

So, you want to sound like “Old Blue Eyes”?



### **Books have been written on Sinatra’s style.**

Indeed, he actually co-authored a book *Tips On Popular Singing by Frank Sinatra in collaboration with his vocal teacher John Quinlan*. The book doesn’t actually tell you how to sound like him, merely how to train like him. Many Sinatra impersonators sound like “Old Blue Eyes” on one or two songs, like *My Way* or *LeRoy Brown*. They then spoil the magic by barking out the same sort of harsh growling sound in *All the Way* or *Nancy*.

Frank Sinatra made his mark as a crooner in the Bing Crosby mold, quietly seducing bobby-soxed teens away from their homework over a valve radio. He went on to do a whole range of song styles and, over 60 years, he sang as a young man, middle-aged man, and, unlike Elvis, as an old man. Sadly, many today only remember his later songs when his voice became harsh and growly, as we old men do. But there is much more to Mr Sinatra’s complex contribution. Therefore, to do him justice, you have to give a Sinatra “feel” to each song by adopting an Sinatra mind-set. This involves a vocal style, a research mind, as well as a distinctive Hoboken, NJ accent. I’ve tried to break it down into components:

### **The Sinatra vocal style**

#### ***Range***

Sinatra has a limited baritone range and would sound more natural on mid-range notes. His voice is like a saxophone – a brassy reed instrument. He sounds harsh compared to predecessor Bing Crosby, who pioneered the deep, rich radio crooner style. Sinatra had a “bright, young” brash approach compared with Bing’s mellow, fatherly sound –ie- Bing: “buh-buh-bu-boo” v Frank: “do-be-do-be-do”.

***High notes***, on the other hand, were distinctive, as he deliberately chose to handle high notes with an open throat like an operatic or Broadway baritone. Don’t forget that he was to have starred as a stage baritone in *Carousel* and

that Gordon McRae, a more conventional baritone than crooner, was merely his replacement. Sinatra refused to use falsetto or a closed throat to whine or squeak out a note as is done in today's pop sounds. The open throat technique requires a lot of air. The Sinatra high sound is a bit like a Trombone. He has a naturally edgy and brassy sound compared to more conventional baritones like Gordon McRae, Tom Jones, and Englbart, who sound more like smooth French Horns on high notes.

When belting out an open-throat high note, remember to hold the mike away to shout at it to give that huge, distant, cavern sound.

**Quiet, seductive notes**, as in *I Couldn't Sleep A Wink Last Night*, are always sung –ie- with a subtle vibration - rather than merely flat, as in speaking. Remember to hold the mike close to half-whisper these notes & let the mike provide the volume, which should sound up close and personal. The quiet, high-pitched Sinatra sound is a bit like a clarinet – restrained and reedy.

**Low notes** require resonance. This is the sort of sound made when he does *Old Man River*, competing against the memory of legendary bass Paul Robeson. Because low notes by definition use an open throat, it requires a lot of air. To hit really low notes, you have to lean your head forward so that the throat can relax and not be stretched in any way.

The Sinatra bass sound is a bit like a Trombone – brassy, rather than Tuba-like, which would be the Elvis bass.

## **Phrasing**

Enthusiasts praise Sinatra for his phrasing and timing. Because this was his talent, it is hard to emulate. What it means in practice is giving the audience the impression that you know very darn well when the note should come in and then you deliberately do something different – a bit like Impressionist painting or improvised jazz. There is a certain amount of randomness to the timing so that the audience can't actually predict where you will come in, only where you conventionally should come in.

## **Research**

Despite his reputation as wild man, Sinatra took his music seriously. He used to study instrumental trumpet and trombone soloists and other famous singers to get ideas. That suggests that you should do the same – instead of trying to sound like Sinatra, try to sound like a saxophonist or clarinetist such as Benny Goodman or Arty Shaw or a female vocalist like Billy Holiday. For practice, hum the song and try to sound like a sax/clarinet. By doing that, you're following the Sinatra mindset as a music researcher and might end up sounding more like him than by direct imitation.

## Breathing

Another trademark of Sinatra style was extended notes. He used to practice underwater lap swimming to improve his lung capacity to allow him to hold notes longer. Apparently, he thought these long notes would appeal to female listeners and the results would suggest he was right. Michael Crawford reported that Sinatra was so passionate about this aspect of singing that he persisted on talking about it as Michael was backing out of Frank's driveway after dinner to the extent that Michael accidentally ran over Frank's foot! So, the lesson seems to be – hold that note as long as you can.

## Hoboken Twang

Sinatra, like many club singers, cultivated a bouncy sort of lilt to suit the swing style. The club style "it's a gas" became by the 60s more kitsch than "ovodeodo", "23 skidoo", or "oh you kid" from the 20s. As the old joke went: "Descartes – 'to do is to be' .. Kant- 'to be is to do' .. Sinatra 'do be do be do'". As a retro-50s-club sound, however, a bit of high camp bounce and finger-clicking will at least sound musical and is certainly a contrast to angsty millennial songs with their monotonous over-driven guitar background juxtaposed with screaming youth. So feel free to rotate your head around the nasal axis, while chanting "ring a ding ding".

## Hoboken Accent

Sinatra came from a much-parodied ethnic group. For example, Sinatra was associated with and considered for *The Godfather* character, Johnny Fontaine, who was played by Sinatra's contemporary crooner, Al Martino. *The Soprano's* have made da' New Joisey accents all dah rage. Too much fake Hoboken accent is an ethnic slur –ie- Tony Curtis has never lived down his line in *Son of Ali Baba*: "Yondah lies d' Valley of d' Sun and beyond, d' castle of my faddah.' But, hey! wouldn't *Beyond the Valley of the Sun* make a great Sinatra song?

The Hoboken phrasing gives it a swing sound, so the accent actually has an impact on the music: because an "ah" sound is softer than a harsh "r" sound, a liddle touch o' d' Hoboken accent can soften a song and give a liddle bounce, oah ahn't you list'nin'? When doing Sinatra, try pretending you're wearing a wire, singing at a 1960s *BadaBing* Mafia nightclub, trying to impress a stripper dat you're cool and, at d' same time, reassuring Pauli and Silvio dat you're an OK wiseguy and one of dem. Dat's moah high preshah dan d' Vegas Sands.

## Swing Era

Ballads and versatility were what put Sinatra in the charts in the first place. Singing live on *Your Hit Parade* he had to serve up whatever was in the charts: fast, slow, high, low, groovy, square, cool, corny, highbrow, lowbrow... and he kept everyone happy every night. The Sinatra swing is very different from the Elvis rock. Comparing Sinatra's *Castle Rock* with Elvis' *Jailhouse Rock* shows them to have a very different vocal approach. Sinatra croons each

note, whereas Elvis shouts many of them, abbreviates others, stretches some out. They're both danceable but are from different era's.

### **Later Era**

Sinatra's lilting swing style is in contrast to his barking *LeRoy Brown* sound of later years, so make sure to apply the appropriate style to the era. You don't bark on *All the Way*. To get the barking sound, think of saying "You lookin' at me? Yeah, you – I'm talkin'a you!" to a 7 foot gorilla.

### **Radio Era Ballads**

Pretend you're trying mass hypnosis on a nation of teenage girls who have you on the wireless as background music while they're doing their homework. You don't want to startle them and don't want their daddy to hear. A crooner holds notes out past their use-by date without drawing a breath, makes breathing sounds when they want to appear to sigh, and generates an ethereal quality that comes from being really on key with a very pure note. You're also crooning the words ve-r-r-ry meaningfully to these ever-so-precious little darlings (your ma and grandma after all!), and want to ooze out of the radio like maple syrup all over their trigonometry lesson. "It's Frankie, here, girls .. just for you, sweetheart..."

To really be the ultimate smoochy crooner, try mimicking Karen Carpenter or Connie Francis. Better yet, the ultimate suck-up job - sing like you talk to your cat when trying to sneak in a bath or pill from the vet: click your fingers and croon "Here kitty kitty, suh-weet kitty kitty, bee-you-tiful kitty kitty". Hm, why did no-one write *Here kitty kitty* as a Sinatra song? Maybe I should record it!

### **No Vibrato**

Sinatra and Elvis are poles apart in terms of vibrato. Everyone has some vibration in the voice. That's what makes a note sound musical instead of spoken. Sinatra always put a distinctive pitch to every note, but, whereas it's quite natural to warble and waver on notes, Frank Sinatra went out of his way to cultivate a flat, almost non-vibrating sound, which has come to be seen as part of the club crooner style. Sid Vicious sent this up by doing an over-the-top warble like a Leslie rotating speaker on a version of *My Way*, which was a deliberate contrast to the flat, smooth Sinatra sound, which Sid does on some of the notes just to show you he can if he wants to.

To give a musical sound to a non-vibrating sustained note means you have to have excellent pitch. Sinatra ballads are not for those who have a hard time staying on key.

### **Lack of Echo or Effects**

The Sinatra we know from recordings worked under very primitive conditions: musicians went on strike, forcing them to do live radio shows acappella ...there was little of the echo that today's vocalists take for granted. However,

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he had good microphones, even by today's standards, and the valve circuitry, because of its very subtle random vibrations, added a certain amount of warmth and compression to sounds. Without echo the sound is plain and all of the musicality must come from hitting solid, pure notes.

### **Summary of the Sinatra style:**

**Range** voice is like a saxophone – a brassy reed

**Open throat** on high and low notes

**Phrasing** deliberately diverging from the expected timing

**Research** study clarinet, trumpet, and sax solos

**Breathing** hold and taper out long notes without breath

**Hoboken Twang** a bouncy, lilting club style of sing-song

**Hoboken Accent** particularly avoiding harsh “r” sounds

**Swing Era croon**, but don't shout, notes in time with rhythm

**Later years** a harsh, abrupt, staccato barking sound

**Radio Era Ballads** Quiet, seductive notes

**Flat sound** with no yodel or falsetto

**Lack of echo** or effects except some warmth (valve) and bass