



“I’m supposed to have a Ph.D. on the subject of women. But the truth is, I’ve flunked more often than not. I’m very fond of women; I admire them. But, like all men, I don’t understand them.”

– Frank Sinatra

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THE KING OF *Hearts*

Frank Sinatra was divorced three times,
but he never lost faith in marriage.

BY ELISA JORDAN

If one of your nicknames is Chairman of the Board, you're probably great at many things. During his lifetime, Frank Sinatra became the voice of the century. He won an Academy Award. He made audiences laugh during live performances. He was also a first-rate ladies man.

Sinatra was married four times. He first wed his New Jersey sweetheart, then one of the world's most beautiful actresses, then an ingénue and finally a former showgirl. But it wasn't just his marriages that captured the public's imagination. The women who appeared on his well-dressed arm included Marilyn Maxwell, Lana Turner, Juliet Prowse, Angie Dickenson, Kim Novak, Marlene Dietrich, Anita Ekberg and Lauren Bacall, the widow of one of his best friends, Humphrey Bogart. It's no wonder his reputation preceded him.

The man himself, however, played down such notoriety. As he once said at a press luncheon in 1965, "I can honestly say to you, slaves of the press, that if I had as many love affairs as you have given me credit for, I would now be speaking to you from a jar at the Harvard Medical School."

In spite of his swinging ring-a-ding-ding image, Frank Sinatra at his core was an old-fash-

ioned gentleman, which is how he won the hearts of so many beauties. He believed in giving compliments, saying "I love you" frequently, bestowing surprise gifts and opening doors. "I may sound old-fashioned but I want to think all women should be treated like I want my wife, daughters and granddaughters to be treated," Sinatra said. "I notice today that good manners — like standing up when a woman enters a room, helping a woman on with her coat, letting her enter an elevator first, taking her arm to cross the street — are sometimes considered unnecessary or a throwback. These are habits I could never break, nor would I want to. I realize today a lot more women are taking care of themselves than in the past, but no woman is offended by politeness."

For his part, Sinatra loved a poised woman who dressed tastefully, kept herself impeccably groomed and didn't use profanity, which he considered unladylike (though he made an exception for Ava Gardner). Although it took four marriages before he got it right, the reality was Sinatra never stopped loving any of his wives. It's a testament to his character that he remained a friend and confidant to all of them.

Nancy Barbato Sinatra

Sinatra was just a skinny 19-year-old kid when he spotted 17-year-old Nancy Barbato filing her nails at the Jersey Shore. Frank wooed her by playing a ukulele and serenading her while she sat on her porch. The pretty teen came from a traditional Italian Catholic family, so it must have seemed like an ideal match for the Italian Catholic Frank. Nancy was good mother material, and Frank was an old-school guy who believed men should get married.

As Mike Barbato waited for his daughter's suitor to get a real job, Frank dreamed of a singing career. Nancy supported his big, seemingly impossible goals, but Frank began seeing women on the side while good-girl Nancy waited for him at home.

While Nancy epitomized the grace and dignity of a traditional bride-to-be, she was no pushover. A confrontation between an aggressive mistress and Nancy led to a physical altercation in a club. Nancy threatened the woman, insisting she never come around her man again. The spurned woman had Frank arrested not once, but twice, for seduction and adultery.

In the end, Nancy won her man, and the two were married in New Jersey on Feb. 4, 1939, after five years of courtship. From the beginning, Nancy was put in a nearly impossible situation. She was a supportive, loving wife who tried to set up a traditional Italian home, but her husband was frequently on the road, singing in clubs every night. When her first child, Nancy, and second child, Frank, were born, daddy was in Hollywood working.

As Frank's star began to rise, it seemed like a good decision to move the entire Sinatra family to Hollywood. Nancy was not thrilled about leaving her large, loving family behind in New Jersey, although they visited frequently. A third child, Tina, joined the Sinatra household in California.

Frank was now in the land of the world's most beautiful women. It's not terribly surprising that close proximity to such temptation further weakened his fidelity. At times, Frank stayed in an apartment instead of returning home. The Sinatra marriage began crumbling, but as she had already demonstrated, Nancy wasn't one to give up easily. She had a family to protect and she was Catholic. She would not grant a divorce. Meanwhile, the press reported on the couple's difficulties with voyeuristic glee.

Eventually, however, not even Nancy could put up with the marriage's miserable conditions. They finally separated for good and, after a back-and-forth battle, Frank gave her 10 percent of his earnings for life. The divorce was finalized in 1951.

Nancy and Frank settled into a friendship that he appears to have treasured. Ultimately, Nancy was the person who understood Frank the best. In times of despair or when needed someone to talk to, it was Nancy he frequently turned to for a comforting word.



“In Nancy, I found beauty, warmth and understanding — being with her was my only escape from what seemed to be a grim world.”

— Frank Sinatra



HAROLD FLANAP PHOTO



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Ava Gardner

Years before they became one of Hollywood's most famous couples, Sinatra reportedly pointed to a picture of Ava Gardner and vowed, "I'm going to marry her someday."

When he finally met the glamorous actress, she was in her early 20s and already twice divorced. In the late 1940s, as his marriage to Nancy was failing, Frank frequently bumped into the raven-haired beauty around town. It was as though fate wanted them together.

Gardner was hardly a traditional woman. She was a force — she cursed, kept up with any drinker (including Ernest Hemingway), had a fierce temper, possessed a wicked sense of humor and loved blood sports like bullfight-

ing. Early in their relationship, Frank and Ava, both drunk, drove out to the desert and shot out streetlights and store windows with .38s.

Frank was helpless in her presence.

It was a turbulent time in Frank's life. His marriage was in ruins, but his wife Nancy refused to grant a divorce. His career was waning. In contrast, Ava's star had never burned brighter. She would one day use that star power to lobby on Frank's behalf and land him the role of Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*, which not only turned his career around but also won him an Academy Award.

Their relationship was tempestuous from the very beginning. They fought constantly but couldn't live without each other. After his di-



"I can't eat. I can't sleep. I love her."

– Frank Sinatra



voice was granted, Frank married Ava on Nov. 7, 1951.

“Plenty of people told me I was mad to marry him,” Ava said years later. “Lana Turner had had an affair with him. ... ‘I’ve been there, honey,’ she told me. ‘Don’t do it!’ I should have listened to her. The girl had been around.”

It wasn’t just their fiery personalities that made things difficult for the couple. The press heaped criticism on the romance because Frank had left his wife and children. The Catholic Church-affiliated National Legion of Decency threatened a boycott. Fans flooded the studio with hate mail. The negativity hung like a foreboding pall over their entire marriage.

Drinking, infidelity, nasty tempers and drama plagued the couple. They repeatedly

made up, only to unravel again. At one point, Frank either attempted suicide or faked it to get Ava’s attention, depending on who is telling the story. Ava became pregnant by Frank twice, but aborted both babies. “We couldn’t even take care of ourselves,” she said years later. “How were we going to take care of a baby?”

The two divorced in 1957, but they were never completely out of each other’s lives. “We talk, honey ... two or three times a year. He always calls at Christmas. He never forgets my birthday,” said Ava, whose birthday was Christmas Eve. “He’s a sentimental man.”

Frank remained a steadfast friend to Ava, who moved to Spain and later London after the marriage. After Sinatra, she embarked on occasional relationships but never remarried. In her final years, she suffered from emphysema and an undisclosed autoimmune disease. Two strokes limited her mobility. Frank insisted on paying many of her medical expenses. He was, to the end, loyal to the woman no man could tame.



TOP: MONADORI PORTFOLIO/RETT COLLECTION; BOTTOM: MARY EVANS/ROMULO GRANIT/RETT COLLECTION



WALTER ATTEW/RETNA PHOTO

Mia Farrow

As the daughter of actress Maureen O'Sullivan and director John Villiers Farrow, Mia Farrow grew up in Beverly Hills surrounded by wealth and privilege. Celebrity was normal. When she first met Sinatra she was just 11 years old and having dinner with her father at Beverly Hills hot spot Romanoff's. "Pretty girl," Old Blue Eyes joked. Farrow replied in jest, "You stay away from her."

It wasn't until eight years later that Frank and Mia ran into each other again, this time on a soundstage. Mia had started a career of her own and was starring on the nighttime soap opera *Peyton Place*. Frank was filming a movie, and during a visit to the neighboring set Mia watched him filming a scene.

They soon started quietly seeing each other. The 19-year-old girl and 49-year-old crooner kept their romance secret. Only a few friends initially knew, but even they were surprised when one day Frank hopped out of a swimming pool at a gathering and proclaimed loudly to Mia, "I love you!" It was an emotionally intense connection, and the two enjoyed almost total privacy for several months at Frank's rented Sunset Boulevard mansion. A

publicist quelled any hints of a romance in the gossip columns.

Frank married Mia during an awkward period in his career. His style of music was no longer popular. It was the mid-1960s and rock 'n' roll had become a sensation. Mia reinvigorated him. In turn, she was moved by his tenderness.

When the couple finally went public, not even Frank, who was accustomed to intense media coverage, could have anticipated the rattling invasion of privacy and scathing commentary. Frank endured countless midlife crisis jokes from the media and friends. (Dean Martin once toasted Mia from the stage by announcing, "I have bottles of Scotch older than you!") Mia was accused of wanting a father figure. Sensitive, she was surprised that others couldn't see their bond. "I kept thinking, They have it all wrong, they don't really know him," she said of that time. "They can't see the wounding tenderness that even he can't bear to acknowledge — except when he sings."

Despite the improbability, the two wed on July 19, 1966. Frank was almost 51; Mia was 21. The ingénue soon signed on to appear in *Rosemary's Baby*. Frank, however, wanted Mia to also star with him in his upcoming movie, *The Detective*. When the shooting schedule for *Rosemary's Baby* ran over and she didn't report to work on *The Detective*, Frank served Mia divorce papers. It was November 1967 — their marriage lasted just over a year.

Frank remained friendly with Mia. Nearly 25 years later, when Mia found out that her partner Woody Allen had photographed her adopted daughter in the nude, she turned to Sinatra for comfort.

In 2013, Mia told a reporter that her son Ronan, who is legally Woody Allen's biological son, was "possibly" Frank's and that she and Frank "never really split up." When Frank was laid to rest, Mia and Ronan attended his 1998 funeral with the Sinatra family. (No DNA tests have been performed and the Sinatra family denies that Ronan is Frank's child. Frank had a vasectomy long before Ronan was conceived, they say.)



"It will be harder for Mia to mend because of her age. When you get to be my age, you've built a wall around yourself. You don't hurt as much as you used to."

– Frank Sinatra

AP PHOTO



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Barbara Marx Sinatra

By the early 1970s, Frank Sinatra already had a lot of living behind him. He was in his mid-50s and he had survived three failed marriages and career ups and downs. He didn't feel the need to make another woman his wife. "I've been married three times and that's enough," he said. "I'm not getting married again."

Things began to change when he took an interest in Barbara Marx, his longtime neighbor in Palm Springs. For years Barbara and her husband Zeppo Marx, of the Marx comedy family, occasionally socialized with Frank or saw him around the golf course as their carts zoomed past each other.

The Marx marriage wasn't always an easy one. Zeppo was 26 years older than his wife and after she caught him cheating with another woman, she decided they were over. It was when Barbara's marriage was in its final stages that Frank showed serious interest in the former model and showgirl. Initially, however, she wasn't sure she wanted to reciprocate. "I really didn't care about knowing him because of the press I'd read."

But Sinatra knew how to win over a woman. When he found out that Barbara was taking her son on a trip to Monaco, he said he would be there at the same time. How about meeting up? When she arrived at her hotel, three dozen white roses were waiting for her.

After four years of dating, Barbara accompanied Frank on tour to Jerusalem. While at the Wailing Wall, she wrote a prayer on a piece of paper to slip between the cracks. At the end of her prayer, she asked for continued happiness with Frank and added, "And please, have him ask me to marry him."

The following year, Frank did just that. He had vowed never to marry again, but in his heart he was an old-fashioned Italian from New Jersey. Men should be married.

Frank and Barbara married on July 11, 1976. He was 60; Barbara was 45. The wedding



took place at the estate of publisher Walter Annenberg. Chasen's, a legendary Beverly Hills restaurant, provided the catering.

With Barbara, Frank was able to find the stability that seemed to elude him in his previous marriages. Perhaps it was because of his age, but he finally settled down ... in his own way. "I live my life a certain way that I could never change for a woman," he once said.

She endured his outbursts and soothed him when he lost his temper. She stayed up with him when he wanted a late night of drinking with his buddies. In turn, he showered her with lavish gifts like jewelry and a Rolls Royce. She loved his passion for living.

During an interview, Barbara admitted that she and Frank fought "a lot." She would later talk of how there was a Jekyll and Hyde aspect of his personality. Still, he was devoted to her. In his softer moments, Frank picked flowers for her and serenaded her in the morning. It was during his fourth marriage that Frank finally seemed to learn how to be a husband. •

Elisa Jordan is a journalist who writes and speaks on Hollywood history. She also regularly serves as script editor for numerous documentaries on Southern California.

"The love of my life, my Barbara."

– Frank Sinatra