

# How Springsteen Became Sinatra



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“Fighting to Stay Free”

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## **And now, ladies and gentlemen...**

... some will argue otherwise, but little has really changed when it comes to being an adult in America now, vs. 30-40-even 50 years ago. Most of us still go to work Monday through Friday, and then rest - or, perhaps more accurately, spend more time doing things we enjoy away from the workplace - on the weekend.

While what those things are might differ a little, music is still at the center of it all. Even taking into account how much easier it is to listen to whatever music we choose 24/7, it's still about the weekend. That's when we can focus more on that music without having to work at the same time, and we're more likely to go see our favorite artists perform on a Friday or Saturday night.

In the so-far brief history of recorded music, there have been only a few solo performers who defined his or her generation. One of these performers is, without question, Frank Sinatra. In his lifetime and long career, Sinatra successfully transitioned from idol of female fans, to TV and movie star, to master of his craft. As the latter, he became the 'comfortable shoe' artist of the weekender: his albums never stopped selling, and he never stopped being a big concert draw. And then, of course, there's Sid Mark (<http://www.soundsofsinatra.com/>).

More important, Sinatra became the artist who “defined” the musical tastes, even personalities, of many pre-baby boomers. My father-in-law may enjoy many different types of music and artists, but it always comes back to Frank. Maybe it's that smooth-and-sure delivery or the knockout-punch of a lyrical hook. Or the way he set up songs when performing live. Or maybe it's just the depth of his catalog. Or...how Sinatra's style always stood in stark contrast to all the other music flooding the airwaves since rock 'n roll and a younger generation took over contemporary music, as if to say to

then-parents (and later grandparents) 'Don't worry...we're still the cool kids.'

The idea that every generation has its Sinatra - embodying most if not all of the qualities listed above - may seem obvious to anyone taking a long view of pop culture, but it wasn't to me. Until I began to notice where Bruce Springsteen has taken his career over the past 20 years: the evolution of his songwriting, vocal style, live presentation, and the activity - and aging - of his fan base.

Yes, you can point to obvious similarities between both artists: Jersey, storytelling, Joe Piscopo's dead-on impressions, even the appreciation one has (or had) for the other (<http://www.examiner.com/article/bruce-springsteen-s-songwriting-style-is-inspired-by-frank-sinatra>). In a tribute to Sinatra, Bruce drew this parallel between their songs: "While his music became synonymous with black tie, the good life, the best booze, women, sophistication, his blues voice was always the sound of hard luck, and men late at night with the last ten dollars in their pockets, trying to figure a way out." Quite possibly, Bruce has purposely orchestrated the transition in his career to spokesperson for now-oldsters, evidenced by quotes such as: "Sinatra sang colloquially, the way people speak. The minute the needle goes down on the record, a world is summoned up. I wanted to catalogue my times in that way."

This in no way suggests Springsteen's recent musical output is more simplistic and less meaningful than anything on *Born To Run* or *The River*. In fact, I would argue the opposite. There's a greater depth to his past four or five albums because he understands his product is being used differently than it was when he was young, hungry and "rock 'n roll's future." Springsteen, like Sinatra before him, has made his music more personal and thereby more iPod-, concert- and HBO special-ready. It's a major difference from the music produced during Bruce's peak years of popularity in the 1980s, when short stories that could serve as radio wallpaper were the order of the day. It's no surprise both were Grammy winners long after their hit-making days ended.

These days, Springsteen has come to the point in his long career that Sinatra did in his "post-retirement" era: he's got nothing left to prove, with nothing but a continuing self-imposed mandate to create great music. He's not the only still-recording act who's pre-sold with an audience that grew up on album rock, where every new album is still an event: U2 shares that honor, although a six-year gap between the last new album and the next hasn't helped their cause any. While the fact that Bruce continues to be must-see-live probably goes without saying, what is worth noting is his evolution to showman who matches Sinatra's knack for telling a story and setting up a song, and for paying tribute to the music that influenced him (or that he's just always loved) with faithful reinterpretations of those songs in concert - including, perhaps surprisingly, "Royals," during a recent show in Lorde's hometown of Auckland, New Zealand (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6VToqhUd-0>).

Just as Sinatra's music and don't-give-a-damn attitude defined so many of "the Greatest Generation," Springsteen's now does the same for the lower-end of the baby boomers (not to mention, quite often their children). For both performers, the power of their music has made it easy for fans to look the other way when it comes to controversies stirred by each - whether Sinatra's "Rat Pack" behavior or Springsteen's willingness to go against the grain politically. It could be that's a big part of what both act's fans love about their hero: neither shows or showed any fear. Sinatra sang "I'm Gonna Live Till I Die"; Springsteen reminds us he's "Tougher Than The Rest."

And sure enough, if you see Springsteen perform live these days, you can almost hear him say to everyone in the crowd unplugged from modern contemporary radio, 'Don't worry...we're still the cool kids.'

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