

'Sinatra, Commie Playboy': Frank Sinatra, Postwar Liberalism and Press Paranoia

• Karen McNally

Anti-Communist hysteria had a wide-ranging impact on Hollywood across the postwar period. As writers, directors and stars came under the scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) due to the content of their films and their political activities, careers were interrupted indefinitely and Hollywood's ability to promote cultural change in the new era following World War II was severely hampered. Frank Sinatra's heavy involvement in liberal politics during this period illustrates the problems confronting the American film industry as it attempted to address the country's imperfections. Commentary denouncing Sinatra's politics makes plain the role played by sections of the press in cultivating the atmosphere of anti-liberal witch-hunts promoted by HUAC. In November 1944, prior to the re-election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt for a third term, Westbrook Pegler, a political writer for the Hearst publication *The New York Journal-American*, wrote: 'There are among the Roosevelt political following some thorough Americans who support him though they know that thereby they put themselves in alliance with the Communists.'¹ Pegler's easy branding of FDR's supporters as Communist sympathisers is indicative of the reaction of a number of journalists to Sinatra. As a prominent campaigner for FDR, and a star who became particularly associated with the cause of tolerance and civil rights, Sinatra provoked negative reactions from the right-wing press who viewed the star's politics and proudly asserted ethnicity as equal evidence of his un-American tendencies. Gerald Meyer's consideration of Sinatra's connection to liberal organisations in

the 1940s positions the star in the history of Hollywood's Popular Front.² Sinatra's active involvement in the politics of race equally locates him in the specific culture of anti-Communist extremism during the postwar period.

The 'Good War' versus American Racial Inequality

Sinatra was initially drawn into the political arena by his mother Dolly, who served as a Ward Leader in the Ninth District of Hoboken, New Jersey in the 1920s, using her knowledge of Italian dialects to recruit immigrant support for the Democrats. In 1944 he campaigned extensively for a fourth term for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, recording radio programmes for the Democratic National Committee, donating funds to the President's election campaign, and telling his fans: 'This peace will depend on your parents' votes on November seventh.'³ Sinatra's public support of FDR and his association with organisations such as American Youth for Democracy and the Independent Citizens' Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, on which he served as Vice-President in 1946, led to the star becoming firmly established as a Hollywood liberal. His involvement with Paul Robeson's American Crusade to End Lynching and the awards he received from the journal *New Masses* for 'greater interracial understanding' and the 'contribution made to promote democracy and interracial unity'⁴ are an indication of the extent to which Sinatra's political image was defined even more sharply around race. Through projects such as the short film *The House I Live In* (1945) Sinatra took a

prominent position in Hollywood's attempts to address America's racial inequalities in the immediate postwar period.

During World War II America's racial and ethnic divisions had been actively denied as the country concentrated on galvanising support for what was cast as the 'good war' against German fascism and Japanese inhumanity. The Office of War Information (OWI) co-opted Hollywood into an image building exercise, demanding films which presented an inclusive image of American life. The manual for filmmakers produced by the OWI adopted the theme of Vice-President Henry Wallace's 'Century of the Common Man' speech, terming the war a 'people's war', and urging the depiction of multi-ethnic platoons 'using names of foreign extraction' and the occasional inclusion of black officers.⁵ This stress on America's acceptance of diversity resulted in films such as the 1943 release *Bataan*, in which the combat unit cobbled together to destroy a bridge in the fight against the Japanese was a uniquely democratic group that included a WASP, an Hispanic, a Philippine boxer, an Irish American, a Jew and an African American. The inclusion of African-American servicemen in this picture, however, presented a false image. While some integrated units existed in World War II, the Armed Services remained officially segregated until President Truman ordered integration in 1948. While the Navy and Air Force complied at this stage, the Army resisted full desegregation until African-American troops were required for the war in Korea in 1950.

The OWI's and Hollywood's denial of American racism occurred despite the fact that World War II highlighted the injustices of the country's racial divisions. As African Americans fought for democracy in Europe but still faced fundamental indignities at home, the call for racial equality gained an increased sense of urgency. Labour leader A. Philip Randolph's threatened March on Washington in 1941, which prompted the Fair Employment Practices Commission, combined with African-American newspapers' 'Double V' campaign, for victory in war and victory over inequality at home, to demonstrate a growing impatience. In 1944

Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma* which examined racist practices in the South, and called on Americans to live up to the 'American Creed', a belief in equality, freedom and opportunity. The substantial increase in the NAACP's membership during the war years, from 50,000 to 400,000, added to the mood which sought a resolution to the country's social divisions.

Preaching Equality and Racial Integration

Hollywood was a prominent indicator of the postwar shifting cultural climate. While conservative organisations existed in Hollywood, such as the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, formed in 1943 by film-makers including Walt Disney and King Vidor, the industry was dominated by a liberal sensibility. The film capital's liberal streak dated back to 1930s Popular Front organisations such as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the Motion Picture Artists' Committee and the Motion Picture Democratic Committee. The Popular Front was a broad coalition of radicals and liberals formed in 1935 to fight fascism at home and abroad, and to work with the unions towards social reform.⁶ Diverted from more radical film-making by the war effort, liberal screenwriters, directors and actors returned their attention to America's social divisions as World War II concluded.

Sinatra inserted himself into Hollywood's race debate in a number of significant ways. He was the first white star to perform on *Jubilee*, a programme produced for African-American G.I.s, breaking the Armed Forces Radio Services' colour bar. In 1945 Sinatra published several articles calling for racial, ethnic and religious tolerance. In 'What's This About Races?' Sinatra compared American discrimination to the evils of the Nazi regime. Positioning himself as a typical second-generation immigrant, he recalled the taunts of 'little Dago' he suffered as a child, while friends were labelled 'Kikes' or 'Niggers'. Sinatra went on to remind readers that 'all men are *created* equal', that '*everybody* in the United States is a foreigner', and encouraged them to 'stamp out

prejudices that are separating one group of United States citizens from another'.⁷

Again directing his message at the nation's youth, Sinatra also intervened in two school disputes. On 23 October 1945 he attended the Benjamin Franklin High School in Harlem where disturbances had broken out between Italian and African-American students. At the integrated school, recognised as an exemplary model of tolerance and intercultural education and the subject of an OWI documentary, Sinatra encouraged the students to 'act as neighborhood emissaries of racial good will'.⁸ The following month he visited Froebel High School in Gary, Indiana where white students had staged walk-outs when the School Board attempted to fully integrate its African-American students in school activities. Sinatra confronted the initially unfriendly crowd, declaring: 'I can lick any son of a bitch in this joint.' Accusing local politicians of inciting the strike action, he urged the students to rethink their actions and reject the influences of those opposed to racial integration.⁹ Sinatra's appearance in Indiana failed to resolve the dispute, but added further to his image as a star active in racial politics. Columnists began writing about Sinatra as a performer with 'a deep sense of his brother's wrong and a social conscience that hasn't been atrophied by money or fame'.¹⁰ He was also honoured with a number of awards such as the first scroll presented by New York's Bureau of Intercultural Education, and his name was added to the 1945 Honor Roll of Race Relations by the curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature of the New York Public Library.

***The House I Live In* and the Postwar Push for Tolerance**

Sinatra's role in *The House I Live In* was his most high profile association with the political issue of tolerance, and was an important contribution to liberal Hollywood's attempts to stimulate a debate around race. Released in September 1945, *The House I Live In* was a ten minute short put together by a Hollywood team loaded with liberal credentials. The project was overseen by

Dore Schary at RKO, who, along with Samuel Goldwyn, would later become one of the two lone voices opposing the Hollywood studios' decision to dispense with the services of the 'Hollywood Ten'. Production was handled by Frank Ross with direction by Mervyn LeRoy, who had been involved in a number of Warner Bros.' social critique movies of the 1930s, among them *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). The soon to be blacklisted Albert Maltz provided the screenplay. The title song was written in 1942 by lyricist Lewis Allan who penned the Billie Holiday ode against lynching, 'Strange Fruit', and composer Earl Robinson, whose 'Ballad for Americans', written in 1940, was a fifteen minute work which claimed freedom as a basic American value. All proceeds from the film went to organisations involved in social work for adolescents.

The House I Live In stresses the significance of tolerance for a nation of immigrants, asserting the need for postwar America to address its social divisions. Establishing a semi-documentary style, the film opens with Sinatra in a recording studio performing his hit of the previous year, 'If You Are But A Dream'. Exiting into an alleyway for a break, Sinatra is confronted by a group of boys chasing another into a corner. As Sinatra breaks up the scene, he attempts to establish the reason for the 'gang war', and is eventually told by one of the boys: 'We don't like his religion.' (The particular religion is not made explicit, but the suggestion is that the boy is Jewish.) Sinatra's response is to label the protagonists 'Nazis', reasoning that, 'Religion makes no difference, except maybe to a Nazi or somebody as stupid.' To illustrate the possibility of positive co-operation between the religions, against a backdrop of documentary-style footage, Sinatra relays the tale of Colin Kelly, 'an American and a Presbyterian' and Meyer Levin, 'an American and a Jew', who worked together to sink the 'Jap' battleship the *Haruna* a few days after Pearl Harbor. The short concludes with Sinatra singing the title song to the boys with orchestra accompaniment, after which the boys depart, bringing the former outcast along with them.

The House I Live In illustrates the problems posed as liberal filmmakers attempted to represent America's inequalities. The decision to focus on religious prejudice has led to criticism that the film falls short of addressing the more explosive issues of ethnic and particularly racial intolerance. Thomas Cripps, for instance, suggests that the film 'missed its mark, preferring the relatively safe ground of religious bigotry rather than the emerging national issue of racism.'¹¹ While anti-Semitism is most prominent in the film, America's problematic relationship with ethnic and racial diversity is also quite clearly confronted, as *The House I Live In* utilises the context of World War II to reinforce the relevance of its message. Positioning himself as a part of both immigrant and American culture, Sinatra challenges the boys' intolerance by relating it to their ethnic differences, telling them: 'My dad came from Italy, but I'm an American. But should I hate your father because he came from Ireland or France or Russia?' There is significance, of course, in the choice of the neutral Irish and the French and Russian Allies, as well as the omission of the Japanese, Sinatra referring to them throughout the film as 'Japs'. The uncritical inclusion of Russia in the immediate aftermath of the war contrasts with later postwar representations of the Communist state and is typical of the period. Three melodramas from 1943, for example – *Mission to Moscow*, *Song of Russia* and *The North Star* – gave Russia a positive, democratic image, and each was retroactively condemned by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947.¹² The film's attitude towards the Japanese, meanwhile, whose attack on American soil had provoked a particularly vitriolic response, was indicative of lingering resentments towards a people, 100,000 of whom had been forcibly interned on America's West Coast by government decree during World War II.

While *The House I Live In* was able to argue the absurdity of other varieties of ethnic intolerance in a direct manner, the difficulties involved in Hollywood attempts to address the more controversial topic of race discrimination had not abated, despite concerted efforts to

make some headway. An episode of the independent feature *The March of Time*, released in July 1944 and distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, exemplifies this restrictive climate. 'Americans All', which depicted black and white Americans mixing socially, black troops serving in the jungles of the Pacific, and pointed out 'the injustice of denying to the Negro the rights of American citizenship while expecting him to shoulder its ultimate responsibility – that of defending his country with his life', was denied a release in the South.¹³ The decision to concentrate attention on religious rather than racial intolerance in *The House I Live In* is, therefore, unsurprising, and made it one of a number of films which took a similar route, including the 1946 Warner Bros. short *It Happened in Springfield*. Several Hollywood features made during the immediate postwar period adopted the theme of anti-Semitism as shorthand for intolerance in general, using World War II as a timely indicator of the dangers of undemocratic attitudes. As well as *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), which made additional allusions to race through the notion of 'passing', these included Maltz's own *The Pride of the Marines* (1945), a film particularly notable for its combination of attacks on anti-Semitism and ethnic intolerance and its dignified representation of an African-American male. While it presents a positive picture of various religions working together, *The Pride of the Marines* does not shy away from suggesting that the war has failed to expunge intolerance. Jewish and Irish soldiers fear returning home to the same prejudices, and another exhibits prejudice towards a Mexican soldier alongside whom he has previously fought. Sinatra was particularly affected by the film, expressing his support in a letter to Maltz:

I have never been so emotionally moved by anything. . . I know you do understand that my anxiety and interest in our social and discrimination (or what have you) problems have been hungrily awaiting such valuable assistance. . . You've got to hit 'em right in the kisser with it and, baby, you really did.¹⁴

In addition to the use of religious intolerance as an all-encompassing method of confronting discrimination, Sinatra's reference to blood in *The House I Live In* suggests a more direct targeting of the issue of race. When one of the boys balks at being labelled a Nazi since his father was wounded in the army, Sinatra asks if his father received 'some of that blood plasma'. Having discovered that both parents of the Jewish child have donated blood which could conceivably have been used to save the life of the boy's father, Sinatra uses the point to stress equality as a basic truism, telling them: 'God created everybody. He didn't create one people better than another. Your blood's the same as mine; mine's the same as his (pointing to the Jewish boy).' The social consequences of racial bloodlines for inhabitants of the South make this reference highly significant. By specifically addressing the subject of blood plasma, the film goes to the root of the philosophy of a fundamental inequality between the races, which the war had failed to resolve and had even perpetuated. Beyond the racial separation of the Armed Forces, such beliefs extended as far as the segregation of blood meant for the treatment of servicemen. The practice of classifying blood plasma by race as well as type, adopted by the Red Cross and the Armed Forces, was carried out for reasons the Surgeon General deemed 'not biologically convincing' but 'psychologically important in America'.¹⁵ As government officials legitimised existing attitudes at their very root, cinema challenged this war-time inconsistency in films such as *Somewhere I'll Find You* (1942). Clark Gable's war correspondent reports back from the front line in Bataan that black and white soldiers fought together 'and when they bled, their blood was the same colour.' Similarly, Sinatra's assertion of the sameness of blood directly challenges racism at its core, and reveals the message of *The House I Live In* as an appeal for tolerance that incorporates religion, ethnicity and race.

Government Witch-Hunts and the Hearst Press

The progressive tone of *The House I Live In* was embraced by Hollywood, and at the 1946 Oscar ceremony Sinatra, Mervyn LeRoy and Frank Ross were each presented with a special Academy Award. However, reactions from other quarters were indicative of a growing tide of anti-liberal sentiment. Albert Maltz was blacklisted by HUAC and jailed for six months in 1950 as a result of what the Committee considered to be the Communist influence in his screenplays. In his statement before HUAC Maltz referred to *The House I Live In* as one of the screenplays for which the Committee was urging he be blacklisted. Although he worked sporadically following his sentence, Maltz remained uncredited until the late 1960s.

The House I Live In was also an important factor in intensifying suspicion and criticism of Sinatra's liberal politics. The Federal Bureau of Investigation initially opened a file on the star in 1943 following a bizarre letter which suggested Sinatra's singing was a vehicle for right-wing political extremism.¹⁶ Through the postwar period the FBI continued to record his alleged affiliations with organisations such as Action for Palestine and the Committee for a Democratic Far Eastern Policy, with the result that Sinatra was denied clearance to entertain the troops in Korea in 1954.¹⁷ Criticism of Sinatra's political activities began when he was invited to have tea with President Roosevelt at the White House in September 1944. The Republican Senator from Nebraska, Kenneth Wherry, complained: 'That crooner! Mr Roosevelt could spend his time better conferring with members of the Senate.'¹⁸ Westbrook Pegler took to calling Sinatra the 'New Dealing crooner'.¹⁹ During the eight years following the release of *The House I Live In* Sinatra was named as a Communist twelve times to the House Un-American Activities Committee by, among others, Jack B. Tenney, a California state senator, and Gerald L. K. Smith, the right-wing leader of the America First Party.²⁰

Sinatra's support for the forward thinking Henry Wallace also defined him politically.

Wallace served as Vice-President to Roosevelt between 1940 and 1944, and was dismissed from President Truman's government due to his public opposition to the Administration's policy towards the Soviet Union. He went on to form the short-lived Progressive Party in 1948, and his resolute determination to effect social change and foster co-operation with the Soviet Union captured the imagination of liberal Hollywood. Sinatra aligned himself with Wallace, suggesting to reporters: 'Poverty. That's the biggest thorn. It comes down to what Henry Wallace said, to what he meant when he said every kid in the world should have his quart of milk a day.'²¹ In 1947 Sinatra wrote to Wallace, who was then editor of the liberal weekly *The New Republic*, calling for, 'mutual respect, whether it's on the slum level of one kid for another or at the top of the ladder where it's one government for another, one race for another or one belief for another.'²² In what reads as an appeal to Wallace to reconstruct Roosevelt's legacy, Sinatra warned: 'Until another leader we can trust, as we trusted him, takes up the fight we like to think of as ours – the fight for tolerance, which is the basis of any fight for peace – it's going to be tough to be a liberal.'²³ Again signalling tolerance as his main political concern, Sinatra also highlighted the problems posed for those involved in liberal politics.

While Sinatra avoided being called to testify before HUAC's televised Hollywood hearings which commenced in October 1947, as part of the Committee for the First Amendment he expressed his support for the 'Unfriendly Ten', who included Maltz, Edward Dmytryk and Dalton Trumbo. The Committee for the First Amendment was formed in October 1947 by, among others, John Huston, William Wyler, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall and several United States senators as a response to what members viewed as HUAC's unconstitutional activities. A number of members of the Committee famously flew to Washington and presented a petition to the clerk of the House of Representatives seeking redress against the various 'abuses of civil rights' perpetrated by HUAC's hearings. On 26 October Sinatra

appeared on the Committee's *Hollywood Fights Back* radio broadcast to warn of the dangers to democracy posed by HUAC's hearings:

Once they get the movies throttled how long will it be before the Committee goes to work on freedom of the air? How long will it be before we're told what we can and cannot say into a radio microphone? If you make a pitch on a nation-wide network for a square deal for the underdog, will they call you a Commie? . . . Are they gonna scare us into silence? I wonder.²⁴

Sinatra's direct challenge to HUAC's activities predicted the type of Communist smear to which he was subjected via a stream of press attacks. Among the more extreme publications condemning Sinatra as a Communist sympathiser was the Red Scare pamphlet *Red Betrayal of Youth*, in which the following diatribe appeared in 1948 under the title 'Sinatra, Commie Playboy':

One of the outstanding young Reds in Hollywood is Frankie Sinatra. . . Of late this young Red punk has been touring the country swooning bobby soxers with his baritone voice while he tells their parents how to vote. He appeared before 16,000 left-wingers in Madison Square Gardens last year at the opening of a nationwide campaign by the Communist Party and the New Deal's "Russian Firsters" to capture the veteran's votes. Frank Sinatra, defiant in bow tie, demanded freedom for the Chinese; a campaign against the Spanish government; and public recognition of the political possibilities of radio crooners. . . Through this one performance alone any intelligent person ought to be able to see how "Red Frankie", with his gentle purring voice is swooning the youth of America into the arms of atheistic Communism.²⁵

Sinatra answered criticism of his appearance at Madison Square Garden from Gerval T. Murphy, a director of the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus, arguing:

That was no Red Rally. It was a rally sponsored by the Veterans Committee of the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions.

While Murphy was hunting witches, the committee was urging passage of legislation to provide housing for veterans. I was trying to help veterans get homes to live in. If that was subversive activity, I'm all for it. . . The minute anyone tries to help the little guy, he's called a Communist. . . The guy's a jerk.²⁶

Similar accusations were launched against Sinatra in the popular press. Dissenting voices on rival journals and subsequent analysis suggest that Sinatra's treatment at the hands of, in particular, the Hearst press, was indicative of a determined crusade against the Left by a section of the media. Jim Tuck argues:

In the late forties New York's Hearst papers faced communism as if they were preparing for Armageddon. . . Given this total war mentality, one can understand the Hearst policy that rebaiting should not be limited to political columnists, editorialists, and news writers.²⁷

Sinatra's political activities, therefore, were denounced by not only political writers such as Westbrook Pegler, but also showbusiness columnists such as Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, both of whom Tuck describes as 'xenophobic, homophobic, and invincibly bigoted'.²⁸

Sinatra's reported associations with underworld figures were often the channel through which criticisms of his politicking were made. Following a visit to Havana in September 1947, during which Sinatra was photographed in the company of Charlie 'Lucky' Luciano, the Scripps-Howard columnist Robert Ruark remarked:

Mr Sinatra, the self-confessed savior of the country's small fry, by virtue of his lectures on clean living and love-thy-neighbor, his movie shorts on tolerance, and his frequent dabblings into the do-good department of politics, seems to be setting a most peculiar example for his hordes of pimply, shrieking slaves, who are alleged to regard him with the same awe as a practicing Mohammedan for the Prophet.²⁹

Ruark exhibits a clear repulsion for Sinatra's perspective on racial politics that was echoed by Lee Mortimer and his superior, Jack Lait.

Stereotyping Sinatra's ethnic identity by tying the star to violent crime imagery, the Hearst reporters made Sinatra's liberal politics appear dangerously un-American. Their preoccupation with Sinatra's involvement with the cause of equality intensified following the star's physical assault on Lee Mortimer at Ciro's nightclub in April 1947, an incident which resulted in Sinatra's arrest and an out-of-court settlement. Lait used the incident to ask: 'Who qualified Sinatra to clean up juvenile delinquency, plead for the underprivileged and assail discrimination?'³⁰ As various Hearst papers featured stories on Sinatra five days running, *Daily Variety* commented: 'It looks as though Frankie Boy has taken on the whole Hearst organisation.'³¹ In a 1951 article entitled 'Frank Sinatra Confidential: Gangsters in the Night Clubs' Mortimer insinuated corruption of the Kefauver Committee hearings on organised crime as an introduction to an assault on Sinatra. The journalist casually established a link between the way in which, he suggested, Sinatra had been 'adopted' by organised crime to glamorise their narcotics enterprises, and the methods used by Communists to promote their cause. Mortimer indicated that a government dossier on Sinatra revealed:

many well-known entertainment figures had been "captured", either with or without their knowledge, by the underworld, the Communists, or both. The Communists and the gangsters both have the same motive, acquiring respectability by association with prestige names. Frankie's contacts with both groups are numerous.³²

Mortimer's attempt to associate Sinatra with both ethnic crime and Communist activity suggests a political motivation behind his negative stereotyping of the star as an Italian-American male.

Hollywood Anxiety and the Continuing Impact of HUAC

Like many Hollywood stars, Sinatra exhibited some apprehension about the political attacks to which he was subjected, which his subsequent actions revealed. In April 1948 Sinatra, alongside

Joe DiMaggio and Jimmy Durante, took part in a radio broadcast to the people of Italy's new Republic, attempting to persuade them to vote against the Communist Party in the forthcoming national election.³³ Sinatra's FBI file records that an intermediary approached the Bureau in September 1950 with the star's offer to assist in identifying 'subversives', an offer curtly rejected by J. Edgar Hoover's top aide Clyde Tolson in a handwritten memo to his boss stating: 'We want nothing to do with him.'³⁴ In 1951 Sinatra attended a Central Park rally of the Stop Communism Committee which aimed to combat 'Red influences in the entertainment world'. Sinatra's activities were indicative of reactions to the shifting political climate in Hollywood. Both rounds of HUAC hearings combined with the demise of radical liberalism in the wider political arena to create an atmosphere of fear on the West Coast. Former government attorney Alger Hiss was put on trial and imprisoned in 1951 when found guilty of working as a Soviet agent. Richard Nixon, then Republican Senator for California, attempted to discredit the politics of the New Deal further in 1952, telling the *Kansas City Star*: 'There's one difference between Reds and Pinks. The Pinks want to socialize America. The Reds want to socialize the world and make Moscow the world capital. Their paths are similar; they have the same bible – the teachings of Karl Marx.'³⁵ Nixon included in his definition of 'Pinks' those who supported the New Deal or the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

Sinatra's reticence to confront this increasingly anti-liberal atmosphere in the late 1940s and early 1950s came about in the midst of the most dismal period of his career as Sinatra was dropped by both MGM and Columbia Records by 1952. Having spectacularly resurrected his career through an Academy Award for his performance as Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and a string of critically acclaimed, best-selling albums with Capitol Records, Sinatra reinserted himself into the civil rights debate, addressing racial politics in films such as *Kings Go Forth* (1958), a World War II romantic drama set in the South of France which presented a picture of racism as a pervasive

American force. In the 1958 article 'The Way I Look at Race' published in *Ebony* Sinatra discussed his hopes that the 'national disease' of bigotry would be eradicated by the education of future generations, and that moves towards desegregation would herald a new era of racial equality.³⁶ In 1986 the African-American magazine *Jet* referred to the article as 'the most significant stand taken by a famous white person since Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt. . .gave support to the cause of racial justice and equality.'³⁷ Sinatra's direct challenge to American racism occurred in the context of political caution and an increasing impatience among African Americans at the slow pace of change. The Civil Rights Movement, activated by such events as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Martin Luther King's establishment of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, demonstrated a weariness at federal ambivalence towards discriminatory practices. This government reticence to promote rapid change was evident in the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court in the case of *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka* instructing states to proceed towards school desegregation with 'all deliberate speed', and the limited aims and effects of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. Films such as *Kings Go Forth* and *The Defiant Ones* (1958), which followed earlier efforts to address racism in *Pinky* (1949), *No Way Out* (1950) and a number of similar films, represented Hollywood's continuous focus on American bigotry during the postwar period, despite the persistence of an anti-Communist hysteria.

The enduring influence of anti-liberal sentiments was evident in 1960 when Sinatra announced his intention to produce and direct a film version of William Bradford Huie's novel *The Execution of Private Slovik*. Huie's book tells the story of the last American soldier to be executed by the United States Army for desertion following the Battle of the Bulge in 1944, the first such execution since the Civil War. The project reunited Sinatra with *The House I Live In* screenwriter Albert Maltz. As Maltz relates, Sinatra had a dual objective in bringing this book to the screen. His aim was to release a film

whose narrative effectively articulated the inhumanity of war, but, in hiring Maltz as screenwriter, Sinatra was also intent on breaking the Hollywood blacklist. Maltz recalls:

I went up to see him, and we discussed the story, which we both agreed would say that the enemy in the war was not the United States Army, but the war itself. . . Frank said that he had been thinking of hiring me for a long time and that it was very important to him to do so and to make this film. . . He anticipated all the problems and the outcry from the American Legion-types, but he said he didn't care. He wanted to break the blacklist.³⁸

Much of the response to Sinatra's planned production indicated that the political climate in relation to Hollywood liberalism had altered little. On 28 March 1960 *Variety* published a full page advertisement in which Sinatra announced the project, and that he had hired Albert Maltz to write the script. *The New York Journal-American* responded in an editorial advising Sinatra to 'Dump Maltz and get yourself a true American writer'.³⁹ *The New York Mirror* continued the political assault on Sinatra and Maltz, asking:

What kind of thinking motivates Frank Sinatra in hiring an unrepentant enemy of his country – not a liberal, not an underdog, not a free thinker, but a hard revolutionist who has never done anything to remove himself from the Communist camp or to disassociate himself with the Communist record?⁴⁰

A few months before this furore, Otto Preminger had openly challenged the blacklist, revealing the screenwriter for his 1960 film *Exodus* as another of the 'Hollywood Ten', Dalton Trumbo. When *Spartacus* opened in October of the same year Trumbo was again credited as author of the script. By announcing his plans prior to production, however, Sinatra exposed the difficulties still involved in bringing to the screen liberal subjects written by those associated with the political left.

The New York Post was one of the few publications to criticise the press attacks on Sinatra. In an article entitled 'Sinatra's "Sin"' the paper countered:

The know-nothings have apparently declared total war on Frank Sinatra. A torrent of abuse from the Hearst press, from various veterans' groups and from smugly conformist film personalities of dubious talent is being heaped on the actor-producer's head. . . Some of the lines being spoken by the flag-wrapped critics make us wonder how absurd this noisy production can get.⁴¹

Fierce Republican supporter John Wayne was one of those in the Hollywood community who took exception to Sinatra's planned production, using the debate to question Senator Kennedy's political perspective and asking: 'I wonder how Sinatra's crony, Senator John Kennedy, feels about him hiring such a man? I'd like to know his attitude because he's the one who is making plans to run the administrative government of our country.'⁴² This kind of attack on the presidential candidate Sinatra was so publicly supporting was, in part, responsible for the collapse of the project. Ronald Brownstein's examination of Sinatra's involvement with Kennedy's campaign effectively illustrates the increasingly close relationship developing between American politics and showbusiness.⁴³ The *Slovik* episode, however, equally reveals the fragility of Sinatra's position in relation to political influence and power. When a fortnight of pressure from, among others, the Catholic Church and the right-wing press caused Joseph P. Kennedy's direct intervention, Sinatra paid Maltz his salary and abandoned his plans for the film. Sinatra's initial retort to his critics had been: 'I am prepared to stand on my principles and to await the verdict of the American people when they see *The Execution of Private Slovik*. . . In my role as a picture maker, I have, in my opinion, hired the best man to do the job.'⁴⁴ Sinatra's final statement demonstrated the continued existence of a powerful anti-liberal lobby in Hollywood:

I had thought the major consideration was whether or not the resulting script would be in the best interests of the United States. . . But the American public has indicated it feels the morality of hiring Albert Maltz is the more crucial matter, and I will accept this majority opinion.⁴⁵

- Frank Sinatra, Postwar Liberalism and Press Paranoia

Sinatra renewed his association with the story of Eddie Slovik in 1963, demonstrating shifts in Hollywood's political climate which allowed the explicit expression of an anti-war message on screen. Carl Foreman's *The Victors* (1963) follows Eli Wallach's U.S. army unit through Europe during World War II, casting a light on the detrimental effects of war on the spirit of both soldiers and civilians. One scene depicts the execution by firing squad of an unnamed Private in December 1944, a clear reference to Slovik. While Wallach's men serve as unwilling witnesses to the event, the soundtrack accompaniment is a specially recorded Sinatra performance of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas'.

Sinatra's close involvement with racial politics demonstrates the extent to which anti-Communist extremism impacted on the activities of Hollywood liberals during the postwar period. While the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee used its extensive powers to interrupt careers, elements of the right-wing press were similarly intent on negatively affecting the reputations of industry professionals and restricting the expression of liberal political ideas. Sinatra's shifting response to accusations of anti-American allegiances positions the star at the centre of this turbulent period of Hollywood history. The challenges Sinatra faced in his various attempts to confront the politically oppressive atmosphere of postwar Hollywood are a marked indication of the sustained power of extreme Republican forces to contain the liberal activities of even such a prominent industry player as Frank Sinatra.

Notes

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