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Grayscale reproduction of “Ghost Light (Loew’s Theater, Jersey City)” by Franz Jantzen. The original work — a photo assemblage printed with pigment ink on smooth cotton rag paper and mounted on aluminum panel — is 43 inches high by 77-1/2 inches wide. It was issued in an edition of 15 and first exhibited in 2012.

Ghost Light (Loew’s Theater, Jersey City)

Virtually all of the accounts of Frank Sinatra’s early life include a life-changing moment when the teenager sees Bing Crosby perform and decides then and there to make singing popular music his life. Such a powerful moment, where a performer can have a profound effect on a stranger in the audience, sparked the imagination of Washington D.C. fine arts photographer Franz Jantzen.

So much so that he traveled to the scene of the famed epiphany, Jersey City’s Loew’s Theater, seven decades after the event to create a stunning image. Rather than making a single photograph the artist stitches together countless smaller ones into the larger image. Shown from above, the old theater’s small details, the decaying stage floorboards, its vintage organ in an empty orchestra pit, the worn velvet seats, are

rendered in muted tones. The artist adds one final important element. The single glowing lamp set center stage, in the old theater tradition of leaving one light burning in an empty house to appease those ghosts who may be present, completes an image that is a haunting depiction of memory and moment. Mr. Jantzen writes about the illusive story that became the inspiration for his artwork beginning on page 28.

The Story Behind “Ghost Light (Loew’s Theater, Jersey City)”

By Franz Jantzen

Following is an essay prepared by artist Franz Jantzen for the 2012 exhibit of his artwork “Ghost Light (Loew’s Theater, Jersey City).”

There is no question that singer Bing Crosby, a superstar in the early 1930s, was the primary inspiration for Frank Sinatra’s own career as a singer, and that the groundwork took place while he listened to Crosby on records and the radio as a teenager.

By the time the 17-year-old Sinatra was actually able to see Crosby perform live near his own town, at the Loew’s Theater at Journal Square in Jersey City in early March 1933, he had already begun singing locally, though not very successfully. He went to the show with guitarist-friend Tony Mottola, and while the draw for Sinatra that day was to see his idol, Mottola was more interested in seeing his own idol Eddie Lang, Crosby’s accompanist and the first important jazz guitarist. (The concert they saw would soon take on even more significance, for three weeks later Lang died after a botched tonsillectomy and his death led Crosby to end his own concert appearances.)

That is what happened, but it’s not how the creation myth of Sinatra’s career goes. The famous version, which has appeared in print so often it is never credited to a first-hand source and has even tripped up good historians, goes like this: Sinatra went to a [Crosby movie/live show] in [New York/ Jersey City] with [future wife Nancy Barbato/another girlfriend], and [during/ after] the show turned to her and said [“that doesn’t look so hard, I can do that too”/ something to that effect], and then and there decided on a career as a singer.

That story worked its magic on me, well enough to inspire “Ghost Light.” I read it in Gary Giddins’ excellent biography of Crosby, and the idea that a powerful connection can happen between a performer and someone in the audience,



Loew’s Theater, Jersey City, 1932.

between two people in a particular theater on a particular day, interested me. In this story, the performer was of course totally unaware of his effect on a stranger out in the audience, but his effect was so powerful that it caused the stranger to make a decision at that moment which would not only change the course of American popular song but challenge that very performer for his role as the reigning pop singer of the day.

Only after I finished “Ghost Light” did I look in several other Sinatra biographies for their versions of the event, with the idea of writing a short essay quite different from what I’m writing now, and discovered that all bore the varnish of some forgotten publicist. (The primary factual error in most versions, for example, is that Sinatra sees the show with Nancy, whom he did not meet until over a year later.) Only one version stood out as plausible — Donald Clarke’s — so I contacted him out of curiosity. He in turn consulted Mottola’s son for details, who then forwarded a copy of what may be the only first-hand account of the event, an op-ed his father had written for *The Boston Herald* after Sinatra’s death in 1998.

In the end I’m not sure what this means for my piece, since it owes its existence to a story I first thought was true but evaporated

when I chased it. Except that it’s now a tale of two star-struck teenagers, not just one, each no doubt watching his own idol’s every move onstage. And that perhaps there are indeed such things as ghosts, at least in regard to old theaters, which would necessitate the old theater tradition of appeasing them by keeping a single lamp burning on the stage after the other lights in the building have all been turned off.

What follows are the event as described in several Sinatra biographies, the Crosby biography, and live radio shows from the 1940s. This is by no means comprehensive, but does give a sense of how widely and creatively the mythological version has been repeated.

■ Donald Clarke, *All Or Nothing At All: A Life of Frank Sinatra* (1997, p. 17). Young Frank was a big fan [of Crosby]. He took one of his girlfriends to a theater to see Bing in person, and she never forgot that he came away enchanted, convinced that he could and would be another Crosby. (Guitarists Al Viola, from Brooklyn, and Tony Mottola, from New Jersey, both saw Crosby, probably on the same tour; they were mesmerized by Eddie Lang, Crosby’s guitarist, and both later worked with Frank.)

■ Will Friedwald, *Sinatra! The Song Is You* (1995, p. 62). All Sinatra chroniclers... agree that the turning point of his young life was catching a Bing Crosby performance and deciding that he could “do that.” They don’t agree on whether it was a live theater gig or a movie in Jersey City or Manhattan, and whom he was with, but we do know that sometime in 1931 or 1932, Sinatra had made up his mind that he was going to be the next Bing Crosby.

■ Gary Giddins, *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams* (2001, p. 307). It is tempting to imagine that every time Bing stepped out on a stage in 1933...aspiring singers experienced jolts of recognition. Within ten years the pop music terrain would be crowded with his musical offspring...yet none of those singers, however popular or distinctive, provided Crosby with any real competition. Only one singer challenged him. Right before Bing played the Capitol [in New York], he and Eddie Lang worked a week at Jersey City’s Journal Square Theater. In attendance, with his girlfriend and future wife, Nancy Barbato, was seventeen-year old Frank Sinatra, who credited Bing’s performance that day with his own decision to embark on a musical career.

■ Nancy Sinatra, *Frank Sinatra: My Father* (1985, p. 47). My mother [Frank Sinatra’s first wife, Nancy] believes that “his mind was made up [to become a singer]. [She said that] We used to go to the most important part of town in Jersey City, Journal Square. They had theaters there, and we’d see movies and the different live acts. We saw Russ Columbo, and Bing Crosby in his last vaudeville appearance. They were his idols. He had a burning desire to be like them.”

Frank Sinatra: “I was a big fan of Bing’s. But I never wanted to sing like him, because every kid on the block was boo-boo-booing like Crosby. I wanted to be a different kind of singer. And my voice was higher anyhow, and I said, That’s not for me. Bing was a troubadour, the first real troubadour any of us had heard when we were fourteen or fifteen.”

■ Michael Freedland, *All The Way: A Biography of Frank Sinatra* (1997, p. 26). Nancy had gone with him to the Crosby concert at the Loew’s Theatre in Jersey City. “I’d like to be just like him,” Frank had said. “Go ahead,” Nancy retorted, “You can do it.” He left the theater that night dazzled by the career prospects which he now thought he had before him...

■ Pete Hamill, *Why Sinatra Matters* (2003). The story of Sinatra’s inspiration by Crosby has been told in all the biographies: how he would sing along with the records, and how one night in 1935 he took his best girl, a dark-haired beauty named Nancy Barbato, to the Loew’s Journal Square theater in Newark to see Crosby in a live appearance. On the way home he said to her, “Someday, that’s gonna be me up there.”



Bing Crosby and guitarist Eddie Lang shown in an early publicity photo.

■ 1948 Sinatra interview with Dick Simmons to promote his movie *The Kissing Bandit* (excerpt)

DS: How did you happen to turn to singing — professionally, I mean?

FS: Well, you can blame a fella named Crosby for that.

DS: Crosby? Where does he come in?

FS: One night I took my best girl Nancy to see a Crosby picture, and then and there I changed my mind about a newspaper career.

DS: You mentioned Nancy. Would that happen to be Mrs. Sinatra?

FS: True, true, true. And she encouraged me to become a singer. I quit my newspaper job and auditioned for Major Bowes, and got lucky and won first prize singing “Night And Day.”

■ Banter between Sinatra, Crosby and Bob Hope on the June 6, 1945 episode of *Command Performance* (excerpt)

FS: Well Bob, whatever I am today I owe to Crosby. Bing, I’ve been listening to your records for years.

BH: Both of ‘em? (laughter)

BC: Really, Frank?

FS: Yes Bing, and the very first time I heard you sing I made up my mind I was gonna be exactly like you.

BC: That’s flattering, Frank, and in all sincerity I want to tell you that you have a great voice. When I listen to you sing I wonder how all of that beautiful music can come out of a rag of bone and a hank of hair. (laughter)

FS: Well at least I have a hank of hair! (laughter)

■ Finally, here is the actual quote for Bing Crosby’s famous quip about Sinatra. This, too, is almost always incorrectly quoted — usually as being a single statement by Crosby, when it was actually banter between him and Dinah Shore (about fellow guest Sinatra) on the February 1, 1944 episode of *Command Performance* (excerpt)

DS: (After Bing finishes a song): Aw, Bing, that was lovely!

BS: Well thanks, Dinah...but say, ah, how ‘bout this, uh...what’s his name? Sinatra? (laughter) What’s he doin’ here tonight?

DS: Well Bing, Sinatra’s a great singer! A singer like that only comes once in a lifetime...

BS: Yeah, and he had to come in my lifetime! **J**

A fine arts photographer and master black and white printmaker, Mr. Jantzen is also Collections Manager of Graphic Arts in the Curator’s Office at the Supreme Court of the United States. (www.franzjantzen.com)

TONY AND FRANK A Couple of Jersey Boys

Forgive me for giving my father top billing, but filial loyalty runs deep. And after all it was Sinatra who would introduce the musician's solo feature mid-concert by saying, "Ladies and gentleman, from New Jersey, Mr. Tony Mottola — the greatest guitarist in the world."

But 50 years before they performed memorable duets on stage in the 1980s they were just a couple of ambitious teenage musicians who found their way to WAAT radio in Jersey City, New Jersey and performed together for car fare in Hudson County social halls. Not long after that scrappy start they were both on the road. Sinatra, famously with Harry James and Tommy Dorsey; and Mottola, less so with the George Hall band that was nonetheless notable for a spunky singer from Newark called Dolly Dawn and a rhythm section that, in addition to the 18-year-old guitarist, included Nick Fatool, Doc Goldberg and Johnny Guarnieri.

By the early '40s both were back in radio, and now they were in the big leagues at the CBS Radio Network in New York, where Mottola was on staff and Sinatra was featured on shows like Raymond Scott and The Chesterfield Supper Club and others where the guitarist was in the band. They also recorded together at Columbia Records on some of Sinatra's Axel Stordahl sessions and a noteworthy series of late '40s sides the singer recorded with the Tony Mottola Trio (Guarnieri on piano) in the style of Nat Cole's small group recordings of the time.

Then, in a famous slump, Sinatra left New York and headed west for the comeback that eventually led to fame and fortune. Mottola stayed in New Jersey and set about becoming a legendary musician in the New York studios. The pair occasionally crossed paths over the years for Sinatra NYC recording dates and TV appearances, but mostly their careers went in separate directions.

Until 1980, when longtime Sinatra guitarist Al Viola retired from touring just before the singer was coming east for a week each in Carnegie Hall and Atlantic City. Sinatra said

to his musical contractor Joe Malin, "Let's see what Tony's up to." Not much actually. The guitarist was more or less retired and spending the winter in Florida. "I haven't touched a guitar in months," he told Malin when he got the call. "So what," said Joe.

When they got together to rehearse Frank explained that he wanted the guitarist to do a solo spot with the band and then they'd do something together, just the two of them, "like the old days at CBS," he said. It was a winning formula from the start and at the end of two weeks Sinatra asked him to come on tour. Mottola balked at first, "I can't up and leave my wife and travel all over the place like I did when I was 18." "What's the problem? Bring Mitzi along," Sinatra countered. (Mrs. Mottola was also an old friend from the WAAT days, another kid singer back then.)

And so began what my father called his "magic carpet ride." The first trip took them from New York to South Africa to Rio and Buenos Aires. Along the way over six years together they got to Japan, London, France, the Dominican Republic, most every major city in the U.S., and played a Command Performance for the Queen of England and a state dinner at the White House.

Mottola sketched out nearly 40 guitar arrangements of standards and would stop by the singer's dressing room with his guitar and portfolio case of music before the show to see what the boss was in the mood for. Their duets became famous — and sometimes infamous, as once in Boston when the singer blanked on the first line of the bridge to "These Foolish Things." "What's the next line?" he asked his accompanist. "I don't know," the musician said with a smile, "but the next chord's E-sharp minor seventh."

The high point of it all came in 1983 when Sinatra decided to record a song by long-time collaborator Jule Styne with a Susan



Tony Mottola and Frank Sinatra recording "It's Sunday" in Los Angeles, February 28, 1983. Photo by Mitzi Mottola.

Birkenhead lyric called "It's Sunday." He recorded three versions with a full orchestra, first a Peter Max chart and then two tries by Don Costa. Still dissatisfied he said Don was missing the intimacy of a song about the simple pleasures and quiet love of an older couple on a lazy Sunday morning. He asked Costa to listen to him run it down with just Mottola for a frame of reference. You know where this is going, Costa, who started out as a guitarist, said, "You've already got what you want Frank. Just do it with Tony."

A month later they did just that. The two went into a studio and Sinatra recorded the tune for a fourth time. Of an estimated 1200-plus studio recordings made by the singer, "It's Sunday" is the only time he recorded with just a guitar for accompaniment. The song was released as the B-side of a 45 rpm single later that year with "Here's to the Band." It's considered a classic performance of Sinatra's late career. "It's a very difficult song to sing. In the first couple of bars there's something like eight words in every measure! It's the first time he's ever recorded anything with a solo guitar, and it makes me very proud," Mottola told author Will Friedwald.

The song made it onto CD on two 1990s Reprise compilations, both now out of print. But thanks to the Internet the recording, which still gets lots of airplay and streaming (especially on Sundays), lives on on YouTube! Just search Frank Sinatra "It's Sunday." While you're at it add Tony's name and search "Send in the Clowns" for a video of a classic duet performance by a couple of Jersey boys who made good. **□**

— Tony Mottola Jr.