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Sinatra's Mic by Pam Munter



How did I get here? I was standing in a Capitol Records recording studio holding Sinatra's microphone in my hand.

I had dreamed about doing this all my life but I never really thought it would happen. Still, it wasn't totally unreasonable. I had already made many of my showbiz dreams come true over the years. I had appeared in a half-dozen films, had my own local television show, had been a disc jockey on the radio, was in a dozen or so commercials, and traveled all over the country singing in jazz clubs and cabaret rooms. There was just one thing missing.

The whole showbiz adventure at this point in my life was an exercise in chutzpah. I couldn't completely immerse myself in my lifelong dream to perform until I retired from what I was educated to do — practice clinical psychology. But, even at 50, I knew I had major unfinished business with this passion. It seemed to vibrate like an impatient homunculus within, demanding to be let out. No matter what else I had done in my life, there was a *showbizzy* element in there somewhere. Jumping in completely was something I had to risk before my life ended. Because I was, um, older, people thought I had been performing for decades and expected a professional performance. This created additional pressure but it also provided a cushion for me. Almost from the get-go, the audience expected me to be good. Now I was trying to prove it in the heart of Hollywood.

Perry Como's music director in Los Angeles gave me Ed's name as someone who could put together a jazz trio for me when I was preparing to do my gig at the famous Cinegrill at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. The show was about Frank Sinatra, a personal look at

how his life and music had impacted mine. I called Ed and we agreed to meet in a week or so. I was living in Beaverton, Oregon, at the time and jumped on a plane at the first opportunity, one of many flights I would make for this oddly timed singing career.

Ed and his wife, Donna, lived in an almost completely unfurnished house on a quiet street in Toluca Lake, a suburb in the San Fernando Valley. At first, I thought they had just moved in but then they informed me they had been there more than a year. The only obvious furniture in the three-bedroom, two-story house was an old dining room table and chairs and a beautiful, outrageously expensive Bosendorfer grand piano in the living room. Ed's workspace/den had a desk, musical instruments and recording equipment, but the rest of the house looked as if it were on the market. The master bedroom and the guest bedroom (where I would spend many nights over the next few months) were inhabited only by an air mattress and blankets. I would come to think of it as camping indoors.

Both of them were in their 40s, 10 years younger than I was, their entire lives dominated by showbiz. Donna had been a backup singer with Norman Luboff and Como, among others; Ed had written arrangements and performed with many legends, including Anita O'Day, Sammy Davis Jr. and Bob Hope. In addition to the apparent talent and ambition, they were attractive, warm, funny and generous.

I only had used lead sheets in my past jazz/cabaret appearances, sparse musical pages with lyrics and chords. Rehearsals were required each time to set the tempos and the road maps for every tune. Ed insisted that I needed to have real arrangements so every performance would be the same, wherever I was and whoever the musicians might be. He offered to create them for me — for a fee, of course.

To get the Sinatra show set for the Cinegrill, I flew down to L.A. several times. Ed and Donna insisted I stay with them instead of my usual haunt at the Beverly Hills Residence Inn, a long and traffic-clogged drive from the Valley. During the show discussions and rehearsals, we happily spent all our time together. We were deliciously compatible, talking all day and often into the night about our various life adventures, sharing stories with lots of laughs. I knew I was in good hands professionally and, as a bonus, thought I had found what could be lasting friendships.

After flying into L.A. for the opening week, I decided to visit Sinatra's grave in Cathedral City, just a few hours' drive from Ed's house. I'm not sure why I did this as I'm not in the least bit inclined toward the "woo-woo" or spiritual side. I guess I thought it might help

me forge a connection of sorts. As I read the inscription on his grave marker, I puddled up even while smiling. The song title etched into the stone was perfect for the occasion. It said, “The best is yet to come.” I hoped so.

The Sinatra show did go very well. The musicians were inspiring, the audience responsive. It had been my first appearance at the Cinegrill, where so many famous people had performed from Hollywood’s earliest days, and not the last. The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, itself, had been the home for the first Academy Awards, in 1929. I danced up the same stairs where Shirley Temple had rehearsed with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in the 1930s. As a rabid showbiz history buff, I savored each moment there. The performance room had caricatures of silent film stars on the walls, and I could happily identify all of them. I dearly loved performing in spaces like this where I could connect so intimately with the historical fiber of old Hollywood.

After we were done with the Sinatra show, I began writing the next one, about Doris Day. I had been engaged to play Danny’s in New York once again and then, many months later, at the pinnacle of cabaret significance, the Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel. I called Ed and asked him to write arrangements for this very special show about Doris, who had been a powerful role model to me. This required more trips to L.A., of course, and more stimulating conversations with Ed and Donna. In the evenings, when Ed would have gigs in local clubs, he would ask me to join him. He’d sit at the piano, ask me what I wanted to sing and in what key, then count it off for the band. It was fun, risky to fly by the seat of my musical pants. With nothing on the line, though, it sometimes felt like another rehearsal. Several managers offered me gigs, but I lived too far away to entertain the thought. Nice to hear, anyway, since it was a different kind of validation than that coming from an audience.

One evening, we were sitting around a local restaurant enjoying northern Italian food along with a bottle of wine while listening to music when Donna asked me where I wanted to go with “all this.” I had long given up dreams of legendary stardom, I told her. What I wanted now was to explore my own talent and abilities, to keep learning and growing, continue to push myself. But, I soon confided after a couple of glasses of Barolo, I would love to cut a really good CD.

I had done one already in Portland — of Sinatra tunes. While it was a heady experience, the people involved didn’t know what they were doing and neither did I. It had been way too early in the learning curve to attempt something so bold but I was afraid I’d lose the opportunity. I’ve always been a “carpe diem” type of person. If not now, when? I enjoyed

the process but wasn't especially pleased with the outcome. There was far more exuberance than proficiency. I wanted to do it right this time — professionally. Ed quickly, almost casually, announced, "I can get a deal for you at Capitol Records."

I felt my face blanch. The singer was just launching into a reprise of "Fly Me to the Moon" in the background, so I wasn't sure I heard Ed correctly. "What? Really?" "Sure. You can use the Doris arrangements I'm doing. I'll line up the musicians. Donna can get the backup singers."

I hardly could speak. "Really?" I said again in disbelief. I am always dumbstruck when this kind of thing happens, disbelieving my own ears. So much within my impossible fantasy spectrum had happened already. Still, Capitol Records?

"I'll call Diana, who manages everything over at the studio, and see when we can do."

I started to panic. "Wait. Wait a minute. I need more rehearsal time. Time to think about this. More time to prepare."

"It'll be at least a month before we can get time. I know the guy I want to engineer it, too. We work well together. He's worked with some of the biggies."

From that moment, it was all I could think about. Record at Capitol? Not only was the building iconic in the Hollywood skyline, it was allegorical in my life. I had walked past the round building many times as a teenager, hoping somehow to absorb the vibes I knew must emanate from this shrine. I had felt performance pressure before but this was on a whole different scale. This was the ultimate dream. It didn't take long for the self-doubt to start up. What if I wasn't good enough? What if I blew it? What if I couldn't do it? I had experienced past disappointments in this biz but if this went down, how would I recover?

Ed recorded the arrangements on tape for me with just his piano, so I could rehearse at home in Oregon. And rehearse, I did. Every day. Sometimes more than once. Since I only had the piano background, I didn't know what he had done with the full-band arrangements. I had sent him recordings of the Doris tunes and some sheet music for guidance since he hadn't been familiar with some of the selections. After much deliberation, I chose 19 songs for the CD. Some were well known and associated with her: "It's Magic," "Secret Love" and "Que Sera, Sera." Others were favorites of mine, like "I'll Never Stop Loving You," "With a Song in My Heart" and "Sam, the Accordion Man." Some

were just silly and fun, like “Pillow Talk” and “Purple Cow.” At this point, I could hardly wait to hear how it all sounded. Scared, too.

That June, Donna picked me up at the Burbank airport and, after grabbing some Chinese takeout, we drove to their house for a run-through of the tunes. The next morning, we would be heading to Capitol. Nothing started around there until 11 in the morning, late for me, but I would have been there at any hour. I barely slept and it wasn’t just because I was sleeping on that lumpy, leaky air mattress on the floor. As Ed pulled into the Capitol parking lot in the back of the building, I could feel my adrenaline take an exponential leap. We all got out of the car and started to walk through the back door and, as we did, I stopped them.

“Can I just stand here for a minute?” As I looked at the Capitol logo on the door, I could feel my eyes filling up, emotion overcoming me, and I needed to steady myself. Catching it early is always the best option.

“Sure. Take your time.”

Deep breath. “OK. I’m ready.”

Walking through the winding corridors between the studios, I looked up to see towering black-and-white photographs of the people who had been there before me, all the usual suspects — Sinatra, Garland, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin, The Beach Boys, Margaret Whiting, The Beatles, The Carpenters. I felt small standing there gaping at them, even as my heart was swelling to giant proportions.

We entered recording studio B, the middle-sized suite of the three available. It looked just as I had envisioned it — a cozy room with electronic equipment, comfortable couches and a big glass window overlooking the much-larger recording space. I wondered how Garland felt when she walked in there to record. Charlie, the engineer, rose to greet me.

“I brought you this,” he said, casually holding out a gold box. I opened it to find a microphone carefully encased in red felt. “Sinatra used this for his last sessions here.”

I would be using Frank Sinatra’s mic to record Doris Day’s songs? How can this possibly keep getting better, I wondered. Did he offer this to everyone? I wasn’t sure if I should genuflect but I was more concerned about not passing out at that point. At the same time, I knew I couldn’t get too excited. Any further stimulation would interfere with my vocal

performance. And I had to keep breathing.

Ed led me into the big recording studio where the other two rhythm section musicians were waiting. We would be laying down basic tracks upon which the other instruments would build and I would do “scratch vocals” to see how they sounded with the music. We all shook hands. The bass player, Jim Hughart, had toured for years with Ella Fitzgerald and had also backed Sinatra. Earl Palmer, the diminutive drummer, was in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and had played with everyone famous. He was quick to tell me he recorded with Doris, too, in the late '50s. I loved the convergence. Both Day and Sinatra had been strong influences in my musical genesis and development and, if they couldn't be here now to mentor me, this was coming pretty close.

I walked back into the soundproof booth, closed the door, clapped on the earphones and stood directly in front of Frank Sinatra's microphone. I looked over into the control booth and saw Charlie poring over the dials in front of him. If I had died at that very minute, it would have been OK. I had achieved something already, I thought. I was here. Unbelievable.

I looked at the mic hanging in front of me but I didn't touch it. Which of his famous Nelson Riddle arrangements had he recorded using this? Why was this one special to him? Was there any of his DNA still on it? I felt an odd connection to this nearly mythical man, someone I had never met.

The musicians had not rehearsed together but, as I was to learn, they didn't need to. I was the one who was nervous and unsteady. Everything went fine until we got to “Pillow Talk.” Ed had told me this was one of the tunes Earl had recorded with Doris. I was having trouble finding the tempo and rhythm, rushing it. After several takes, Earl came to my little booth and politely knocked on the glass.

He walked into the closed space and put his arm around me. “Sweetie, you know, Doris had trouble with this, too. It took a lotta takes before she could figure it out. Relax. It'll be fine.”

We took five and when we returned, I nailed it. Over the course of the next few months, Earl and I developed a warm connection. He was showing the inevitable signs of aging by then and was thinking about his legacy. He wanted to share his stories. I was equally eager to hear them all. When he talked about working with Elvis, Little Richard, Rick Nelson, Sinatra, Doris, Ella and others I felt as if I were privileged to be listening to an

audible history book. When he was asked about me by an interviewer, he often compared my phrasing and timing to Sinatra, which was beyond flattering. No wonder I felt attached to him.

Late one night after we finished work, Charlie led us up the many narrow steps to the very top of the Capitol Records tower. To my delight, we could walk all around its circumference, taking in a different view of the bright, neon Hollywood skyline with each big visual drink. The blinking strobe at the top was intended to warn off low-flying aircraft when it was the tallest building in the city. It blinked “Hollywood” in Morse code. Charlie told us that one disgruntled employee had reprogrammed it after being fired to flash the Morse code symbols for “Fuck you, Capitol.” I laughed but felt very far from that sentiment. Instead, there was a sense of gratitude and transcendence as I remembered that little girl with the fantastic dreams. She could never have imagined standing atop the Capitol Records tower at midnight looking over the glitzy showbiz capital of Hollywood, having just completed a full day in a recording studio.

At the same time I was recording the CD, I was having regular meetings and initial rehearsals in another part of town with my director and musical director for the revised Doris show I would be doing at the Algonquin in New York. There were times I was in conference instead of at Capitol when Ed was working with the backup singers. I still hadn’t heard the full orchestrations. But the time had come.

I was situated in the middle of the darkly lit recording studio, no glass cage this time — just a stool, the headphones and Sinatra’s mic, a reminder of the standards to which I aspired. This was it. These would be the takes that would go on the CD. I began to understand how lonely this process could be, in spite of all the people around me. No one could help me now.

Charlie pressed a button in the control room so I could hear his voice over the PA. “I’ve turned on the reverb downstairs.” That meant we were ready to begin. He was talking about the revolutionary echo system in the basement of the tower, the one invented and installed by Les Paul in the 1950s. It gave dimension and depth to vocals. Now, no one records without using something modeled after it.

“Thanks, Charlie. I need all the help I can get.” My garbled laugh sounded hollow and distant.

First up would be “Teacher’s Pet.” Ed had written the identical arrangement Doris had

recorded, but I hadn't heard it yet. I had never sung with anyone else, never took chorus in high school, always the soloist. For several of the tunes, I would be singing for the first time with five backup singers. How would that sound? How would I feel? Could I blend in and still maintain a distinct sound? I was about to find out.

Charlie turned on the playback and the male chorus (all of whom were famous themselves) started the familiar syllabic intro: "Bum-ba-da-de bum. Bum-de-bum-de-bum." I could feel my emotions quickly welling up, threatening to spill over. My face felt hot, my hands tingly, my body flooded with adrenaline and significance. I tried to calm myself by staring at the lyrics on the sheet music in front of me, but it wasn't working. I felt engulfed by my personal history, my early identification with Doris, my dreams and aspirations — old and new. It was layer upon layer of memory and meaning, overwhelming. But I told myself, come on, this is a lighthearted song and no real vocal challenge. I stopped the playback and asked Charlie to cue it up again. I lowered my head to gather myself. Deep breaths, Pam. You can do this. You did it for years with Doris in your bedroom. No, wait. Exhuming that memory won't help. But you were able to perform well on the road in New York, Chicago, San Francisco — even here in Los Angeles. You can do this.

Charlie counted it down again. I heard the familiar introduction by the singers and started to sing, "Teacher's Pet ... I wanna be Teacher's Pet." Oh, oh, oh. Where was that sound coming from? I knew it was being fed into my ears through the headphones but it seemed to be generated from deep within me. It filled my body, my brain, my soul. It invaded every pore in my body, every atom. I thought I would burst. How can this be happening? Can someone die from ecstasy?

Each song over the weeks of recording had its own challenges. I had laughingly and almost guiltily looked forward to the duet with myself in "Everybody Loves a Lover." It had been one of my favorite '50s Doris hits, full of exuberance and the self-confidence that comes from early romantic love. The counterpoint was created electronically, of course, and I confess I smiled throughout both sessions. There was a part of me that couldn't believe I was getting away with all this narcissism. When I sang, "Who's the most popular personality? I can't help thinking it's no one else but me," I almost believed it. I felt transported to a place I'd never been and, somehow, knew I'd never visit again. Every second now was precious to me.

As we worked on the CD and throughout my performing career, I had never tried to emulate Doris. In spite of my childhood wishes, we really had little in common except a

love for the Great American Songbook. She was a perfect pop singer in so many ways, always on the beat, right on top of the note. I preferred to sing behind the beat and needed retakes now and again to find the center of the tone. Her voice was warm and intimate; mine was cooler, smokier, more ironic. Though I had spent hours and even years listening to her, I hadn't done so in a very long time. And now, recording her songs, I had opted to avoid reminding myself of her style and choices, preferring to put my own stamp on her music. Still, there were times when it was hard for me to get her phrasing out of my head. Much later, when I would run into a song she and I both had recorded, I found I hadn't remembered her version accurately at all. Time and my own years of musical morphing had colored my memories.

Somehow, in the middle of all this unmitigated pleasure, my critical self left the building, a stunning and atypical development. I wanted to be good, yes. But the doing of it, the full participation in this fulfillment of a lifelong dream, became more important than, well, anything else. I wanted to be completely present. There were moments when time seemed irrelevant.

On some days, someone from the media would come in to do an interview. One afternoon, a photographer came into the studio while I was working and took some shots. We used one or two on the album notes. I was told he was Doris Day's ex-brother-in-law from her last and presumably final ill-fated marriage. There she was again, almost there with me.

There was one interview in particular that stayed with me more than the others.

The reporter took me outside with his cameraman, to the front of the record-shaped Capitol tower on busy Vine Street. "You're a relatively new recording artist. What does this project mean to you?"

That was a question too complex for a man with a television camera to record. I tried to assume my professional performer's demeanor.

"When I was a kid, I loved to listen to Doris Day. I used to spend my babysitting money on the Cobb salad at the Brown Derby that used to be just down the street. This is something I always wanted to do — something I never thought was possible. I've always been hooked on Hollywood."

I hardly needed reminders of what this was about or any further acceleration of my

emotions, but this 45-minute interview provided both. I walked away from the interview wiping my eyes.

The time back in Oregon between sessions was well spent, too. I met with Owen, the photographer who had done all my headshots for the acting part of my career, and asked if he'd shoot the album cover. I told him the theme, "Sentimental Journey," and suggested he shoot me boarding a train or bus or plane, an anticipatory and hopeful photo. Early one morning, I met Owen at his studio and we headed over to the downtown Portland train station. It was a time before terrorist paranoia so we were able to walk directly into the boarding area of the empty depot. To our delight, there was a perfect, silver streamlined train just waiting on the tracks with no one around. Owen told me to stand on the steps of one of the cars and hang out as if looking for the next adventure. Ten minutes after we began, two private security cops came over and confronted us. Didn't we know we shouldn't be there? This area is restricted! We needed to go to the office with them right away. At least they didn't arrest us. Owen whispered to me that he got some great shots and hoped he wouldn't have to hand over the film. Once in the office, we explained to a gruff man behind the desk what we were doing and promised to never, ever do it again. Honest! We left the office, chuckling and smug. When I saw Owen's contact sheets, I was thrilled at the wonderful pictures he got, in perfect perspective, focused and nicely composed. The cover accurately captures the mood and the theme of the CD.

Days in the recording studio were long, often 10–12 hours, but I never felt fatigue until I got home to the air mattress. It was always Charlie or Ed who called for a break. On my trips to the bathroom down the hall, I ran into other people also working at Capitol. Richard Carpenter of The Carpenters was recording a solo album and would nod at me as we passed each other. The cast of TV's "West Wing" was laboring over a Christmas song for the show, teasing each other outside studio A. Ricky Martin had left flowers in the studio after his session the day before for the next person, namely me. And somewhere down the hall, I could hear Bette Midler loudly cursing out one of her backup singers for "doing it all fucking wrong." It was a rarefied atmosphere, an exclusive club, and here I was, invited in, a mouse at the feast.

Everyone at every level was astonishingly professional in every way. Ed's arrangements were both accurate to the originals and, when he stepped out from them, brilliantly innovative. He and Donna were unconditionally supportive throughout, setting up an ideal environment for creativity. The musicians and singers were experienced professionals who did this for a living. I was an interloper in their midst but they

consistently treated me with respect and sometimes even admiration.

It took almost three months to finish the recording part. In one of our nearly daily, lengthy phone conversations, Ed and I decided on the order of the songs. I wrote the liner notes, selected the photographs, then turned it over to the graphic artist. In the meantime, the CD had to be mastered, a process in which I was not involved. It would be another few frustrating months before I'd be able to see and hear what we had accomplished. Patience is not one of those qualities that would ever appear on my psychological résumé. I was pleased with the result but sad it was over. I knew it was an experience unique in my life and, perhaps, even the pinnacle of it.

After the first few weeks, I stopped listening to the CD. Now, more than 15 years later, I find myself critical of some of the choices I made in phrasing. Just as I could never watch videos of my shows, I am equally uncomfortable listening to any vocal performance on record.

I went on to perform in other cities, other venues. None would have the intensity or deep personal meaning of those months at Capitol Records. I remember it as a perfect confluence of past and present, of dreams and reality, of expectation and fulfillment. It was truly the process that provided the meaning, not just the outcome. Looking back on it, I am so glad I took the risk and, with the help of some very good people, created indelible memories that helped remind me who I am and what's possible.

Pam Munter has authored several books and dozens of articles, mostly on dead movie stars. A retired clinical psychologist and former performer, she's currently enrolled in the low-residency MFA program at the University of California, Riverside/Palm Desert, and is working on a deconstructed memoir and a book of short stories based on old Hollywood.

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