

# Frank Sinatra's Oscar-Winning Evolution as an Actor Examined in Definitive New Study

*Frank Sinatra on the Big Screen offers revelatory film-by-film study of how he broke free of studio typecasting to earn critical raves and box office success*

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, UNITED STATES, July 8, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Frank Sinatra was without

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*Gary Schneeberger*

question one of the most influential singers in the history of recorded music, a charismatic and enigmatic figure whose personal life generated innumerable headlines during his more than 50 years in the public spotlight. What is often lost in the discussion of his A-list career, though, is that he was also a gifted and courageous actor who became a film star in a manner Hollywood did not foresee.

In the just-released [Frank Sinatra on the Big Screen: The Singer as Actor and Filmmaker](#), authors James L. Neibaur and Gary Schneeberger take a deep and detailed dive into

the movie career of the star who may not have been the first, or the last, musical artist to parlay his success into a movie career – but may have been the one who succeeded most resoundingly.

“Sinatra did more than just sing ‘My Way’ – he became a respected and heralded actor and filmmaker his way,” Schneeberger explained. “The industry tried to paint him into a one-note corner, and despite some significant personal and professional setbacks, he emerged on the other side as a force in front of and behind the camera for decades.”

Neibaur, a noted film historian with 30 critical studies to his credit, noted Sinatra was a triple threat as an actor, turning in impressive performances in dramas, musicals and comedies.

“He was an instinctual, natural actor who eschewed the Method approach of contemporaries like Marlon Brando,” Neibaur said. “There’s a visceral intensity in his best work, even in films that were not blockbusters or award-winners, which has been sadly underappreciated.”

That is more than anyone expected from him in the early 1940s. Sinatra, then a skinny young

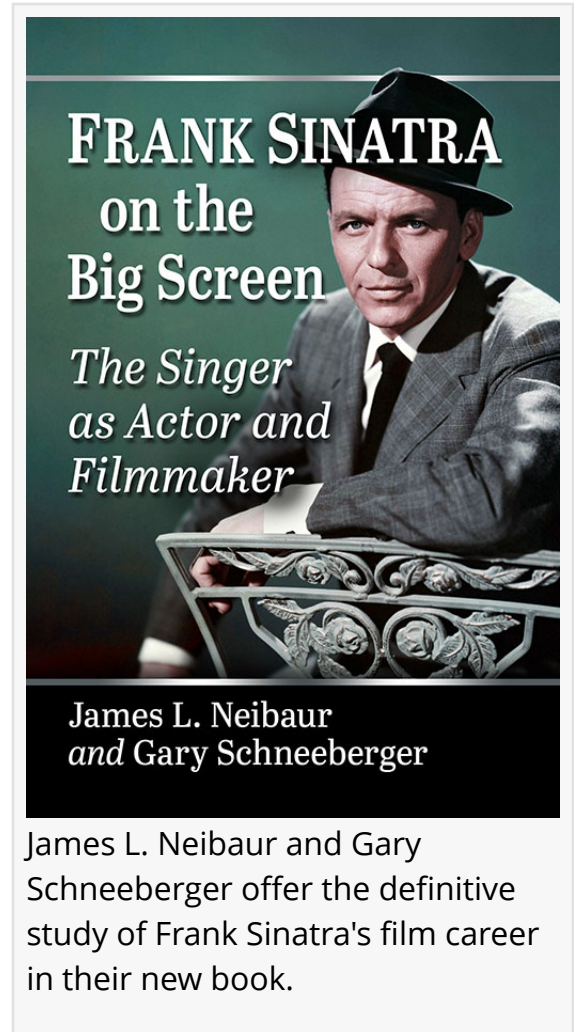
balladeer known as The Voice, was groomed to be a movie "star," not a movie actor, and the distinction is an important one. He was brought to Hollywood because those in the industry believed he could titillate female audiences as easily from a movie screen as he had from a concert stage. His first few roles required no real acting at all -- he played extensions of himself: a band singer who crooned one or two numbers during an interlude incidental to the narrative.

Even as he segued into portraying characters, Sinatra could not be accused of stretching his abilities. His initial character work was tentative and a little laconic. Nonetheless, he developed a screen persona during these years, mostly playing naive, earnest men who would sing a half dozen songs as they shyly pursued – or tried to avoid for lack of confidence -- pretty young women. Not surprisingly, the public could take just so much of that. Sinatra's only genuine hits during this period were musicals like *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), and *On The Town* (1949), films in which he was just one member of an ensemble of talented performers, and not the star counted on to sell a production on his own merits.

The 1950s, though, would prove to be the breakthrough decade for Sinatra as an actor as he began to select roles that helped redefine his screen image. Meet Danny Wilson was a pivotally shrewd choice, since Sinatra was able to sing and at the same time demonstrate an ability to play drama as a largely unsympathetic character. Although the movie was not a commercial success, it was a fitting bridge to his next project, *From Here To Eternity*, for which he won the 1954 Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor. In the small but pivotal role of Maggio, a troubled soldier who is beaten to death in an Army stockade, Sinatra proved unequivocally that he was the dramatic equal to such co-stars as Burt Lancaster and Montgomery Clift.

A series of consequential dramatic roles followed. He played a calculating drifter out to kill the President in *Suddenly* (1954), and in 1955 earned another Oscar nomination, this time as Best Actor, for his chilling portrayal of a heroin addict trying to kick the habit in *The Man With the Golden Arm*. Over the next few years, he appeared in other films that graphically explored then-taboo subjects. He effectively played the alcoholic comedian Joe E. Lewis in the biopic *The Joker is Wild* (1957), and he delivered a solid, subdued performance as a brainwashed ex-soldier trying to unravel a complex murder plot in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a psychological thriller considered by some as his finest work.

"He even took a shot at directing, with better results than one might have anticipated," Neibaur



James L. Neibaur and Gary Schneeberger offer the definitive study of Frank Sinatra's film career in their new book.

said. "His approach to the material as a director in *None But the Brave* in 1965 shows the same innate talent in filmmaking he had, by now, long established as an actor. His cinematic vision belies his novice status as a director from his opening scenes."

In his musicals during this period, Sinatra was also trying to expand on the characters he had played in his '40s ensemble outings. In *Young at Heart* (1955) and *High Society* (1956), he layers maturity and wisdom seemingly hard-earned into his portrayals as both actor and singer. By the time he did *Guys and Dolls* (1955) and *Pal Joey* (1957), his evolution seemed complete -- he had metamorphosed from the jittery innocent who is intimidated by women and had become the cocksure hipster who does the intimidating.

Sinatra wore this persona so well he rarely shed it in the later years of his screen career. With few exceptions, his roles starting in the early 1960s mostly underscore that image, especially in his undertakings with the Rat Pack and in the succession of world-weary private investigators and police detectives he played. His performances in these movies are uniformly good, though the roles require little of the range and emotion he had shown he was capable of projecting.

"It's ironic that after he had finally succeeded in breaking free from studio-imposed typecasting, he chose to impose a different but equally limiting typecasting upon himself," Schneeberger said. "But then he was still doing it his way."

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