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Frank Sinatra: Inside the Legendary Performer's Palm Springs Compound

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Palm Springs was one of the most enduring passions of Frank Sinatra's passionate life. Except for his music and his family, Sinatra loved the desert community at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains longer than he loved anything or anyone else. Although he maintained residences in Los Angeles and New York, they were way stations. Palm Springs was his center, his haven, his home.

Sinatra began frequenting Palm Springs just after World War II, at about the time he won his first Oscar—for a short film on intolerance called *The House I Live In*. He was introduced to the desert by composer Jimmy Van Heusen ("Here's That Rainy Day," "But Beautiful"). Legend has it that Van Heusen, a pilot, had stopped for fuel in Palm Springs and later, over dinner in Los Angeles, told Sinatra of the beauty of the desert. Sinatra insisted that Van Heusen fly him there that very evening.

Other stars were discovering the desert. Sinatra went to parties and dined and danced with Lana Turner and Ava Gardner. He built a house in Palm Springs in 1947 when the town was still small. "We...needed our jeep to manage the dirt roads, sand dunes, and tumbleweeds," his older daughter, Nancy, writes in her 1985 book *Frank Sinatra, My Father*. The house was on Alejo Road in the fashionable north section, with tall picture windows facing a pool shaped like a grand piano.

In the mid-fifties, with the growing town enveloping his privacy, Sinatra moved. He purchased a small house on a plot of land several miles south and east, on Wonder Palms Road, along the seventeenth fairway of the new Tamarisk Country Club. It was there that he would establish the home of a lifetime. The small, one-story house had a rough stone entrance and vertical sand-colored clapboard siding. There were two bedrooms, a living room, a tiny kitchen and dining area and an oval swimming pool open to the golf course. "Sometimes golfers actually walked in," Nancy Sinatra writes. "One clown drove a golf cart right into the pool.

Since there was no immediate fire protection so far out in the country, two huge red fire extinguishers on wheels stood guard over the property. Electrical generators were installed as protection against the frequent power failures.

The fifties and early sixties were among the most profitable periods of Frank Sinatra's professional life. After winning his second Academy Award, for *From Here to Eternity*, in 1954, he made timeless recordings and movies—the albums *Only the Lonely* and *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*, for example, and the films *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. Between engagements Sinatra gradually expanded his property in the desert to two and a half acres. Having secured privacy with a fence between his house and the golf course, he added a pair of two-bedroom cottages, one off either end of the pool. Each bedroom had its own separate his-and-her baths. The her baths were equipped with Helene Curtis professional salon hair dryers. Sinatra also

expanded the main house, adding a dining room for twenty-four and a restaurant-size kitchen with a commercial range, a walk-in refrigerator and freezer and a wine closet. Outside, the desert dweller had a choice: He could keep the natural environment at bay with lush lawns lavishly watered, or he could accommodate his home to its habitat, accepting the sand as lawn, the boulders and cactuses as shrubbery. Sinatra chose the latter, enhancing his terrain with specimen cactuses, saguaro, ocotillo, cholla and prickly pear, as well as grapefruit, lemon and lime trees.

John F. Kennedy spent two days at Sinatra's place in 1960, sleeping in a guest room of the main house. Sinatra had a plaque installed to honor the event. When Kennedy became president, it was expected that he would again visit Sinatra, who continued to add to his property: a tennis court, a helicopter pad, a projection room between the main house and the golf course, an office displaying his Oscars, Emmys, Grammys and gold records, an additional cottage with a bedroom and painting studio, and a four-bedroom bungalow on the west end of the property with a living room, a kitchen and its own swimming pool. The bungalow, built for his children, was called the Christmas Tree House because of a big pine tree in front.

Kennedy never returned to the Sinatra estate. When the president next visited Palm Springs, he stayed at Bing Crosby's house instead. The Secret Service deemed it more secure. Sinatra was hurt, but by then, over the course of a decade, he had created an utterly singular home for himself and his family—a cluster of plain, anti-style structures, at one with the desert on the outside, and on the inside luxurious, loaded with creature comforts, but homey, not opulent. This was where Frank Sinatra came to rest, read, paint, listen to music, watch movies, play with his model trains (they had their own house—a simulated depot) and entertain his friends and family.

“It was the place of the happiest times we ever had with him,” says his younger daughter, Tina. “That was his home, and you could feel it. It was full of great times. I met the world in that house.”

The nine guest bedrooms at the Sinatra compound were occupied much of the time. The visitors were Hollywood royalty and American and European high society: Noel Coward. Elizabeth Taylor. Richard Burton. Bennett Cerf. Roaslind Russell. Yul Brynner. Dr. Michael DeBakey. The Roland Regans. The Milton Berles.

“You had no idea who would show up,” recalls Daniel Melnick, the film producer and former president of MGM and Columbia pictures. “It could be the president of the United States. It could be Vito Musso, the great sax player from the Stan Kenton band. Vito, Frank and Jilly Rizzo would cook their favorite pastas.”

“It's well known that [Frank's] the single greatest host since Perle Mesta,” writer-director Garson Kanin told Nancy Sinatra. “He got up at five o'clock every morning and he worked like a goddamned Yankee innkeeper all day to see that everybody had the right number of toothpicks.”

And the right amount of music. The entire property was wired for sound. A Bosendorfer concert grand piano, a gift from Jimmy Van Heusen, later given to Nancy, adorned the living room of the main house. A Yamaha stood ready in the projection room.

Sinatra's restaurant-strength kitchen was open around the clock, and the staff ready to prepare most any type of food or drink a guest might desire. Not every demand could be filled instantly, however. Late one night Dan

Melnick and Tina Sinatra raided the freezer looking for ice cream and found only two or three flavors of Baskin Robbins. “I made a joke, the word got back to Frank, and the next week he had it stocked with all thirty-one flavors,” Melnick says.

Laundry was done on the premises and returned wrapped in soft paper. In 1971 several of Frank’s employees, knowing of his love for trains, gave him an actual caboose, in which he installed a sauna, a massage table, a barber chair, an exercise bench and a huge Toledo scale. His guests used the caboose frequently—hairdressers and masseurs were brought in when needed.

First-run movies were shown in the projection room on studio-quality equipment by studio projectionists imported from Los Angeles. When the New York writer and columnist Stanley Zion was in residence, he asked to see *The Manchurian Candidate*. Sinatra sat with him while he watched it. When the radio personality Jonathan Schwartz came for an evening, the group watched Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson in *The Missouri Breaks*, with Frank Sinatra supplying anticipatory plot narration to his guests, a habit he had picked up from the old Hollywood moguls.

In 1976, three years after a career hiatus and three years before *Trilogy*, the biggest recording project of his life, Frank Sinatra married Barbara Marx, another longtime lover of the desert and resident of Palm Springs. The arrival of the new Mrs. Sinatra reminded Mr. Sinatra that his home had been aggressively lived in for more than two decades. It needed work. Barbara Sinatra retained her longtime friend, Beverly Hills interior designer Bernice Korshak, known as Bea, who in turn summoned architect Ted Grenzback. They opened and lighted the central spaces of the main house and added a master suite for Barbara with Travertine floors, a Jacuzzi tub, an exercise room and lots of mirrors. They also renovated the projection room, which, as the center of constant entertaining, showed the most wear.

As they planned the changes, Bea Korshak and Barbara Sinatra found themselves with Frank Sinatra’s blessing, waging a gentle war on orange. As his favorite color, orange pervaded the property. There was orange carpeting and orange tile, an orange refrigerator and orange draperies, orange towels and an orange sofa. Korshak erased a good deal of orange from the living room and bar of the main house, and from the projection room, substituting subtle desert colors and white. She blended new window treatments and wall coverings, as well as furniture.

Outside, Korshak replaced more than a dozen clashing patterns of pool and lawn furniture with a single design of white with brown leather strapping.

The buildings on the estate had been named for such frequent guests as Bennett Ceref and Yul Brynner. After the renovation, Frank and Barbara Sinatra renamed each building, and each room within, for Frank’s recordings. The main house became “The house I Live In”; the projection room, “Send in the Clowns,”

A part of the property that changed relatively little was Frank Sinatra’s bedroom (“I Sing the Songs”). Though there was new furniture and a new fireplace, the room’s essence would remain. There was a plain double bed (not king size) with a headboard covered in orange-and-white fabric. A small statue of Saint Francis stood in a corner. Above the bed was a print of Sinatra’s first painting, an orange-and-brown abstract (the original hangs

in the projection room). Copper sculptures of train engines rimmed the fireplace, and a Denver Express model train stretched along the mantel. Books filled the shelves.

From his room, Sinatra could look out to the pool, monitoring the comings and goings. Or, with the flick of a switch, he could close the shades, plunging the space into pitch blackness for sleeping, essential for a man who worked and played—and then slept—very late.

“He loved that room—it was a little cave,” Tina Sinatra says.

On the door to the brown and orange dressing area was a small plaque that read: “I believe in the sun even more when it’s not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God, even when he is silent.” The dressing area was small and simple, with a massage table and a steam shower but no bathtub. A mosaic snowman made by Tina Sinatra when she was eight hung on one wall. A panel of clocks gave the time in Los Angeles, New York, London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. There were two sad-faced clowns, painted by Sinatra, self-portraits. The suite reflected modesty, a lack of ostentation on Frank Sinatra’s most private space, so different from his image.

Sinatra sang in public for what would prove to be the last time on February 25, 1995—six songs at an annual Palm Springs golf tournament that he and Barbara sponsored for the benefit of the Barbara Sinatra Children’s Center. He sang well, considering that he was a seventy-nine-year-old man in failing health. Shortly thereafter, the Sinatras put their estate on the market and prepared to take up full-time residence in their houses in Malibu and Beverly Hills.

The Palm Springs compound was sold to a Canadian businessman, Jim Pattison. The Sinatras’ scheduled departure date approached, but Frank Sinatra did not want to leave. Barbara inquired about renting the place for an additional month. Pattison declined but allowed them to stay as guests. Weeks passed. A Pattison representative moved onto the property. Finally, in late May, Sinatra arose one day, breakfasted, showered and shaved, donned a suit and tie and got into a town car. His staff of twenty-six, informed that he was leaving for good, lined up along both sides of the driveway as a driver eased the car out of the compound and down the street that had long since been renamed Frank Sinatra Drive. A few minutes later a Pattison employee found half a dozen of the female staff sitting and kneeling on the floor of Sinatra’s bedroom quietly crying.

Giving up his home devastated Sinatra. He never got over it, and he died in Los Angeles three years later—on May 14, 1998—without returning to the compound. He did come back to the desert, however. His remains are interred alongside his parents’ near his former estate.