."

—Norman Mailer

"Compelling. . . . It's the depth and thoroughness of the authors' research that make the biography noteworthy."

—*Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*

"Fascinating. . . . And you can say that in spades. Mr. Summers is an author I believe in."

—Liz Smith, New York Post

"Newsmaking revelations. . . . Meticulous research."

—*Las Vegas Review-Journal*

"Riveting. . . . No one has exposed Sinatra's majesty—and his dark side, as Anthony Summers does."

—Book-of-the-Month Club

"Well-researched, detailed analysis. . . . Extensive documentation of the legendary crooner's involvement with

the Mafia.”

—*USA Today*

“Ava Gardner, the Rat Pack, JFK, Lucky Luciano—it’s all there. What a ride!”

—Washington Examiner

“Eye-opening disclosures.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“Balanced, candid and highly readable.”

—*Tucson Citizen*

“Provocative.”

—*Life*

“*Sinatra: The Life* is worthy of the talented and complex man who is its subject. . . . Sheds light on every aspect of the entertainer’s life with such clarity and detail that even his family and closest friends are in for some surprises.”

—Nicholas Gage, author of Eleni

“Exhaustive research. . . . Solid. . . . Moving.”

— *The Toronto Star*

“Summers and Swan tell us much that is new, and with panache. . . . Sterling work.”

—The Times (London)

“A fascinating, very fair and balanced account of a modern Jekyll and Hyde.”

—Charles Higham, author of Howard Hughes: The Secret Life

“The definitive ‘must-read’ bio of the Chairman of the Board.... A page-turner that reads like a fast-paced mystery novel.”

—Edge (Boston)

“No stone unturned. . . . An astonishing job.”

—*Irish Examiner*

“The finest Sinatra biography yet.... Unflinchingly honest, impeccably written and researched. . . . A pungent portrait of a sad, mad and dangerous figure.”

—Herald Sun (Melbourne)

AUTHORS' NOTE

We were commissioned to write this book with a brief to deliver a truthful account of the life of Frank Sinatra. Here was an artist of shimmering talent and unparalleled generosity, shadowed always by rumors of personal shortcomings and persistent stories linking him to the some of the most evil criminals in the world. In the blur of fifty years of gossip, what were the facts? We believe we have delivered them—without neglecting the magic of Sinatra's music or his virtues. Some prominent critics suggested, when the hardcover edition of our book appeared, that we had been unfair to the man and his artistry. We say they are wrong, and we stand by every line.

Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan
April 2006

1

Debut

MARCH 18, 1939.

In a studio on West 46th Street in New York City, a band was playing Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee." It was a simple place, a room with couches and lamps, hung with drapes to muffle the echo from the walls. This was a big day for the musicians, who were recording for the first time.

A skinny young man listened as they played. The previous night, at the Sicilian Club near his home in New Jersey, he had asked if he could tag along. Now, as the band finished playing, he stepped forward and spoke to the bandleader. "May I sing?" he asked.

The bandleader glanced at the studio clock to see if they had time left, then told the young man to go ahead. He chose "Our Love," a stock arrangement based on a melody from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet.* Standing at the rudimentary microphone, he launched into a saccharine lyric:

Our love, I feel it everywhere
Our love is like an evening prayer . . .
I see your face in stars above,
As I dream on, in all the magic of
Our love.

Unseasoned, a little reedy, the voice was transmitted through an amplifier to a recording device known as a lathe. The lathe drove the sound to a needle, and the needle carved a groove on a twelve-inch aluminum-based lacquer disc. The result was a record, to be played on a turntable at seventy-eight revolutions per minute.

The bandleader kept the record in a drawer for nearly sixty years. He would take it out from time to time, with delight and increasing nostalgia, to play for friends. The music on it sounds tinny, a relic of the infancy of recording technology. Yet the disc is kept in a locked safe. The attorney for the bandleader's widow, an octogenarian on Social Security, says the singer's heirs have demanded all rights and the lion's share of any potential income derived from it, thus obstructing its release.

The disc is a valuable piece of musical history. Its tattered adhesive label, typed with an old manual machine, shows the recording was made at Harry Smith Studios, "electrically recorded" for bandleader Frank Mane. Marked "#1 Orig.," it is the very first known studio recording of the thousand and more that were to make that skinny young man the most celebrated popular singer in history. For, under "Vocal chor. by," it bears the immaculately handwritten legend:

Frank Sinatra

A year after making that first record, at twenty-five, Sinatra told a new acquaintance how he saw his future. "I'm going to be the best singer in the world," he said, "the best singer that ever was."

2

A Family from Sicily

IO SONO SICILIANO ...” I am Sicilian.

At the age of seventy-one, in the broiling heat of summer in 1987, Frank Sinatra was singing, not so well by that time, in the land of his fathers. “I want to say,” he told a rapt audience at Palermo’s Favorita Stadium, “that I love you dearly for coming tonight. I haven’t been in Italy for a long time—I’m so thrilled. I’m very happy.”

The crowd roared approval, especially when he said he was Sicilian, that his father was born in Sicily. Sinatra’s voice cracked a little as he spoke, and he looked more reflective than happy. At another concert, in the northern Italian city of Genoa, he had a joke for his audience. “Two very important and wonderful people came from Genoa,” he quipped. “One *. . . Uno: Christopher Columbus. Due: mia Mamma . . .*”

This second crowd cheered, too, though a little less enthusiastically when he mentioned that his father was Sicilian. “I don’t think,” he said wryly, “that they’re too thrilled about Sicilia.” It was a nod to northern Italians’ feelings about the island off the southernmost tip of the country. They look down on its people as backward and slothful, and because, as all the world knows, it is synonymous with organized crime. It is the island of fire and paradox, the dismembered foot of the leg of Italy. Sicily: at ten thousand square miles the largest island in the

Mediterranean, a cornucopia of history that remains more remote and mysterious than anywhere in Europe.

The island's story has been a saga of violence. Its ground heaved to earthquakes, and its volcanoes spat fire and lava, long before Christ. Its population carries the genes of Greeks and Romans, of Germanic Vandals and Arabs, of Normans and Spaniards, all of them invaders who wrote Sicily's history in blood.

"Sicily is ungovernable," Luigi Barzini wrote. "The inhabitants long ago learned to distrust and neutralize all written laws." Crime was endemic, so alarmingly so that a hundred years ago the island's crime rate was said to be the worst in Europe. By then, the outside world had already heard the spectral name that has become inseparable from that of the island—Mafia.

The origin of that word is as much a mystery as the criminal brotherhood itself, but in Sicily "mafia" has one meaning and "Mafia"—with an upper case "M"—another. For the islanders, in Barzini's view, the word "mafia" was originally used to refer to "a state of mind, a philosophy of life, a concept of society, a moral code." At its heart is marriage and the family, with strict parameters. Marriage is for life, divorce unacceptable and impossible.

A man with possessions or special skills was deemed to have authority, and known as a *padrone.* In "mafia" with a small "m," those who lived by the code and wielded power in the community were *uomini rispettati,* men of respect. They were supposed to behave chivalrously, to be good family men, and their word was their bond. They set an example, and they expected to be obeyed.

The corruption of the code and the descent to criminality was rapid. Well before the dawn of the twentieth century, the Mafia with a capital “M,” though never exactly an organization, was levying tribute from farmers, controlling the minimal water supply, the builders and the businessmen, fixing prices and contracts.

Cooperation was enforced brutally. Those who spoke out in protest were killed, whatever their station in life. The Mafia made a mockery of the state, rigging elections, corrupting the politicians it favored, and terrorizing opponents. From 1860 to 1924, not a single politician from Sicily was elected to the Italian parliament without Mafia approval. The island and its people, as one early visitor wrote, were “not a dish for the timid.”

Frank Sinatra’s paternal grandfather grew up in Sicily in the years that followed the end of foreign rule, a time of social and political mayhem. His childhood and early adult years coincided with the collapse of civil authority, brutally suppressed uprisings, and the rise of the Mafia to fill the power vacuum.

Beyond that, very little has been known about the Sinatra family’s background in Sicily. The grandfather’s obituary, which appeared in the *New York Times* because of his famous grandson, merely had him born “in Italy” in 1884 (though his American death certificate indicates he was born much earlier, in 1866). Twice, in 1964 and in 1987, Frank Sinatra told audiences that his family had come from Catania, about as far east as one can go in Sicily. Yet he told one of his musicians, principal violist Ann Barak, that they came from Agrigento on the southwestern side of the island. His daughter Nancy, who consulted her father extensively while working on her two books about his life, wrote that her

great-grandfather had been “born and brought up” in Agrigento. His name, according to her, was John.

In fact he came from neither Catania nor Agrigento, was born earlier than either of the dates previously reported, and his true name was Francesco—in the American rendering, Frank.

SICILIAN BAPTISMAL and marriage records, United States immigration and census data, and interviews with surviving grandchildren establish that Francesco Sinatra was born in 1857 in the town of Lercara Friddi, in the hills of northwest Sicily. It had about ten thousand inhabitants and it was a place of some importance, referred to by some as *piccoloPalermo,* little Palermo.

The reason was sulfur, an essential commodity in the paper and pharmaceutical industries, in which Sicily was rich and Lercara especially so. Foreign companies reaped the profits, however, and most locals languished in poverty. The town was located, in the words of a prominent Italian editor, in “the core territory of the Mafia.” The town lies fifteen miles from Corleone, a name made famous by *The Godfather* and in real life a community credited with breeding more future American mafiosi than any other place in Sicily. It is just twelve miles from the Mafia stronghold of Prizzi—as in *Prizzi’s Honor,* the Richard Con-don novel about the mob and the film based on it that starred Jack Nicholson.

It was Lercara Friddi, however, that produced the most notorious mafioso of the twentieth century. Francesco Sinatra’s hometown spawned Lucky Luciano. Luciano was “without doubt the most important Italian-American gangster,” according to one authority, and “head of the Italian underworld throughout the land,” according to a

longtime head of the Chicago Crime Commission. One of his own lawyers described him as having been, quite simply, “the founder of the modern Mafia.”

Luciano, whose real name was Salvatore Lucania, was born in Lercara Friddi in 1897. Old marriage and baptismal registers show that his parents and Francesco Sinatra and his bride, Rosa Saglimbeni, were married at the church of Santa Maria della Neve within two years of each other. Luciano was baptized there, in the same font as Francesco’s first two children.

In all the years of speculation about Frank Sinatra’s Mafia links, this coincidence of origin has remained unknown. Other new information makes it very likely that the Sinatras and the Lucanias knew each other. The two families lived on the same short street, the Via Margherita di Savoia, at roughly the same time. Luciano’s address book, seized by law enforcement authorities on his death in 1962 and available today in the files of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, contains only two entries for individuals who lived in Lercara Friddi: one a member of his own family and the other a man named Saglimbeni, a relative of the woman Francesco Sinatra married. Even if the Sinatras and the Lucanias did not know each other, Luciano’s later notoriety makes it certain that the Sinatra family eventually learned that they and the gangster shared the same town of origin. Kinship and origins are important in Italian-American culture, and were even more so in the first decades of the diaspora.

As a boy, Frank Sinatra could have learned from any of several older relatives that his people and Luciano came from the same Sicilian town. He certainly should have learned it from Francesco, who lived with Sinatra’s family

after his wife's death and often minded his grandson when the boy's parents were out.

Francesco, moreover, survived to the age of ninety-one, until long after Luciano had become an infamous household name and Frank Sinatra an internationally famous singer. Sinatra himself indicated, and a close contemporary confirmed, that he and his grandfather were "very close." Late in life, he said he had gone out of his way to "check back" on his Sicilian ties. And yet, as we have seen, he muddied the historical waters by suggesting that his forebears came from Sicilian towns far from Lercara Friddi.

That the Sinatra family came from the same town as a top mafioso was not in itself a cause for embarrassment. The reason for the obfuscation, though, may be found in the family involvement with bootlegging in Frank Sinatra's childhood and, above all, in his own longtime relationship with Luciano himself, the extent of which can now be documented for the first time.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE SCHOOL in Lercara Friddi, and few people there could read or write. Francesco Sinatra was no exception, but he did have a trade—he was a shoemaker. He married Rosa, a local woman his own age, when both were in their early twenties, and by the time they turned thirty, in 1887, the couple had two sons. As the century neared its close, thousands of Sicilians were going hungry, especially in the countryside. There were food riots, and crime was rampant.

In western Sicily, the Mafia's power had become absolute. Palermo, the island's capital, spawned the first *capo di tutti capi,* Don Vito, who would one day forge the first links between the Sicilian Mafia and the United States. His

successor, Don Carlo, operated from a village just fourteen miles from Lercara Friddi. Some of the most notorious American mob bosses—Tony Accardo, Carlo Gambino, Sam Giancana, Santo Trafficante—were, like Luciano, of western Sicilian parentage.

By 1889 Francesco and Rosa had moved to a working-class suburb of Palermo. Two more sons were born there, but died in infancy, possibly victims of the cholera epidemic that ravaged the neighborhood in the early 1890s. One and a half million Sicilians were to leave the island in the next twenty-five years, many going to Argentina and Brazil and, increasingly, to the United States.

Francesco Sinatra joined the exodus in the summer of 1900. At the age of forty-three, he said goodbye to Rosa and their surviving children—there were by now three sons and two daughters—and boarded a ship for Naples. There he transferred to the British steamer *Spartan Prince,* carrying a steerage ticket to New York. At Ellis Island, on July 6, he told immigration officials he planned to stay with a relative living on Old Broadway in Manhattan. He had $30 in his pocket.

Francesco found work, and soon had enough confidence to start sending for his family. His eldest son, Isidor, joined him in America, and Salvatore, just fifteen and declaring himself a shoemaker like his father, arrived in 1902. Rosa arrived at Christmas the following year, accompanied by Antonino, age nine, and their two daughters, Angelina and Dorotea, who were younger. Antonino—Anthony Martin or Marty, as he would become in America—was to father the greatest popular singer of the century.

The Statue of Liberty smiled, Frank Sinatra would say in an emotional moment forty years later, when his father

“took his first step on Liberty’s soil.” For many Italian newcomers, however, the smile proved illusory.

IN FRANCESCO’S DAY, Italian immigrants were greeted with widespread hostility. They were at the bottom of the heap in New York, ostracized by those who had arrived before them, by the Germans and the Irish especially. Italians were said to be dirty, ignorant, and criminal, and were vilified as “wops,” “dagos,” “guineas.” Early in the twentieth century, when blacks were being lynched in the South, some Americans considered Italians—immigrants from southern Italy and Sicily especially—“not even white.” The Ku Klux Klan railed against them. They found themselves excluded from churches used by other ethnic groups, consigned to menial work, and persecuted by the police.

The accusation of criminality had some basis in fact. Mafia fugitives from Sicily had by then been active in the United States for some years. Palermo’s mob chieftain Don Vito, describing himself to immigration officials as “a dealer,” arrived from Europe the year after Francesco and during a two-year stay laid the foundation of what would eventually become the American Mafia.

To oppressed Sicilian immigrants, Vito and his kind were the *uomini rispettati* who had ruled the roost back home. They offered protection, loaned money, made many things possible—at a price. They extorted money from shopkeepers and workmen, and those who did not cooperate got hurt. To some immigrants, joining the ranks of the criminals was more attractive than legitimate work. “I realized Italians were considered dirt, the scum of the earth,” recalled “Jimmy Blue Eyes” Alo, the son of a Calabrian tailor who was to become a senior American mafioso. “I quit . . . went the other way.”

Lucky Luciano, who arrived in America from Lercara Friddi several years after the Sinatras, made the same choice. “We was surrounded by crooks,” he recalled of his childhood years on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, “and plenty of them were guys who were supposed to be legit. . . . All of them was stealin’ from somebody. And we had the real pros, the rich Dons from the old country, with their big black cars and mustaches to match. . . . The only thing is, we knew they was rich, and rich was what counted.”

Francesco, for his part, struggled. Many Italians were cobblers, apparently too many, for he found work as a boilermaker. He later landed a job at the American Pencil Company that paid $11 a week (about $200 today), and stayed with the company for seventeen years. Rosa, like Francesco already well into her forties, raised their children and eventually opened a small grocery. By that time, the couple had long since left New York City for the town now inseparably linked with the name Sinatra—Hoboken.

In the nineteenth century the town had been a resort for opulent New Yorkers like the Vanderbilts and the Astors. By the time the Sinatras arrived, however, it had become a grubby industrial town of sixty thousand people. Its waterfront, on the Hudson River, served oceangoing ships and backed onto a jumble of factories and railroad yards. The Irish ran the city, held the plum jobs, occupied the best housing. Italian newcomers, crammed into a few mean streets to the west, made the best of it in tenements.

The Italians stayed in their own territory, in part because they were unwelcome elsewhere and in part because it suited them. In the town’s Little Italy they had the comfort of their own church and their own customs and rules, rules enforced by their own criminal protectors. Sicilians, especially, tended to gravitate to streets settled by earlier

arrivals from their hometowns and villages. Close relatives often lived on the same block or even in the same building.

Hoboken was a tough town, and Italians straying into Irish territory after dark invited violent attack. Many men in the Italian section owned firearms, mostly antiquated handguns, and in 1909 some of them fought a battle against the Irish-dominated police force. The police, summoned to the scene of a fracas on Monroe Street—an Italian child had been killed in an accident involving other Italians—came under heavy fire. “Excited Italians armed with revolvers,” the *New York Times* reported, “were lurking behind windows and doors taking pot shots at the police. . . . A hundred or more shots were fired, and at a late hour last night quiet had not been entirely restored.”

Francesco and Rosa raised their five children in Hoboken through a decade and more of freezing winters and sweltering summers. They had no central heating and, of course, no air-conditioning. Isidor worked with his parents in their grocery. Salvatore became a baker. Marty, who dropped out of school when he was ten or eleven, could neither read nor write nor speak much English. He turned fifteen the month of the Italian immigrants’ battle with the police.

Marty was a small fellow, “the size of a mushroom,” one acquaintance said. He soon had a prematurely receding hairline and, perhaps to compensate for his lack of stature, sported multiple tattoos. He was dogged by chronic asthma. Relatives recalled him as having been a gentle character, most of the time, but he was prone to long brooding silences and had an explosive temper. He also liked to drink.

Following in the steps of his father and his brother Salvatore, Marty started out as an apprentice shoemaker.

For years, though, he had no steady job. At one point, when he was listing his occupation as “chauffeur, ” he was involved in a fatal accident. After running over and killing a five-year-old child on Newark Street, near the docks, Marty simply drove away. Tried for manslaughter, he told the court he had been “unnerved” and lost his head, and was acquitted. He also got into trouble for receiving stolen goods.

For a while he fought professionally, as a bantamweight. He called himself Marty O’Brien in the ring, after his sponsor, an Irishman from Philadelphia. Italian boxers often used Irish names to make themselves acceptable to a wider public. It was probably through a fellow prizefighter, Dominick “Champ” Garaventa, that he met the woman who was to become Frank Sinatra’s mother.

Dolly Garaventa, one of Dominick’s eight siblings, was also an immigrant—from northern Italy. Her father, a peasant from Rossi, a hamlet near Genoa, had brought his wife and children to the United States before the turn of the century. If he had high hopes for his sons, however, he was sorely disappointed.

Dominick was involved in bootlegging, and got arrested after a shooting incident involving his brother Lawrence. Lawrence, known as “Babe” because he was the youngest of the brood, turned out to be the worst of the lot. Also a boxer, he was arrested more than twenty times, convicted of loan-sharking and pulled in for bootlegging offenses and for two armed holdups that resulted in murder. Another brother, Gustavo, was arrested several times for running numbers.

Dolly, more properly Natalina, or Natalie, Garaventa, had been born the day after Christmas in 1896. She had blue

eyes and light skin and, as a young woman, strawberry blond hair. Though tiny, she was formidable even as a teenager. Women were not allowed to attend fights, but Dolly dressed as a boy to see Marty Sinatra box. She talked tough—her foul mouth became legendary—and nonstop. She never forgot or forgave a perceived offense. She was literate, spoke fluent English, and could get by in several Italian dialects. She was a good organizer, and at some point trained as a nurse. She could also sing, a talent inherited from her father. She sang popular songs and operatic arias at weddings and family affairs, and at Hoboken's Clam Broth House—while standing on a table.

Marty Sinatra met Dolly in 1912 when he was eighteen and she sixteen. He could sing, too, and serenaded her with a sentimental ditty called "You Remind Me of the Girl Who Used to Go to School with Me." Dolly was brainier, bossy, and domineering, but love flowered. Defying opposition from her parents, she and Marty ran away—all of two miles—to Jersey City, where they were married at city hall on Valentine's Day 1913. Afterward, they returned home, made up with their families, and later married again in church.

They rented an apartment at 415 Monroe Street, on the block where four years earlier their fellow Italians had fought with the police. Salvatore Sinatra—he now called himself Charlie—and his wife moved in across the hall. Publicists would one day describe the building as having been a slum tenement. In fact it was a modern wood frame structure, four stories over a cellar, divided into eight apartments. There was no hot water and two families shared the single toilet on each floor, but in those days that was nothing out of the ordinary. Each family had three rooms, plus a kitchen with a stove. Dolly's brother Dominick remembered it as "a pretty good, lower-middle-class neighborhood."

WHILE DOLLY AND MARTY found each other, tied the knot, and set up house, the world had gone on turning. The *Titanic* was sunk by the iceberg. Woodrow Wilson was installed as president, avoiding as best he could a demonstration in Washington by women demanding the right to vote. A French aviator flew over the Mediterranean past Sicily, taking his airplane farther over water than any man before him. The Panama Canal opened, joining the Atlantic to the Pacific. Henry Ford established a “moving assembly line” to build automobiles. Einstein refined his Theory of Relativity. Europe was engulfed by war, though for the time being the United States was staying out of it.

There was something else. Wind-up Victrolas—phonographs— were now on the market and easily available. For the first time, Americans could listen to music on rapidly spinning discs called records.

These seismic tremors impinged little on the newlyweds, though Dolly, who would one day immerse herself in local politics, may have cheered for the suffragettes protesting in the capital. For the time being, though, she was preoccupied, and so was Marty. Brides, especially brides with Sicilian husbands, were supposed to get pregnant.

3

The Only Child

WE WERE MARRIED for a long time," Dolly was to recall, "and we didn't think we were going to have any babies." Then in early 1915, after a wait of two years, she did become pregnant. She hoped for a girl.

The pains came in the second week of December. Midwives plodded through snow-covered streets to reach the Sinatra apartment, then summoned a doctor. Sprawled on the kitchen table, Dolly was in trouble. She was less than five feet tall and weighed just ninety pounds, and the baby was enormous. She was in agony.

Other women crowded around, shouting advice. There was Dolly's mother, Rosa, her sister Josie, and a neighbor from across the street. The labor was not progressing and the patient was becoming feeble. Fearing for Dolly's life, the doctor opted for forceps. The baby was literally torn from the birth canal, bleeding at the head and neck. It was not the girl Dolly had hoped for but a boy weighing thirteen and a half pounds, and he appeared to be dead.

"I don't think he'll live," Josie remembered the doctor muttering. "Let's take care of the mother." Then one of the women—Dolly's mother is usually given the credit—thought to hold the huge infant under the cold-water tap. He spluttered, was tapped on the back with the palm of a hand, and began to squall.

The trauma left Dolly unable to bear more children. The child's left earlobe, cheek, and part of his neck, torn by the doctor's forceps, would be scarred for the rest of his life. As an adult he would use makeup on occasion to cover the damage. A perforated eardrum, discovered far in the future, may also have been a result of the birth.

The grown man would talk publicly of his gratitude at having been revived. Privately, he had trouble accepting what he learned about the circumstances of his birth. At age eleven, he reportedly tried to attack the doctor who had delivered him. As an adult, he would astonish one of his lovers with an irrational outburst of resentment. "They weren't thinking about me," he said bitterly, "they were just thinking about my mother. They just kind of ripped me out and tossed me aside."

The birth certificate, registered with the state of New Jersey on December 17, 1915, gave the newborn's name as "Frank Sinestro." "Sinestro" was a clerk's mistake, but the "Frank" made sense. It is the Italian custom to name a firstborn child after a paternal grandparent, in this case Francesco. A quarter of a century later, when the grown child had become a celebrity, the name would be reregistered as "Francis A. Sinatra." The "A.," the world was told, stood for "Albert."

"God loves you," family elders told the boy; "he saved you for something. You're meant to be somebody."

A baby photograph of Frank Sinatra, taken in his birthday suit against a painted backdrop of a rural scene, shows a plump child. "It wasn't until he was four or five that he got to be real skinny," recalled his aunt Josie. A tinted print that has been published shows him swaddled against the cold in his mother's arms, a cap hiding the scarred left side of his

head. Nineteen-year-old Dolly looks as though she is finding it hard to smile, and Frank—Frankie, as he would be called until early adulthood—appears to be looking at her doubtfully.

That old family snapshot now seems symbolic of the childhood that followed. Dolly had a strange concept of motherhood, and Frank had all the problems of an only child and more. Having hoped for a girl, she had bought pink baby clothes, and that is what he wore. “I didn’t care,” she recalled. Later, she got her mother to make him Little Lord Fauntleroy suits. Frank played with dolls and was “a little bit of a sissy” far longer than is usual, according to a childhood acquaintance.

Staying at home with the baby was never a priority for Dolly. Frank spent most of his infancy being minded either by his grandfather Francesco or by his maternal grandmother. In 1917, when the United States entered World War I, Marty was exempted from the draft as a man with a dependent family. Dolly, however, volunteered for overseas service as a nurse. When her offer was not accepted, she went to work as a chocolate dipper in a candy store.

Dolly’s sights were set higher than that. She became a midwife and plunged into local politics, both activities that made her a controversial figure. In 1919, in the final months of the campaign for women’s suffrage, she was one of a number of women who chained themselves to the railings at Hoboken city hall. After the suffrage struggle was won, still in her twenties, she became a Democratic ward leader. “I was asked to run because I spoke all the dialects,” she recalled.

When the Irish city bosses started to solicit Italian immigrant votes, they needed someone with influence in the neighborhood. Dolly won that influence by getting people jobs, securing welfare checks for the needy, giving advice on health problems, getting bags of coal distributed in the winter. “She was like a godmother,” said Anthony Petrozelli, who grew up on Monroe Street. “They respected her. She was strong, and she didn’t give a damn about nothing.”

The politicians Dolly worked for ruled Hoboken and Jersey City for thirty years, a period infamous for corruption and thuggery. She was close to two mayors of the period, both notorious characters, and spent her spare time, in the words of her granddaughter Tina, “buying votes for the local Democratic machine.”

Dolly wanted to get her husband into politics, too, but, as her niece Rose Paldino put it, “Marty wasn’t smart enough.” At home, he would tease his wife by pretending to favor the Republicans, and she would retaliate by refusing to cook. Frank was soon pressed into carrying placards for the Democrats. He grew up supporting the Democrats and would continue to do so until he was in his fifties.

Women in the Italian neighborhood knew about Dolly because of the entry in the city directory that read, in bold print: “DELLA SINATRA, Maternity Nurse and Midwife—Phone Hoboken 985.” Writing about the family years later, Kitty Kelley made much of the fact that Sinatra’s mother performed abortions, at a time when the procedure was an illegal, shameful affair. Dolly was arrested several times for performing abortions and convicted twice. Some knew her as “Hatpin Dolly,” and her reputation would one day cause her son to be barred from performing in a local Catholic church.