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By **Steve Uhler**
SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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On a blustery Manhattan night in 1940, the drummer for Tommy Dorsey's orchestra was taking a between-sets stroll when he felt a friendly tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he was cold-cocked by a couple of hired goons he didn't recognize. The following week's edition of Down Beat blared, "Buddy Rich Gets Face Bashed In."

Rich had been having a series of increasingly contentious disagreements with the new "boy singer" in the band. The new kid wanted to showcase syrupy ballads; Rich wanted to stick to more propulsive jazz.

Nursing his swollen face days later, Rich suspected — correctly — this same hotheaded upstart was behind the attack. His name: Frank Sinatra.

Sinatra. Say it loud, and there's music playing.

As he matured ("aged" is more accurate), Sinatra acquired many sobriquets, like ornaments on a tree. Frankie Baby. Swoonatra. Chairman of the Board. Old Blue Eyes. And a few other choice names.

Over the span of his lifetime — dare we call it his "era"? — Sinatra morphed through many phases and personas, dapperly decked out in new threads for each succeeding generation.

From bobby sox teen idol to Rat Pack leader, from scrawny picked-on kid to bantam weight bully, from liberal FDR activist to starchy conservative Reaganite. He was both a lover (his string of seemingly endless conquests included Lana Turner, Lauren Bacall and, No. 1 on the hit parade, Ava Gardner) and a fighter, though he often had others fight his battles for him. (Just ask Buddy Rich.)

Along the way, he became what is generally considered to be the greatest popular singer of all time. He was, and remains, The Voice.

Does the world really need another take on the contrarian, combustible enigma that was Frank Sinatra? James Kaplan's "Frank: The Voice," an absorbing and exhaustive chronicle of the singer's early years, paints an evocative portrait of the scrappy young Bing Crosby-wannabe from Hoboken, N.J., who literally willed himself to greatness.

Relentlessly ambitious — equal parts insecure mama's boy and streetwise survivor — the young Sinatra was every bit as hungry as his early photos made him out to be.

In his craft, he cultivated laudable self-discipline, but was incapable of exercising self-control in his personal life — and the distinction and frisson between the two made all the difference, accounting for the obsessive-compulsive paradox that launched a thousand gossip columns.

But his shortcomings as a human being contributed immeasurably to his growth as an artist. He began as an accomplished vocal technician, achieving greatness when he assimilated his personal

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demons into his art — but that alchemy didn't happen until he'd reached bottom both professionally and personally. Kaplan observes succinctly, "He felt too much: it was his burden, his gift."

Following his career nadir in the late 1940s and early '50s ("The Kissing Bandit," anyone?) and subsequent half-hearted suicide attempts, he rose from the ashes with more panache than a phoenix draped in a Sy Devore suit. No artist ever got his comeuppance more cruelly than Sinatra. Conversely, no scrappy survivor ever orchestrated a more elegant up-comeance. His turn as Maggio in 1953's "From Here to Eternity" not only resurrected his career, it also cemented his legend.

Kaplan draws his cautionary morality tale on a sprawling canvas — World War II and postwar America — with an eclectic and colorful supporting cast sketched in bold strokes: Dominating mother Dolly, perpetually duped wife Nancy Barbato, perverted studio paterfamilias Louis B. Mayer, doomed wiseguy Bugsy Siegel and, most vividly of all, Gardner as Carmen to Sinatra's Don Jose all figure into the tapestry.

Deftly juggling tabloid gossip and impressive research, Kaplan succeeds in capturing the zeitgeist of the times, his punchy sentences conjuring short stories in themselves: "Lawyers, agents, executives, goons, mobsters, gofers — all dancing in attendance of the Golden Boy, who yawned, picked his teeth, and winked at the next beautiful girl at his dressing-room door, while his publicist pulled out what remained of his hair."

At a hefty 700-plus pages, "Frank" wraps in 1954, just after Sinatra wins a best supporting actor Oscar for "Eternity," and before his Capitol masterpieces, the Rat Pack, the Reprise years, Mia Farrow, his much-touted 1971 retirement and hot-on-its-heels comeback. The rest was yet to come.

"Frank" offers fascinating insight into the formative years of the obsessive young artist who would become father to the unsettled man, determined to have the world on a string.

For Sinatra, it would always be all or nothing at all.

Steve Uhler is an Austin freelance writer and musician.

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