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KAREN McNALLY
London Metropolitan University

Hollywood stars vs variety show hosts: The incompatible case of Frank Sinatra on 1950s television

ABSTRACT

This article considers the identity of the variety show host on 1950s American television, exploring how Frank Sinatra's poorly received assumption of the role reveals its strictly limited alignment with a perceived middle-class suburban family audience. Television's attempt to invest its stars with a sense of the everyday in contrast to the extraordinary glamour provided by Hollywood guest stars is examined in the context of the positioning of Dinah Shore and Perry Como as idealized archetypes of the host identity. Exploring the critical reception of Frank Sinatra as both a variety show host and guest, as well as the unconventional star image presented through his performances on the small screen, the article argues that Sinatra explicitly illustrates the distinct ways in which the roles of variety show host and guest star were defined around the oppositions of television and Hollywood, comfort and disruption, ordinary and extraordinary, and suburban and urban.

KEYWORDS

Frank Sinatra
1950s American television
variety show host
Hollywood stars
Dinah Shore
Perry Como

American television's use of Hollywood stars in the 1950s provides an intriguing insight into the new medium's aims for self-presentation as the entertainment form of choice for the average American family. As Christopher Anderson's

exploration of the relationship between the Hollywood studios and the television networks in the 1950s explains, the studios' approach to television was one of ambivalence rather than a simple antagonism towards the new medium. While television represented Hollywood's most powerful competition, the studios viewed television's economic opportunities as 'a perfunctory salvation' (Anderson 1994: 7). As the studios limited their film-making in the midst of the film industry's decline caused by such factors as the Supreme Court's 1948 Paramount Decision, the post-war rush to the suburbs and the shift towards alternative leisure pursuits, they became instead the primary providers of filmed programming for the television networks, transforming their operations in alignment with television's needs. Television was similarly conflicted in its dealings with the film industry. While the networks relied on the studios to fill their airtime with both original programming and Hollywood's back catalogue of movies, television was keen to distinguish itself as a medium addressed towards the post-war American family in its domestic arena. Just as the studios made use of the opportunities their competitor provided for the promotion of their movies, stars and associated products, television drew on its association with Hollywood while simultaneously distancing itself as it sought to create its own identity. This ambivalent approach was evident in its engagement with Hollywood stardom, as television embraced its image of glamour but was equally keen to develop and brand its own kind of star as a variety distinct from its silver screen counterpart. Television stars were presented as the more ordinary alternative to a contrasting Hollywood artificiality, enabling audience identification and effective product sponsorship. In the variety show, one of the staple formats developed by early television, the stars of Hollywood and television were pitched against each other in clearly defined positions as guest and host, respectively, and required to perform their roles as distant sources of glamour and fascination or comfortable and familiar weekly visitors to the suburban home. Frank Sinatra's assumption of the role of variety show host in two separate series during the 1950s provides a crucial understanding of the strict definitions of stardom and the ordinary which tied Hollywood and television performers to their respective roles, making Hollywood stars incompatible with the role of host. Examining the reception of the extremes of Sinatra's image as a star in Hollywood and beyond, and the urban, sexualized, unpredictable image he brought to the small screen, reveals the limiting identities shaped through early television in the context of post-war notions of the middle-class suburban family.

Christine Becker's study of Hollywood stars on 1950s television highlights the various negotiations to be made in integrating film stars into the world of the small screen. Major stars were initially reluctant to appear on television since, as radio before it, television through its reliance on sponsorship was seen as the more commercial medium with a corresponding lower cultural status. The perception was, therefore, that an appearance on television might suggest declining fortunes on the big screen. Dramatic roles were frequently filled by stars of lesser standing – whether on the way up or down in their careers – whom television invested with a positive sense of authenticity, a key marker of their distinction from the glamour of Hollywood stardom, and one intended to counteract any connotations of failing careers or the impression of television as a sub-standard form of entertainment (Becker 2008: 6–7, 28). For those recognizable stars testing the waters on television, whether through acting roles or presenting drama or variety series, further

negotiation was required, as their images were transformed to accommodate the new medium and its demands for the everyday, as Becker explains,

> For film stars moving to television in the 1950s, their star identity was already established, but the intimate and routine quality of early television, as well as its small visual dimensions, presentational genres, overt commercialism, and lesser cultural standing in relation to film, enforced a recrafting of that identity away from the extraordinary. The preformed star image, and even glamour itself, was thus reconstituted as a more ordinary and personal construct.
>
> (Becker 2008: 7)

Hollywood aimed to set itself apart from television by accentuating its extraordinary qualities through glamorous star imaging as well as the new widescreen, sound and colour technology of the 1950s. In the same way, television made a positive virtue of its small screen, commercially dependent, repetitive format by emphasizing its informality and lack of gloss (heightened in live shows) and articulating an essential warm familiarity and intimacy through its stars.

The clear distinctions made between major Hollywood stars and those building their reputations in the new medium were readily apparent in the early television variety show. As hosts and star guests were set up in starkly contrasting ways for audiences, the identities exhibited by both were strictly defined in relation to the individual role each performed. As Denise Mann indicates, guest appearances by Hollywood stars provided several functions for the variety show. These popular stars lent the shows an otherwise missing shot of glamour, happily coinciding with the sponsors' aims to promote broad notions of consumerism through the specific qualities of their products. At the same time, the placement of these stars in opposition to variety show hosts reinforced the domestic aura to which the hosts and television were tied and with which audiences could more readily identify:

> Television variety shows featuring Hollywood stars as guests were capitalizing on the lingering appeal of these idols of consumption. On the other hand, these same TV shows contained skits which made Hollywood stars appear as intruding figures, threatening the positive values and associations of domesticity and family life maintained by the television star, week after week.
>
> (Mann 1992: 47)

Hosts such as Jack Benny, then, positioned themselves alongside their television audiences, comically celebrating the otherworldliness of their Hollywood star guests and at the same time promoting a heightened engagement between audience and television star as the new, naturally improved version of stardom and, consequently, a credible product spokesperson (Mann 1992: 52). The multitude of oppositions apparent here clearly problematizes the positioning of a Hollywood star, such as Frank Sinatra, in the alternative role of host. Hollywood star versus television star, artificial glamour versus genuine attractiveness, extraordinary versus ordinary, the disruptive exotic versus the familiar American family lifestyle, each of these oppositions signals the strictly defined roles guest stars and hosts performed for audiences and within the wider culture of television. Hollywood stars were now the outmoded outsiders in the contemporary world of television, welcomed on a temporary basis

to display some old-style excess and subsequently required to make way for the more egalitarian ethos hosts were able to represent on behalf of the new medium.

The hosts most successful in mediating the distance between Hollywood star guests and the television audience of the variety show achieved this feat, then, by drawing on and re-emphasizing their distinction from the notions of glamour and stardom with which Hollywood stars were associated. Equally, these hosts were presented in terms which attempted to align them with their core audience: married, successful, family-oriented consumers. Those who occupied the role with ease were therefore performers exhibiting an image with which ordinary Americans might naturally identify, despite the very real distinctions between the hosts and their audiences. As Elaine Tyler May has highlighted, the promotion of the white, middle-class suburban family and its attendant lifestyle became nothing less than a political crusade in the post-war era, illustrated by Vice-President Richard Nixon's famous 'kitchen debate' with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition held in Moscow in 1959. As Nixon extolled the virtues of American kitchen appliances and the housewives who used them as evidence of his country's democratic freedoms, he promoted the notion that 'American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes' (May 1988: 21). Lyn Spigel's examination of post-war American television makes clear the extent to which discourses around television were equally tied to an insistence on the middle-class suburban family as American normality. Women's magazines advised readers on the ideal spatial placement of their sets in order to literally bring their families close and advertisements presented images of family members gathered around a television, emphasizing its ability to promote familial togetherness. As Spigel suggests, 'the message was clearly one transmitted by a culture industry catering to the middle-class suburban ideal. Nuclear families living in single-family homes would engage in intensely private social relations through the luxury of television' (Spigel 1992: 44). In the context of this normalization of middle-class suburban family living, variety show hosts intending to position themselves as ideal versions of their audiences rather than inferior forms of their Hollywood star guests appeared as non-threatening, home-loving Americans – in other words, far removed from the inconceivable glamour and decadence of the Hollywood lifestyle. This mild-mannered image of mediocrity was refined by the most popular variety show hosts of the period: Dinah Shore and Perry Como.

THE CHEESEMAN AND THE CHEERLEADER

By the mid-1950s, television variety shows were moving away from the comedy-based versions of early television derived from the comic performances of hosts like Jack Benny and Milton Berle, to the musically styled shows of singers such as Perry Como, Dean Martin, Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore. The successful hosting careers of Shore and Como, in particular, effectively illustrate the closely defined imaging around which the ideal host was situated. Their programmes were some of the most watched variety shows of the 1950s, largely due to the popularity of these television stars named at the 1956 Emmy Awards as Best Male and Best Female Personality. Dinah Shore began her hosting career with NBC's *The Dinah Shore Show* in November 1951, the success of which led to hour-long shows from 1956 and a rebranding as

The Dinah Shore Chevy Show, which ran until 1963. Shore's homespun image, topped off with a southern accent that comfortingly suggested an unspoilt version of stardom, was a perfect fit with the hosting role in the 1950s, providing a seemingly authentic upgrading of the suburban wife and mother to whom audiences could relate. *Time* described her as 'the nicest musical treat on TV' and likened her performance style to her cheerleader past, emphasizing her persona as the all-American girl. Much of her appeal, the magazine suggested, was due to the warmth of her connection with her audience, noting that 'her sign-off kiss floated out individually, so it seemed, to each of her 40 million or so viewers'. Even the commercial nature of her relationship with her consistent sponsor was described by Chevrolet as 'one of the most enduring love affairs in TV' (Anon 1957a). Shore's success as host of the *Chevy Show* was based to a large extent on her articulation of an image of ordinariness, assisted by her only limited success as a film actress. Numerous singers through the 1940s and 1950s moved effortlessly on to thriving movie careers – witness Sinatra, Crosby, Doris Day, Dean Martin and Judy Garland. Shore's foray into Hollywood, however, consisted of cameo musical appearances, her acting roles more notable for those she missed out on, including the tragic mixed-race character Julie in *Showboat* (1951), a role coveted by a number of singers and actresses at the time and won by Ava Gardner. As a singer, while successful, Shore never reached the heights of Ella Fitzgerald or Judy Garland in terms of fame or recognition. As Lola Clare Bratten describes, Shore's distinction from Hollywood was enhanced by an image bound up in 'naturalness', which located her comfortably in the arena of television stardom. Shore's host persona was that of an approachable, middle-class American woman, a persona reinforced by magazine stories which discussed the television star's fashionable, but suitably restrained style and her devotion to her home life:

> Shore's personality was constructed on television as the peppy girl-next-door at a particular moment in American society when the proper role of women in the post-Second World War consumer culture was constructed by the media to be that of the happy home-maker.
>
> (Bratten 2002: 91)

For both Chevrolet and the suburban television audiences to whom its products were pitched, Shore represented an idealization of 1950s American womanhood, assisted, as Bratten notes, by Warner Bros.' earlier efforts to deproblematize Shore's Jewishness through a change of hair colour and surgery on her nose. If Shore was the ideal female host for the 1950s variety show, Perry Como was her male equivalent. Similarly undistinguished as a movie star, Como epitomized the nondescript congeniality of the successful male variety show host, exuding an air of unsophisticated, regular masculinity to which audiences responded, and whom *The New Yorker*'s John Lardner, nevertheless, compared unapologetically to 'a damp match' (Lardner 1957: 106). Como's laid-back singing style, which emulated the kind of relaxed performance associated with Crosby, went further in emphasizing the singer's natural qualities and lack of artificiality. NBC's *Chesterfield Supper Club* provided Como in 1948 with his introduction to the hosting role. On its move to CBS in 1950, the fifteen-minute programme was renamed *The Perry Como Show*, establishing the singer as a television 'name'. Returning to NBC five years later, Como was rewarded with an hour-long show, and the star's contract to

host *Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall* from 1959 until its conclusion in 1963 made him the highest paid performer in television history.

Como's remarkable deal with Kraft Foods became, nevertheless, a factor in his self-imaging as an average guy unaffected by a reality of wealth, power and status. The $25 million contract covered two years of one-hour shows, and excluded a further seven-figure, ten-year deal to act as a publicity symbol for Kraft, in addition to a yearly $1.2 million pay cheque from NBC. Despite his role as producer of the show, Como affected the pose of an uninvolved amateur ready to seal his contract on the basis of personalities, commenting, 'Frankly, I don't know a thing about the deal. But I've met the president of Kraft […] and he seemed a helluva nice guy. Also, I'm quite a cheeseman myself.' *Time* similarly played up the owner of production, television packaging and music publishing companies as an ordinary American, describing him as 'clean-cut' and a 'solid family man', with a lifestyle not dissimilar to that of his suburban audience. The magazine suggested that for the sponsor and audiences, Como represented nothing less than the ideal television variety show host:

> The other cheesemen picked Perry precisely because he sees the world as filled with nice guys, and makes audiences feel the same way. The clean-cut Como appeal runs from toddlers to dodderers. It is no surprise that convent TV sets glow for Como, that he was rated America's ideal husband in a poll of 20-year-old girls, or that three years ago he made Saturday night the loneliest night in the week for brilliant but irascible Jackie Gleason. Says a Kraftman: 'Out in Arkansas, he's the type they want on a family program. Nobody else could do the trick.'
>
> (Anon 1959)

Como's uncontroversial image as a typical American family man outlines his appeal to all ages across middle America and the identity which makes him a safe viewing choice, even for convent dwellers. *Time*'s mention of Como's victory in the ratings war over 'brilliant but irascible Jackie Gleason' emphasizes still further the intrinsic lack of edge which is said to form the basis of Como's appeal and which is a requisite element of his success. The images of Como and Shore were clearly fashioned as uncomplicated reflections – talent notwithstanding – of the average Americans who viewed them on a regular basis in the living rooms of their homes. As commentary played down a powerful and affluent reality, the addition of their limited success in Hollywood enabled these 'natural' performers to find their niche as weekly television stars, comfortably negotiating the distance between their movie and musical star guests and their loyal audiences. Frank Sinatra's attempts to assume a similar role proved far more challenging.

FRANK SINATRA AND THE STRICT DEFINITIONS OF TELEVISION VARIETY

As the host of two television variety series during the 1950s, Frank Sinatra occupied an unfeasible position. In both the highs and lows of his career, Sinatra represented the distant extremes of Hollywood stardom and presented a complex image which bore no relation to the comforting lack of challenge evoked by television's rising variety show stars. By the mid-1950s Sinatra's star status was, if anything, higher than that of the average movie star. The

fascination he held for the press who commented continuously on his active social life, political activities and questionable friendships, and his combined success in the fields of music, film, radio and live performance, led *Time* magazine in 1955 to describe a 'a career unparalleled in extravagance by any other entertainer of his generation' (Goodman 1955: 42). Albert Auster and Ron Simon consider Sinatra's foray into television in the 1950s in broad terms, both drawing attention to his problematic engagement with the small screen. For Auster, Sinatra's limited possibilities for success were a result of a fundamental ill fit between the star's 'intensity' and the more subdued requirements of the medium itself (Auster 1999: 166–74). Focusing on the style of show built around Sinatra, Ron Simon contends that the star's well-received series of specials on NBC which ran from 1965 to 1981, which Simon discusses in relation to NBC President Sylvester 'Pat' Weaver's concept of the 'spectacular' or event television, were evidence of the need to present Sinatra within an extraordinary format in order to marry the image with the medium, a requirement which, he argues, producers of Sinatra's series failed to understand (Simon 2007: 83–94). More specifically, however, close attention to the distinct roles of variety show host and guest is key to recognizing the extent to which the reception of Sinatra was determined by early television's positioning of Hollywood and television stars and the imaging requirements of those strictly defined roles. The shift in format in the 1950s towards more musically-styled variety shows meant that Sinatra was in frequent demand as a guest star, providing obvious assets as a performer, but equally injecting large measures of star quality and unruliness to contrast with more subdued hosts. (Dean Martin's relaxed, family-man persona neutralized any disruption he might occasionally bring to the strictures of his hosting role.) As a host, however, Sinatra was comprehensively unsuitable, in the judgement of critics who expressed disapproval of the image the star presented, and audiences who were drawn in ever decreasing numbers to the shows.

As noted by Becker, early television was frequently viewed by Hollywood stars as the route taken by those whose careers were in the descendant. In Sinatra's case, this was initially an appropriate conclusion. While he later suggested in a 1955 'Person to Person' interview with Edward R. Murrow that television had provided him with an opportunity to resurrect his career, or 'get off the canvas', through his guest appearance on the one-off extravaganza *The Star Spangled Review*, hosted by Bob Hope, his subsequent move into hosting his own show only added to the downward spiral into which his career was sliding. By the time *The Frank Sinatra Show* premiered on CBS in October 1950, Sinatra's contracts with both MGM and Columbia Records had been dissolved. Rather than assisting Sinatra in establishing an image which differentiated him from the excess of Hollywood stardom, however, Sinatra's swift transition from his status as the idol of the bobbysoxers and the star of MGM musicals to a struggling television host re-emphasized these extremes and left him with a whiff of failure with which successful and newly affluent post-war audiences felt unable or unwilling to identify. Sinatra's series with ABC, which ran from October 1957 to May 1958, positioned the star in equally problematic ways for contemporary television culture. The extent of his success as a star in Hollywood and beyond, and the sexualized and overwhelmingly urban aspects of Sinatra's star image, distanced him from his suburban family audience and provided an unpalatable image for critics, some of whom were disparaging of its location in the variety show format, and others of whom were distressed at television's attempts to tone down the edgy nonconformity with which Sinatra was associated.

Despite *Variety*'s description of Sinatra as a 'video natural' (Simon 2007: 85) following his appearance on *The Star Spangled Review*, critics were less enthusiastic about his appearances on his first eponymous show, an early indication of the critical distinctions that would be made between the star's guesting and hosting performances. *The Frank Sinatra Show* ran on the CBS network between October 1950 and April 1952, with its first sponsor, Bulova watches, withdrawing from the deal after only thirteen weeks. Several sponsors and consistently decreasing viewing figures later, the show ended with the early termination of Sinatra's contract. The failure of the CBS show was arguably an inevitable result of its scheduling against two of the highest rating entertainment programmes of the day. The first series of *The Frank Sinatra Show*, which ran in 1950, was pitched opposite the popular satirical programme *Your Show of Shows* starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, a ratings war invariably won by the latter. The 1951/52 season at CBS was even more severely hampered by its scheduling against NBC's family favourite *The Milton Berle Show*, one of the most popular programmes on early television. Even reviewers noted the onerous task set Sinatra. Jack Gould of *The New York Times* went so far as to liken Sinatra's plight to 'an invitation to walk the last mile' (Gould 1951). Scheduling aside, and in contrast to Berle's series, for Gould the show had little appeal for a family audience, being decidedly directed towards Sinatra's dwindling teenage fan base. *Time*'s reviewer similarly referred to the show's 'unenviable' scheduling against Berle and the 'girlish squeals' evident in the studio audience (Anon 1951). The targeting of Sinatra's bobbysoxer audience was evident in the opening credits of the show which included a caricature of the skinny singer with floppy hair and an over-sized bow tie, one of Sinatra's props which he would routinely throw out to the girls attending his concert performances. Attempts to draw in this youth audience were successful, in the studio at least. As the above critics noted, screams from a clearly young female audience are evident throughout the shows, and Sinatra frequently addresses those in the studio, rather than those watching at home, in a familiar, playful manner. (This teasing approach was the way in which Sinatra customarily engaged with his young fans, evident also in recordings of his radio shows through the 1940s and early 1950s.) In referencing Sinatra's image as the idol of the bobbysoxers, the series created several problems for the budding television host, beyond the neglect of a large section of the viewing audience. The extent of Sinatra's success as the first popular music singer to create a wave of hysteria at his appearances – what E. J. Kahn Jr. in a series of articles for *The New Yorker*, subsequently republished together as a book, termed the 'social phenomenon' of Sinatra (Kahn 1947) – which then led to substantial, if initially short-lived success in Hollywood (Sinatra was named Most Popular Screen Star of 1945 by *Modern Screen*), meant that he was positioned on television as a star who *had* achieved a level of stardom greater than that of his guests. At the same time, audiences were fully aware of Sinatra's declining fortunes both on the big screen and on record. By 1948 *Metronome* was already asking, 'Is Sinatra Finished?' (Ulanov 1948). The series' emphasis on Sinatra's earlier career successes therefore had a dually negative effect, positioning him as an intruding Hollywood star distanced from his viewing audience, and as a star moving into television due to a failing career, rather than as a rising star of television distanced from the extremes of Hollywood.

The extent to which the series attempted to draw on Sinatra's once-impressive star status and the inverse effect this often had was evident in a variety of sketches. The show screened on 5 May 1951 was based around Sinatra's

current performances at The Paramount Theater in New York, significant as the site of what came to be known as the Columbus Day riots of 1944, when fans unable to enter the theatre for Sinatra's show caused disturbances in Times Square. Sinatra's change in fortunes seven years later was highlighted by the inclusion of blonde bombshell Dagmar, with whom Sinatra had recorded 'Mama will Bark', the song that included a barking dog and which would be held up for years to come as a marker of his decline, and guest star Perry Como, whose career ascendance in the new medium provided an obvious contrast. Most directly, Sinatra himself drew attention to his declining star status, remarking to regular guest singer June Hutton that on his previous appearances at The Paramount he had only to sing, yet 'Now, in the intermissions, I have to go out in the aisles and sell popcorn'. In a further show that aired in February 1951, rising television star Jackie Gleason drew frequent attention to reports of Sinatra's financial problems, joking at one point, 'I'm worried about you […] I'd like to get some money out of you, and I'm worried you ain't got it'. Sinatra's response – 'Well, there's no sense in both of us worrying. Let me worry about it.' – followed his earlier performance of 'Take my Love', which he introduced by commenting that it was becoming a hit, 'strangely enough'.

As the butt of his own and Gleason's jokes, and as a star reduced to trading on past glories, Sinatra reversed the host/guest star positioning which pitched a television star host against a glamorous Hollywood guest. The television star's image as both ordinary and a successful performer in the new medium was equally incompatible with the extremes of success and failure evident in Sinatra's image and to which the shows made direct and uncomfortable reference. Gleason's part in this inversion of identities served only to accentuate the incongruities present. The new host of DuMont's *Cavalcade of Stars*, on his way to finding an historic position in early television via *The Jackie Gleason Show* and *The Honeymooners*, Gleason was here the natural television performer creating comedy at the expense of the Hollywood star with screaming fans and a rapidly reducing bank balance. This left Sinatra as a Hollywood intruder – not a temporary and welcome one as a guest, but a disconcerting one as a misplaced host making weekly appearances on the small screen.

In addition to the problematic positioning of Sinatra on these shows as host and Hollywood star – with the extremes of success and failure central to this latter identity – critics began to struggle with the specific star image Sinatra projected and its unsuitable location in the format of the variety show series. Reviewing the opening show of the second series, *The New York Times*' Jack Gould suggested that Sinatra was 'not the ideal dominant personality needed to sustain a sixty-minute show over a period of weeks', the show being stolen 'effortlessly and smoothly by another gentleman, Perry Como' (Gould 1951). Uncertainties remained about Sinatra's appropriateness for the role of television host, even following the resurrection of his career with his 1954 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and his new-found recording success with Capitol Records. *TV Guide* in 1954 was still moved to ask the niggling question, 'Can Frank Sinatra Make Good in TV?', as the magazine contemplated Sinatra's curious lack of success in the field:

> One of the middling-great mysteries of television has been the failure of Frank Sinatra to (1) achieve success in a show of his own and (2) impress network executives sufficiently to give him another chance with

> a format fitted to his talents. TV has been a sour note in the Sinatra symphony of success […] For all his talent, Sinatra simply isn't cut out for the medium on anything approaching a regular basis.
>
> (Anon 1954: 5)

Reporting mutterings of another Sinatra series, the *Guide* made plain the extent to which the star's persona made him an unwise choice for the role of variety show host: 'Sinatra's moody temperament makes him unsuited for a role that otherwise would be right – the quiet, easy-going emcee who can spin a story, sing a song or chat entertainingly with a visiting fireman' (Anon 1954: 5).

Sinatra was a frequent visitor to the variety show before returning to the genre as host, with the critical success of his appearances illustrating his compatibility with the accepted identity of guest star and his incompatibility with the limiting requirements defined for the host. Sinatra appeared a number of times on *The Dinah Shore Show* throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, having established a friendship with the singer during their time together on radio in the 1940s. His obvious comfort level with Shore resulted in performances which often best conveyed Sinatra's star image, and which illustrate the critical distinctions made between variety show roles. The first of Shore's extended hour-long shows in October 1956 led Jack Gould to hail Sinatra and Shore 'the king and queen of popular song'. Gould likened the stars' performance of a medley – perhaps incongruously – to an Ethel Merman/Mary Martin performance in its flavour:

> For in the Shore-Sinatra presentation there was that same contagious joy of seeing two capital performers enjoying themselves hugely, and intuitively rising to their best under the momentum of their own artistry and enthusiasm.
>
> (Gould 1956)

In a similar medley the stars performed on the *Chevy Show* in January 1958, Sinatra adlibbed constantly while his host responded with both amusement and sighs of relief following each successive improvisation. As he sang provocatively 'why not *grab* All of Me' and inserted an unsettling pause into the line 'I can't give you anything but […] love, baby', Shore's eruptions of laughter at Sinatra's unpredictability were mirrored by the response of the studio audience. In this way, Sinatra injected chaos into the conventional format of the variety show medley, a chaos wholly compatible with both his edgy, sexualized image and the glamour required of his guesting role. The space allowed for this type of performance and its positive reception when both stars are located firmly within their prescribed roles – Shore as warm and conventional host and Sinatra as unpredictable and fascinating star guest – demonstrates the extent to which Sinatra's image necessarily tied him to the Hollywood guest star identity. Sinatra's guest appearances on other variety shows during this period similarly reflected these distinctions. *The Edsel Show* screened on 13 October 1957 on CBS was largely a marketing ploy – famously futile, as it turned out – to promote Ford's new family car. Hosted by Bing Crosby, with Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney and Louis Armstrong as the main guests, it was part of what *The New York Times* was calling television's 'million dollar night'. Running either side of *The Edsel Show* were two equally costly NBC productions, both of which were dismissed as relative disappointments. Standard

Oil's *75th Anniversary Show*, a star-studded affair which included the likes of Tyrone Power, Duke Ellington and Jimmy Durante, was termed 'a very lacklustre operation'. The station's production of *Pinocchio*, led by a 35-year-old Mickey Rooney as the wooden puppet, was similarly described as 'a thoroughly unsuccessful attempt to reproduce the classic children's story'. By contrast, *The Edsel Show* was celebrated as 'the richest in entertainment' with 'zest and feeling in everything done on stage'. Gould was particularly appreciative of the ease with which Sinatra and Crosby performed: 'The leisurely warmth and spontaneity of their own personalities and talents enveloped the home screen and made for a grand time' (Gould 1957a). This model review of a television performance – referencing welcoming amiability ('warmth'), naturalness ('spontaneity') and the domestic audience – comes despite the sometimes overtly sophisticated and sexualized aspects of Sinatra's performance. In one sketch with Crosby, comments such as, 'Didn't I see you chicks in *Esquire*?' and an enquiry about 'latching onto a few broads' were the types of remark which were to cause disquiet during Sinatra's series on ABC, but which here are taken as evidence of the star's 'warmth and spontaneity'.

Sinatra's three-year contract with ABC covered a combination of weekly variety shows and filmed dramas, and would net the star, according to various reports, between $3 and $4.5 million. From the opening programme screened on 18 October 1957, *The Frank Sinatra Show* was under pressure from declining viewing figures and, at best, a mixed critical reaction, eventually running for one season only. By November *The New York Times* was already reporting, contrary to ABC's hopes for Sinatra as an audience draw, 'he has run behind expectations and the ratings of rival networks', and plans were afoot to 'inject life into Frank Sinatra's television ratings' with additional live shows (Shepard 1957). *Time* magazine labelled Sinatra the 'biggest disappointment' of the season's variety shows, suggesting he was 'busily trying to puff some life into his costly ABC-Chesterfield series' (Anon 1958b). Any measures clearly failed, as the final show of the series was broadcast in May 1958, and Sinatra limited himself thereafter to specials and guest appearances.

Sinatra began the second version of *The Frank Sinatra Show* at a point when some critics were bemoaning the trend away from comics to singer-led variety shows and, in opposition to the clear audience response, disapproving of what they viewed as a resultant creeping monotony in the genre. *Time* suggested that the success of Dinah Shore and Perry Como on the small screen was leading to a surfeit of such shows, leaving the coming season promising little more than, in one critic's words, 'the bland leading the bland' (Anon 1957b). John Lardner in *The New Yorker* argued that the effect was shows which were intent on creating a sense of 'synthetic fun' based on the performers exuding an air of 'nonchalance, a time-honoured substitute for wit' (Lardner 1957: 106). Lardner's criticism counters the idealization of these stars as the communicators of a 'natural' style of performance required in the new medium. Robert Fulford of *The New Republic* considered the first of Sinatra's shows with ABC in the light of his assessment of the characteristics of the new-style variety show, namely 'superficial smoothness, lack of emotion, cheerful banality, and something that can only be called intentional dullness' (Fulford 1957: 22).

Fulford was uneasy at what he saw as the attempted taming, or 'sweetening', of Sinatra due to the requirement to conform to the image of a Como-style host. A number of critics suggested that the variety show trend towards predictability, set in tone by unremarkable hosts, had the effect of flattening

Sinatra's extraordinary image. Sinatra's image by the mid- to late-1950s had developed through film roles, recordings and press commentary into a complex mix of urban swinger sexuality, emotional vulnerability, working-class and ethnic alienation and political liberalism, a heady combination for television variety and far removed from the uncomplicated images of his rivals (McNally 2008). Fulford celebrated this varied and controversial image, drawing attention to its unusual placement within mainstream entertainment:

> Sinatra long ago established a public character that is both interesting and diverse. And the most interesting part of this character derives from the fact that Sinatra is – well, there's no better way to say it – not nice. He is tough, sardonic and often funny in a rather rude way. Now there are plenty of people who are not nice, but few of them earn their livings as popular entertainers, and, in a world all too well supplied with nice guys, we should be grateful for them. By their presence they suggest that all life does not exist on the level of country-club chumminess.
>
> (Fulford 1957: 22)

Fulford's celebration of Sinatra's distinct image was prompted by a concern that his television show was subduing 'the subtle hardness that makes him interesting'. Fulford was most alarmed at the possibility that Sinatra might be moulded into a version of the ideal host, explaining, 'Perry Como remarked to a guest on his show, "I don't know a straight line from a gag line – I'm just here". This is the saddest of fates for a performer of any kind – to be "just here" ' (Fulford 1957: 22).

A number of other critics had similar concerns, additionally drawing comparisons with Sinatra's guest appearances. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* complained that while Sinatra 'scored last week-end in his appearance with Bing Crosby' (on *The Edsel Show*), his premiere was a 'rather banal show' which 'lacked ebullience' and in which Sinatra 'never had much challenge' (Gould 1957b). *Metronome*'s Bill Coss described Sinatra's performance on *The Edsel Show* as 'a real triumph all the way around' while suggesting 'the series hasn't really been the knock-out that we had expected'. Like Fulford, Coss expressed admiration for Sinatra's 'forceful, virile, male personality', adding, 'There is little comfort in it. There is much challenge in it; more than a small share of danger' (Coss 1957: 15). His anxiety circulated around seeming attempts to shift Sinatra's image into a more conventional space for his television role. Coss cited as glaring evidence a particular 'boyish' scene with Kim Novak in the premiere show, wherein Sinatra feigned discomfort at Novak's attentions. For Coss, Sinatra required an environment and role which accommodated and enabled his distinct star image, inferring that the position of television variety show host was not such a space.

Conversely, reviewers also suggested that *The Frank Sinatra Show* had failed to fetter Sinatra's image, presenting an unpalatable alternative to Como's unthreatening persona. Shows in which Sinatra surrounded himself with showgirls or traded Italian parlance at a bar with Dean Martin were not typical television variety show fare, and provoked their own criticism. Jack O'Brian of the *New York Journal American* was particularly offended by what he saw as Sinatra's unadulterated presentation of a hip urban persona in his opening show, exemplified by the 'Wise Guyisms' introduced into songs 'which often change a lovely romantic lyric into dirty double meaning'. O'Brian argued that Sinatra ignored the suburban family audience, playing only to 'those who

get it' through ' "inside" jokes' and 'oddments of Broadway urbanity'. Even Sinatra's guests came under attack, with Sinatra setting the tone for an ultra-hip occasion. Peggy Lee's singing style was thus derided as 'too strangely avant even for jazz […] and sometimes you suspect only Miss Lee, musically, is able to "get it" '. Ultimately, the critic took offence at what he perceived to be Sinatra's arrogant display of an exclusive contemporary urban persona which television, in its quest for naturalness emphasized by this live show, revealed in an unflattering light.

> Mostly, however, Sinatra's mood implied – nay, silently shouted – that this was His Show, His Property, His Prerogatives, and he exercised his prerogatives with a nouveau attitude which came through the X-ray eye of the TV lens somewhere between arrogance and insolence.
>
> (O'Brian 1957: 24)

The inconsistencies evident amongst critical responses to Sinatra on the small screen are equally clear in O'Brian's reading. While disturbed by expressions such as 'broads' and 'chicks' used by Sinatra during his ABC premiere, O'Brian conveyed his admiration for *The Edsel Show* as 'pure Sinatra', failing to note the appearance therein of similar terms, or simply, by omission, reinforcing their acceptability when set around the guest star identity. Even Sinatra's CBS competitor, Sid Caesar, felt sanctioned to make a direct comic hit against the star and his hipster image in a sketch on the singer-led variety show, which included the following jibe: 'The whole show is live except me. I'm on film. And now from my latest album, Songs to Make Money By, here's a swingin' tune, "Love is a Gasser" ' (Anon 1958a).

Following the end of his weekly series, Sinatra signed a contract with Timex for four specials to be aired on ABC. Critical reactions were similarly mixed, but Sinatra would again choose the route of specials rather than being drawn back to a weekly series when he returned to hosting, this time for NBC, winning an Emmy for the first in the series, *Frank Sinatra: A Man and His Music* in 1965, and several further nominations. Sinatra's problems on 1950s television were limited to his performance as the host of his two variety show series. Sinatra met perfectly the remit of the guest star, temporarily bringing glamour and unpredictability to contrast with the safe format of the variety show and its hosts. As a Hollywood star assuming the role designed for a new brand of star, and evoking the extremes of failure and success with which his star image was associated, Sinatra was, however, unable to act as a point of identification for the suburban family audience as a variety show host. Sinatra's complicated and disconcerting image, set against the comforting normality of his more successful rivals, highlights the strong sense of the ordinary through which those achieving television stardom needed to be defined, a narrow definition outlined by post-war culture in middle-class, suburban, conformist terms. Described by Bill Coss as 'the most complete, the most fantastic symbol of American maleness yet discovered, for both good and bad reasons' (Coss 1957: 15), Sinatra was naturally at odds with the weekly hosting role, providing through his brief tenures some often unwelcome respite from the predictability of the format and a level of disruption to audience and critical expectations of the role. The demise of *The Frank Sinatra Show* meant that Sinatra became an appropriately temporary visitor to the small screen, reinforcing the role of Hollywood stardom as an injection of the spectacular, and confirming the sense of the ordinary that was essential

to the television variety show host in the 1950s and to the television stars the role created.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Karen McNally is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and Course Leader for the BA Film and Television Studies at London Metropolitan University. She has published a variety of essays on post-war Hollywood cinema and is the author of *When Frankie Went to Hollywood: Frank Sinatra and American Male Identity* (2008) and the editor of *Billy Wilder, Movie-Maker: Critical Essays on the Films* (2011). She is currently co-editing with Giannandrea Poesio an interdisciplinary volume of essays on dance and cinema.

Contact: London Metropolitan University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Tower Building, 166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB, UK.
E-mail: k.mcnally@londonmet.ac.uk

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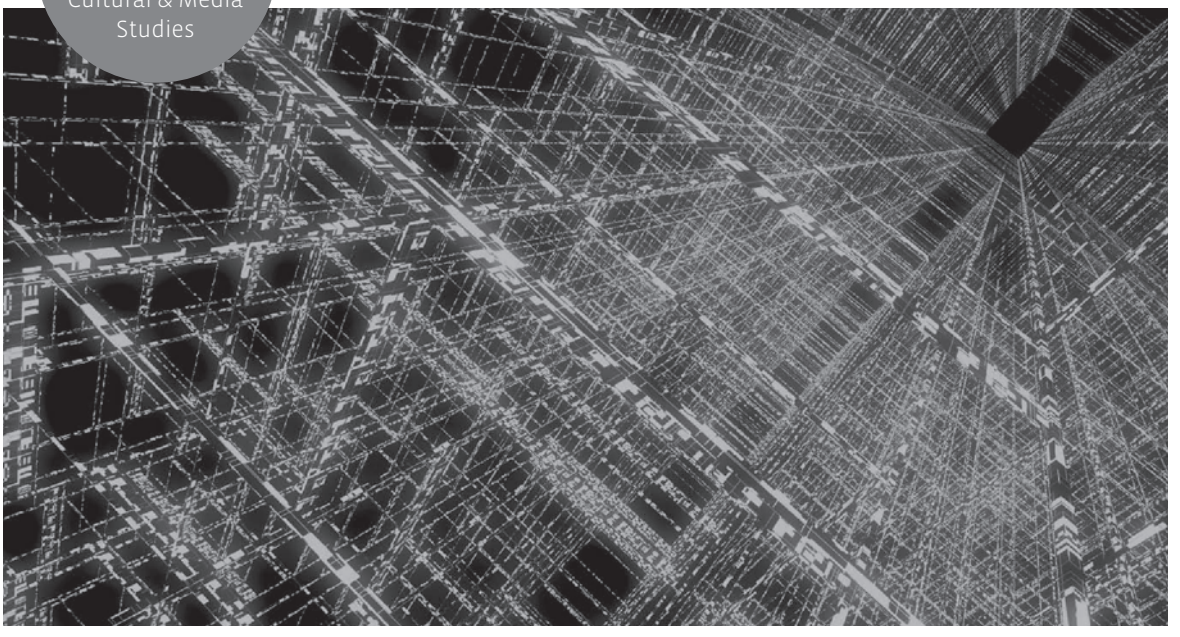

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Principal Editor

Astrid Ensslin
Bangor University
a.ensslin@bangor.ac.uk

Associate Editor

Eben Muse
Bangor University
e.muse@bangor.ac.uk

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