

BOBBIE GREENE

4/15/98

Dick -
David Altschul
shared your
very nice note
with me &
sent along the
attached
related article.
I thought you
would find it
as interesting as
I did.

Cheers,
Bobbie

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innate on national TV. Fearing a "big edit" from CBS censors, Letterman producers asked the band to do a retake. The group refused, and the song aired in full.

While U.S. television serves up a regular diet of sizzle and gruel, there's a whole range of options not on the menu. You can turn off what's tasteless, but as children's TV advocate Peggy Charren observes, "You can't turn on what's not there."

JEFF COHEN

Jeff Cohen is the director of the media watch group FAIR and co-author of *Wizards of Media Oz* (Common Courage).

His Way

Frank Sinatra, who died May 14 at 82, wasn't always a Republican. In 1945, when he was thin and 30, he won a special Academy Award for *The House I Live In*, a short film in which he told a gang of street-corner kids that racial and religious differences "make no difference except to a Nazi or somebody who's stupid." He sang about "The people that I work with/The workers that I meet... The right to speak my mind out/That's America to me." Sinatra was a stalwart of Popular Front culture: When white students in Gary, Indiana, boycotted classes to protest the integration of their high school, Sinatra spoke in the school auditorium and sang "The House I Live In." In 1947 he published an open letter to Henry Wallace in *The New Republic*, urging him to run for President to "take up the fight we like to think of as ours—the fight for tolerance, which is the basis of any fight for peace."

Then came the crackdown. Right-wing papers started calling him "a pawn of fellow travelers." In the eight years following "The House I Live In," Sinatra was named twelve times in HUAC hearings. *The New York Times* Index has only one entry for Sinatra in 1949: "Sinatra, Frank; See US-Espionage."

The pundits called it "Frank's big nosedive." The Hearst gossip columnists went after him; in 1947 he punched one of the most abusive, Lee Mortimer, at Ciro's in Hollywood. The Hearst papers ran whole pages on the punch, and on the crooner's political problems; one headline read "Sinatra Faces Probe on Red Ties." Sinatra said Mortimer had called him a "dago." Mortimer had been saying in his column that HUAC regarded Sinatra as "one of Hollywood's leading travelers on the road of Red fascism." He pledged to "continue to fight the promotion of class struggle or foreign isms posing as entertainment"—like "The House I Live In."

Then Columbia records asked Sinatra to give back his advance, MGM released him from his film contract, he was fired from his radio show and his agent dropped him. His career, like those of so many other victims of McCarthyism, was in ruins.

His comeback began with *From Here to Eternity* in 1953. He returned to politics, now as a good Democrat. He campaigned for Stevenson in 1956—at a Hollywood Palladium rally he sang "The House I Live In." In the 1960 election, his "High Hopes" was the official Kennedy campaign song. He had a second project

that year, started shortly after Kennedy won the New Hampshire primary: breaking the Hollywood blacklist that had been in force since 1947. "Sinatra Defies Writer Blacklist/Hires Albert Maltz," a *New York Times* headline read. Maltz had written "The House I Live In" and then refused to name names—for which he served time in a federal penitentiary.

The Hearst papers went after Sinatra again, pointing out that the onetime red was working for Kennedy. Harry Cohn, head of Columbia, shouted at Sinatra, "They're calling you a fucking communist!" He responded by taking out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* defending his action. But Joe Kennedy said if Sinatra didn't fire Maltz he couldn't be part of the campaign. He did what he was told, but it must have embittered him.

Sinatra's greatest music comes from the fifties and early sixties, the ring-a-ding years when he recorded the brash and irresistible *Songs for Swingin' Lovers* and *Only the Lonely*, probably his greatest album—ravishing and vulnerable ballad singing. During the sixties he posed an adult alternative to youth culture—the middle-aged male as a potent, experienced swinger. He was capable of being both abusive and tender. At the height of Rat Pack power he integrated his nightclub act by including Sammy Davis Jr.—a groundbreaking move for a big-name white performer. A live recording shows the running gag: Sinatra telling Davis to get off the stage, and Davis asking if he could stay. Finally Davis said, "May I offer some impersonations for your nice folks? My first impression, Mr. Frank Sinatra."

Sinatra: "He's just—you'll excuse the expression—a carbon copy." The audience roared.

When Sinatra finally sang a duet with Davis, it was "Me and My Shadow." They did it together for years. The man who had sung about racial harmony in 1945 didn't sound so sweet anymore.

In 1971 Sinatra announced he was retiring. "The principal activity of his retirement years," John Rockwell has written, "was his political shift from left to right." The turning point seems to have come in 1972, when the House crime committee subpoenaed him and confronted him with testimony about his mob ties.

"That's all hearsay, isn't it?" Sinatra asked. "Yes, it is," the committee counsel conceded.

Just before he testified, Sinatra published an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times*. The subpoena, he argued, was an example of government oppression of the little guy. It was time to get big government off our backs—time to become a Reagan Republican. "It didn't gall him as much as he had thought it would," wrote gossip columnist Earl Wilson.

The Democrats he had supported all his life never invited him to the White House, but in 1973 Nixon did—the President who had begun his career as a member of HUAC from 1946 to 1950, the same HUAC that smeared Sinatra. Sinatra sang "The House I Live In," and Nixon smiled. Almost three decades earlier Sinatra had sung it at newly integrated high schools. When the White House program ended, people in the room noticed Sinatra was in tears.

JOHN WIENER

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David - A little background on "The House I Live In."