

VOLUME XI, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2011

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

Angelo M.  
Codevilla  
**The Rise  
and Rise  
of Obama**

Conrad  
Black:  
**Inside the  
New York Times**

James L.  
Buckley:  
**Restoring  
Federalism**

Pia  
Catton:  
**Ballet's  
Swan Song?**

Algis  
Valiunas:  
**Mencken's  
Prejudices**

William  
Voegeli:  
**Democracy  
at the  
Point of a Gun**

R. Shep  
Melnick:  
**The Politics  
of Inequality**

James Q.  
Wilson:  
**Redeeming  
Economics**

Eva  
Brann:  
**Too Liberal  
Arts**

Peter C.  
Myers:  
**Black  
America  
Reborn**



**Liberal History Lesson**  
**by Scott Yenor**

PRICE: \$6.95  
IN CANADA: \$6.95



Book Review by Michael Nelson

## KING OF THE HILL, TOP OF THE HEAP

*Frank: The Voice*, by James Kaplan.  
Doubleday, 800 pages, \$35



**I**N HER NEW MEMOIR, *AND FURTHERMORE*, British actress Judi Dench writes: “I have always said to students that if you really want to know how to speak Shakespeare, Sir John [Gielgud] and Frank Sinatra will teach you. Because one used to present the whole arc of a speech, and the other presented the whole arc of a song, without any intrusive extreme emphases.” In an interview with *USA Today*, Dench elaborated on why she included the singer: “He never lingers too long on one thing. You’re led through a song with Sinatra. There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

Frank Sinatra famously pioneered the concept album, a sequence of songs that unfolds a story or explores an emotion—despair, exhilaration, coming to terms (or failing to) with loss. A title song commissioned from Sinatra songwriters Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen, for example, opens the *No One Cares* album. “Why did no one care?” asked Sinatra, explaining the songs that followed. “Because there is a ‘Cottage for Sale,’ that’s why—so it had to be track two. That song’s the saddest song ever written—it describes the complete break-up of a home.” And so on through nine more tracks, each one expressing a new stage of heartbreak: “Stormy Weather” (track 3), “I Can’t Get Started” (7), “Just Friends” (9), and, finally, a song he had sung years before with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra that gained

new depths of meaning from its new context: “I’ll Never Smile Again.” Sinatra’s concept albums (none more brilliant than *Only the Lonely*, *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, and *Songs for Swingin’ Lovers*) are usually associated with his vocal career’s apex in the mid-1950s. But as James Kaplan points out in *Frank: The Voice*, an 800-page gorilla of a book that takes his life from birth in December 1915 to Oscar night in March 1954, Sinatra recorded his first concept albums when he was with Columbia Records, including a 1950 vinyl LP (the new new thing back then) called *Sing and Dance with Frank Sinatra*—a collection of up-tempo numbers that showed he could do more than sing ballads. He could swing.

**S**INATRA ALSO TREATED INDIVIDUAL songs as narratives, working closely with his stable of great arrangers (Nelson Riddle first and foremost, but also Billy May, Axel Stordahl, Gordon Jenkins, Don Costa, Quincy Jones, George Siravo, and others) to make sure that the music would sustain the words. “I’ve always believed,” he said, “the written word is first, always first. Not belittling the music behind me, [but] it’s only really a curtain.”

“My Kind of Girl,” for instance, a song that Neal Hefti orchestrated for Sinatra and Count

Basie on the 1963 *Sinatra-Basie* album, begins intimately with singer and jazz trio, as if he were quietly telling a small group of friends about the lovely girl he has just met. The Basie band then enters in full force, and Sinatra responds by adding swagger and volume to his vocal—he’s addressing a bigger crowd now, and he wants to impress them with how hot she is. Then the flutist has his say—for two minutes!—before the singer returns to wrap things up. In truth, most of Sinatra’s songs follow a narrative arc all the way past climax to denouement. The typical record builds to a peak about two thirds of the way through, and then ends quietly. “Summer Wind” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” represent the rule, “Theme from New York, New York,” the exception.

Because what songs say was so important to Sinatra, song selection, which most singers left to record producers, was crucial. When he came along in the 1940s, all anybody wanted to hear was new songs. Sinatra changed that—the whole notion of the “standards” or the “Great American song book” is his invention. Philip Furia, a professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, has pointed out that the young singer built his reputation by reviving forgotten songs from old Broadway musicals: George and Ira Gershwin’s “Someone to Watch Over



Me” and “But Not for Me,” Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart’s “My Funny Valentine” and “Bewitched,” to name just a few. What’s more, these songs had been sung by women in the original shows, because as Furia writes, such “ballads of longing or lament were assigned to female characters on the conventional assumption that women were more given to wistful or melancholy effusions.” Is it any surprise that, besides Bing Crosby, all the singers Sinatra said he learned the most from listening to were women: Mabel Mercer, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald.

JUDI DENSCH’S OTHER BIG POINT ABOUT Sinatra—hinted at in her comments “without any intrusive extreme emphases” and “never lingers too long on one thing”—is about the way he phrased a song. Technically, phrasing is how the vocalist places the words in relation to the music, which requires that he make a complex set of decisions about dynamics, duration, rhythm, articulation, relationship to the beat, and a host of other matters. Prior to Sinatra, Will Friedwald observes in his monumental new *A Biographical Guide to Jazz and Pop Singers*, most “singers were prone to chop up a line into several breaks, thus hindering the listener from following the thread of a story.” Each break was

punctuated by a gasp, or at least a conspicuous breath.

From the start, Sinatra figured out that singing should be as much as possible like natural speech. When he got a new song he mastered the lyrics as if they were lines in a play or poem, and only then looked at the melody so that he could tell his arranger what instrumentation, mood, pauses, silences, and other musical features would best support the words as he wanted to present them. “I’m looking to fit the emotion behind the song that I’ve come up with to the music,” Kaplan quotes Sinatra telling casino magnate Steve Wynn. The result, when he sang a song, was that it seemed as if he were thinking it up as he went along—and feeling what he was thinking. Not just swooning teenagers, but also professional musicians dug his extended, conversational phrasing (the product of extraordinary breath control harnessed to deep lyrical intelligence) and his in-the-pocket sense of rhythm. In 1941, at age 25, Sinatra bumped Crosby out of first place as the jazz magazine *Down Beat*’s best male singer.

SINATRA’S MUSICIANSHIP HAS ALREADY been the subject of an excellent book—Friedwald’s *Sinatra! The Song Is You: A Singer’s Art* (1995)—and a very good one—*Sessions with Sinatra: Frank Sinatra and the*

*Art of Recording*, by Charles L. Granata (1999). His film career, which produced a best supporting actor Oscar for *From Here to Eternity*, a best actor nomination for *The Man with the Golden Arm*, two cult classics (the superb *Manchurian Candidate* and the just-okay *Ocean’s 11*), some good musicals (the best of which was Cole Porter’s *High Society*), and more than a few stinkers, has been justly appraised in Tom Santopietro’s *Sinatra in Hollywood* (2008). Sociologist Chris Rojek even produced a decent cultural studies book called *Frank Sinatra* (2004) that focuses on the nature of his celebrity, and historian Stanislaw Pugeliese gathered an interesting collection of essays on *Frank Sinatra: History, Identity, and Italian American Culture* (2004) from a large academic conference devoted to Sinatra at Hofstra University in 1998. These are all recent works. The first good book about Sinatra was written in 1947 by E. J. Kahn, a leading *New Yorker* writer from the Harold Ross era. Kahn’s *The Voice: The Story of an American Phenomenon* came out when the singer was barely in his thirties, the first teen idol and, as Friedwald has pointed out, “the last one not to pander to his audience” (think Elvis Presley to Justin Bieber).

Sadly, however, the best-selling books about Sinatra have focused on his life rather than

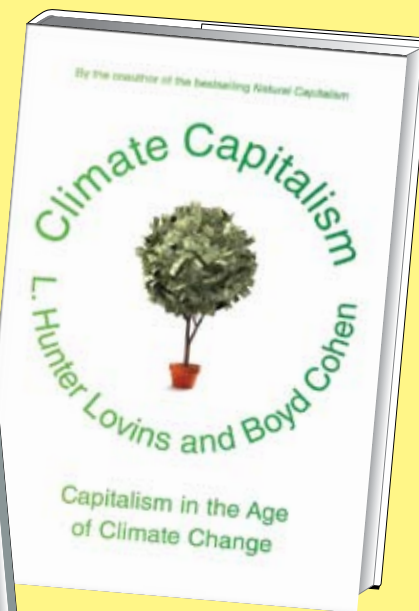
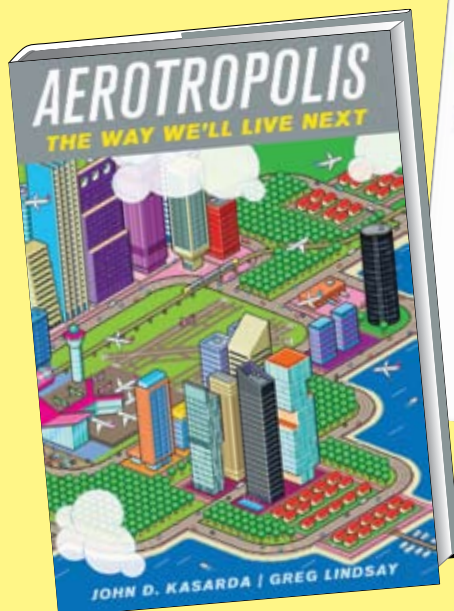
## NAVIGATING THE NEW WORLD

**“An essential guide to the twenty-first century.”**

—Tom Vanderbilt, author of *Traffic*

*Aerotropolis* presents a radical, futuristic vision. This book ties together urbanism, global economics, international relations, sociology, and insights from adventures in places that aren’t even on the map yet to present a plausible new paradigm for understanding how we relate to the skies. Perhaps **the most compelling book on globalization in years.**

—Parag Khanna, Senior Fellow, New America Foundation, and author of *How to Run the World*



**“A must-read** for entrepreneurs, investors, industry experts, and corporations interested in capitalizing on the greatest wealth-creation opportunity of our lifetime: solving climate change.”

—Jigar Shah, founder, SunEdison, and CEO, Carbon War Room

*“In Climate Capitalism, L. Hunter Lovins and Boyd Cohen present in crisp, clear terms **how smart economics hold the key to addressing the multiple crises**—from financial to food, climate to resource scarcity—facing the world.”*

—Achim Steiner, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme

Pick up or download your copy today!



FARRAR  
STRAUS  
GIROUX



HILL AND WANG  
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux

www.fsgbooks.com



his art, ranging all the way from hagiography (daughter Nancy's *Frank Sinatra: My Father*, 1985, and other daughter Tina's *My Father's Daughter: A Memoir*, 2000) to icon-smashing (Kitty Kelly's hatchet-job *His Way: The Unauthorized Biography of Frank Sinatra*, 1986). Sadly, too, that's the literary tree onto which Kaplan—his subtitle notwithstanding—has chosen to graft the bulk of *Frank: The Voice*.

For the most part, Kaplan's book consists of longer, less-biased versions of all the familiar tales about Sinatra's first 39 years: growing up as the only child of a domineering mother in Hoboken, New Jersey; inspired to sing by hearing Crosby and determined to outdo him; the big band years, including fame with Dorse; the bobby-soxer riots outside New York's Paramount theater; his early involvement in liberal, sometimes left-wing politics; the MGM musicals with Gene Kelly; the postwar descent into musical irrelevance; the sexual obsessions (Ava Gardner—both *et al.* and, in Kaplan's bloated treatment, *ad nauseam*); the associations with Lucky Luciano and other organized crime figures—all culminating in the Phoenix-like rise from the ashes that won Sinatra the golden statue for his portrayal of Private Angelo Maggio. Fade to black, bring up the slide: "To be continued."

I'M A SUCKER FOR BOOKS LIKE KAPLAN'S. I could tell you that Kaplan's promised second volume is already on my Christmas list but the truth is I won't be able to wait for Christmas—I'll start reading it the day it comes out.

But here's what I hope I'll remember when I read Kaplan's sequel (and, probably, Barbara Sinatra's new book, *Lady Blue Eyes: My Life with Frank*): Sinatra is worth our lasting attention not because of the life he led but because of the music he made. Kaplan, like many others, tries to square the circle connecting biography with music by grounding Sinatra's art in

his life. When he sang a sad song, this sort of reasoning goes, every desolate word and note was drawn from the well of his own despair. But surely artistry doesn't require that the singer (or actor or dancer or painter) feel the emotion he is portraying. Instead, the artistry lies in making the audience feel that emotion, which is a matter of craft, not sentiment. As Granata points out in *Sessions with Sinatra*, in concert after concert Sinatra

rarely failed to turn in a stunningly believable performance of his quintessential torch song, "One for My Baby." Are we to believe that each such performance (and there were thousands over several decades) is tinged with the singer's real sadness? No, it's his ability as an *actor* that allows him to slip in and out of roles that enhance his vocal performance.

Mitch Miller, who drove Sinatra crazy at Columbia by pushing him to record lowest-common-denominator novelty numbers like "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy" and "The Huckabuck," nevertheless got it right when he said, "Emotion is not something *you* feel—it's something you make the *listener* feel.... It's bulls--t to say that [Sinatra] draws on emotion from his personal life, because what he's drawing on is the emotion from *your* personal life, and he's saying it for you."

EVERYTHING ABOUT SINATRA'S ARTISTRY involved craft. A dese-dem-dose guy in conversation, he enunciated song lyrics with a clarity that sounded natural. He was a monumental egotist in life, but in the recording studio he treated musicians, arrangers, writers, and others as colleagues. "We" was Sinatra's pronoun of choice when talking about his music, not "I." And even though "his records sound like autobiogra-

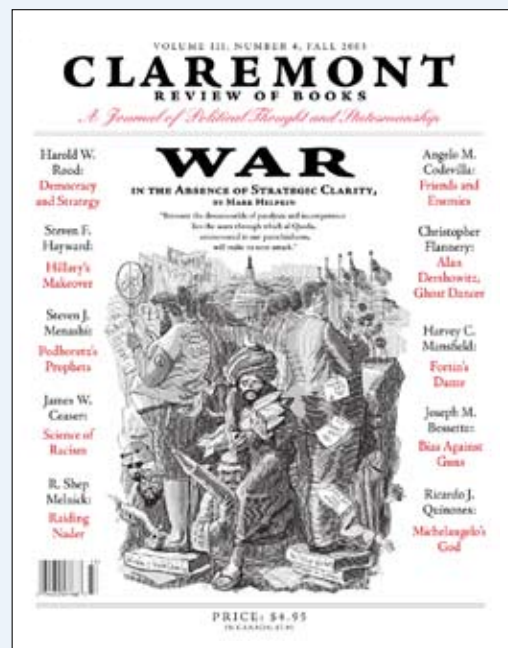
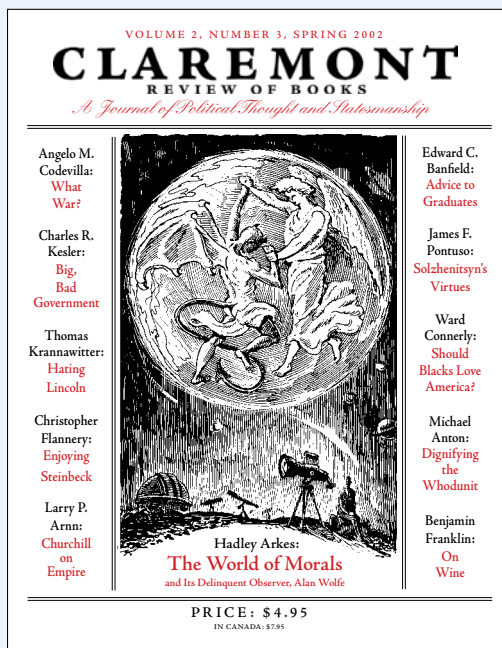
phy," writes *New Republic* music critic David Hadju, "they weren't.... His life off-microphone was a sordid tale of bullying, womanizing and bad temper, mixed up with advocacy for social justice and good deeds done for his friends." His music, on the other hand, was...sublime.

On April 22, 1965, CBS News videotaped Sinatra in the recording studio, singing what turned out to be one of his greatest songs, Ervin Drake's elegiac "It Was a Very Good Year." During the playback, Sinatra hears himself deliver the line, "When I was thirty-five, it was a very good year," smiles at arranger and conductor Gordon Jenkins, and says, "Those were the *swingin'* years!"

Truth is, as Kaplan shows, it was a terrible year for Sinatra. In 1951, when he was 35, his career was on the skids and his personal life was in disarray—he even made a serious attempt at suicide. Desperate for a hit song, he reluctantly took Miller's advice and recorded a stinker called "Mama Will Bark"—and it charted. CBS buried his television show in a slot opposite Milton Berle, then canceled it. He was hounded by the press for divorcing his wife, Nancy, and marrying Gardner, whose star was rising even as his was falling. "Mr. Gardner," people started calling him behind his back.

The tender, sensitive, musically brilliant Sinatra of the recording studio and concert stage wasn't the boozing, brawling, skirt-chasing Sinatra of Kaplan's book. Nothing in Frank Sinatra's life mattered when he sang "It Was a Very Good Year," or any other song. His artistry made those years very good—for exactly as long as he sang about them.

*Michael Nelson, a former editor of the Washington Monthly, is the Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College and a senior fellow at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.*



## Celebrating ten years.

"For lovers of conservatism, books, or both, this journal is a must."  
—National Review

"One of the only places where important new books are treated seriously."  
—Charles Murray

"By far the best review of books around."  
—Thomas Sowell

Support the CRB as it begins its second decade. Visit [www.claremont.org/crb](http://www.claremont.org/crb) to subscribe.

