

Friday, December 31, 2010

An Interview with Luca Ellis

HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD

A Journey Down Memory Lane

R.M. Sydnor



Luca Ellis as Sinatra in *Hoboken To Hollywood* is among those handful of must-see performances that captures not only the spirit of the man but presents an affectionate insight into the golden era of music. Mr. Ellis, whom some describe as George Clooney with a beautiful voice, has what can only be described as star quality.

Interview

Frank Albert Sinatra was born December 12 1915 in Hoboken, New Jersey. He would have been 45 years old in 1960. You are younger than Sinatra in your portrayal. What were some of the challenges you faced in transcending age in this your outstanding performance?

I would have to start by thanking my predecessors, who I owe so much to. I'm also very flattered that you would compare me to the late Francis Albert Sinatra. A man who's voice changed the course of my life and influenced me in deeper and more personal ways than any other artist before him. Why so personal? It's simple, I found my voice in his. As far back as I can remember, whenever I would sing as a kid. Specially to my mother, Liisa may she rest in peace. She would tell me, "Sing it in your own voice". I never understood what she meant until I started listening to Frank about 6 years ago. What she really meant was, sing it in your speaking voice. Mr. S taught me that and so, what did I do? I ran with it! Granted, the man and his music have influenced me the most in delivering a song to an audience. However, our show "Hoboken to Hollywood" isn't necessarily about Sinatra. It's more of a reminder if you will. To a time or era when music was held and hailed in the highest regard. Not only by the industry and the public, but also by the musician and the singer. Most importantly, the song writer. Exceptional material deserves to be interpreted in exceptional ways. That's what "Hoboken to Hollywood" is at its core. Sinatra's style of relaying a story is exceptional. I say is, because I believe the style is alive and well. The man may have passed on, but the innovation and discipline he left behind hasn't. I'm proud to play a part in keeping such a tradition alive. It's true, a lot of references made by "the Crooner" are similar to that of Frank's. Nelson Riddle, Capitol Records, Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey and Harry James are all mentioned, but these are entities that worked with numerous other male "pop" singers during the Swing Era. Is our show about Sinatra? That's really up to the audience member to decide. Hence why the age of the character never came into question. I felt it was more important to deliver the right attitude and swagger when playing this role. To capture the essence of an entertainer in the 1960's.

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There are certainly three distinct periods where Sinatra's career falls: early (late 1930s to 1953), middle (most of the 1950s with some tunes from the '60s and '70s), and the late '60s to the '90s). Many critics and musicologists have pointed out Sinatra of the 1940s had better vocal quality than Sinatra of the late fifties. I do not subscribe to this animadversion because all great voices change with time and change doesn't necessarily mean a diminished voice. I also believe there isn't one song or album that could be totally representative of the Sinatra voice or style.

I don't think there is a song or album that could completely represent the Sinatra voice or style. I've talked to a lot of listeners about that and have found that it's really a matter of taste. Some like the older and more seasoned Frank. Some like the younger and brighter Frank. Then there's those who love every version of Sinatra. I do think over the years the Whiskey and smoking took its toll on his tone, however his phrasing and conviction to a song seemed to just get better. Such experience could only be acquired by living life to the fullest, which he was certainly known for. It could have also been the need to rely more on phrasing given the changes in his voice. I do find myself gravitating to his Capitol years. He was in his prime and joined by master arrangers such as Nelson Riddle and Billy May. Complimenting and enhancing his phrasing. I honestly don't think Sinatra would have had the same impact without such arrangers.

Despite the lasting image of Sinatra wannabe Al Martino crooning Italian songs in the Godfather, The Chairman of The Board never sang Italian Songs. He avoided the music of his parents' generation in favor of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and Johnny Mercer. What are your thoughts on this?

I think Frank the business man knew where the money was. Inspired by the success Bing Crosby had as a singer of popular song. He simply followed suit, and eventually surpassing Bing in mainstream popularity. These men were Pop singers. I think they sang whatever the masses wanted to hear. In order to be the innovator he wanted to be, Sinatra had to live in the now. The "now" then was big band swinging Jazz.

Sinatra was a door to American culture, particularly to millions of children of Italian-American immigrants. He also was a window back into Italian-American influence. Think about this for a moment, the Italians gave the world grand opera, and in Sinatra, Italian culture gave the world the foremost craftsman of popular song. He certainly established an enviable standard.

For a while Italian-Americans had a rough time Stateside. Mussolini driving fascism on the European front and joining the Germans during WWII certainly had a negative affect on the lives of Italians living here. Italians that may have even been embarrassed of the accent they carried on their tongues due to their heritage. Then along comes Frank Sinatra. With a name as Italian as you can get. He opens his mouth and you hear an unequalled mastery of the English language, a diction that even some of the greatest American/American singers never even came close to achieving. All of a sudden you find yourself really listening to the words within the song. How proud were those Italians? How proud indeed.

Tell us about your production team, beginning with Peach Reasoner, who did a heck of job making Hoboken to Hollywood very special indeed.

Paul Litteral and I teamed up early 2010 to put a band together and through a series of creative meetings, intended to come up with an original idea. While showing Paul a Television Special I had seen and watched several times, the idea came to me. I said to Paul "Why don't we recreate something like this? Transform a theatre audience into a live studio audience in the mid sixties." The Special we were watching was "Frank Sinatra, A Man and His Music" As we watched some older specials, Paul Litteral came up with the idea to recreate live product demonstrations. Commercials shot right in the studio in front of that same audience. With these ideas came the basic concept of this new musical event. Being the Musical Director Paul diligently started putting the band together, I insisted on bringing my own drummer (Steve Pemberton) you'd know why if you heard the man play. A little later I brought in Pianist Paul McDonald. Once the band was assembled, we had to find a rehearsal space. Paul told me of an award winning Blues singer who was a dear friend and a supporter of musicians. Enter Peach Reasoner. The key element to everything that has happened. Peach was merely helping us out, with no personal gain in mind for herself. Just out of the goodness of her heart. Can you imagine that?!! Having the keen sense and hearing of a true musician, Peach knew what she was hearing and immediately jumped behind us. In my five years in LA, I had never experienced such graciousness and generosity. I was thrilled! Now there was three of us, driving this concept. Her role very quickly went from rehearsal space provider to Producer. When her attempts to get a few investors didn't pan out, what did this believer do?! She decided to take on all financial needs of the project. This woman opened her home and her heart to Paul Litteral and myself. Not to mention our project. I can confidently say if it wasn't for Peach Reasoner, Hoboken to Hollywood would never have come to fruition. Thank you Paul Litteral for bringing us "Mama Peach".

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The direction of Jeremy Aldridge is impressive and I have a feeling he contributed to your comfort level.

Jeremy Aldridge is way more than just a director to me. First of all, as a director the man is brilliant. I will touch on that later. The role that Jeremy Aldridge played was crucial. Shortly after Peach taking us under her wing, we pulled in Mr. Aldridge. That's when the "Hoboken Four" was born. Paul Litteral, Peach Reasoner, Jeremy Aldridge and if I may be Frank, me formed our little dream team. At that point we didn't even have a script. So, we delegated the writing tasks to Paul, Jeremy and myself. Paul would take on all writings of the commercials, all Shmimex Watch demonstrations and Ford pre-taped commentary that would later accompany what was happening on the screens. Jeremy was to write in all characters who would make up the cast and crew on stage, bringing the television studio to life. My task was to write everything the Crooner would say. Mostly consisting of monologues introducing the songs along side mentions of authors and composers. I think the toughest challenge for me was writing with that certain Sinatra-esque style, or slangage appropriate for the time the filming is taking place. In order to stay true to the era, a certain vernacular not found in today's patterns of speech had to be present. To accomplish this, I watched any old footage I could find and did my homework. The three of us would meet two to three times a week and reconvene. Having these writing/brainstorming sessions allowed us to meld all our ideas into one cohesive story. Once the script was written, Aldridge took on directing me. Being an actor himself, Jeremy has an uncanny ability to reach the actor. To put himself in the actors shoes and get the message across in a very organic way. Another wonderful characteristic is his ability to recognize an actors strengths and weaknesses. Given the fact that I had been singing these songs for the last few years, Jeremy felt the songs were personal but the monologues weren't quite personal enough. At times he even felt they were a little too presentational. Working on me personalizing the talking as much as the singing was a vital part of his direction. That naturally put more of me into the performance, which would explain the ease of delivery. Being one of the writers on the project may have given Aldridge a little more insight as to what the big picture was going to be. I think Jeremy Aldridge did his job, and he did it exceptionally well.

The Paul Litteral Orchestra complemented you so well. I love the mixture of youth and age.

Aside from bringing in my Drummer and Pianist. The rest of the band was all Mr. Litteral. As Paul was assembling the band I found him taking a lot of care in figuring out which musicians would work best together. He even expressed concern when I was pitching my Drummer and Pianist to him. You would think that playing music is mostly playing notes on a page. Paul however being the heavy weight that he is, looks beyond the obvious. Relationships between the musicians is often overlooked by most Musical Directors. I've never experienced such a sense of family with a group of players. If the band is having a good time, you can hear it in their playing. That's the kind of subtle magic that affects the entire cast, crew and audience. Which is why we try to honor so many of these musicians in every show and since every show is a little different, different cats will be recognized on different nights. This way everyone gets their pat on the back. A very highly deserved pat if I do say so myself. The band is a very important and vital part of the show. The back bone of this new concept is the music. Plain and simple. All the other elements in this production are to support the music. These are all subtleties most audience members may not necessarily pick up on, but they always pick up on the magic. They may not understand what it is they are feeling, but they are feeling it. They're feeling the magic. I'd say when that moment hits them, we've done our job.

You mentioned in the show that Sinatra learned much of his smooth, legato phrasing from watching Tommy Dorsey's breathing while playing trombone. How were you able to create this in your performance?

I remember a Trombone player telling me his favorite singer was Sinatra, because he breathed like a Trombone player. So I started watching them as they played and sure enough. The big breaths, the smooth and seamless transitions between notes and most of all the Vibrato. The Vibrato was exactly what Frank would do at the end of his notes. Just a touch of Vibrato to taper off the end of a note I thought was brilliant. I suppose in essence, I watched and listened to the guy who watched and listened to Dorsey. So, I vicariously listened to T-Bone Dorsey through Frank Sinatra. Which would mean, both Frank and I learned from Tommy. Same teacher, same result.

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It is quite an accepted fact that no one becomes very good at anything unless he or she had endured ten years or more of directed practice. I get the feeling that this is the case here.

When it comes to my singing, I have never had any formal training. Plenty of training as an actor, but never as a singer. Thousands of hours of listening and singing to start. I think the best school for me has been working as a professional singer. To have to sing for 4 hours a night, five nights a week will give anyone the experience they need to grasp such an art form. It was a matter of learning to sing in a conversational way. Personalize the material first and foremost. You can't interpret what the writer is saying unless you fully understand what is motivating him/her. Not just to understand the song lyrically, but melodically as well. There's always a beautiful marriage going on between the words and the music within these songs. So any singer should sing the song exactly the way it was written. Sing it straight, don't take liberties when it comes to the lyrics or melody. Personalize it with your phrasing. The rhythmic breakdown of all the syllables, is where a singer can truly express themselves. If a singer can do that, and still sing it exactly the way the writer intended. Then that singer has done the song justice, and given it an entirely new interpretation. Modern singers do not understand such a concept. They think it's about them, but it's really about the song itself. You're merely a vessel to relay the message the writer intended.

The comment most often voiced, other than many women gushing over your looks which they describe (and I might say accurately) as a young George Clooney with a great voice, is that your singing and performance was not so much an imitation but a tribute to a great singer. You seem so comfortable as Sinatra that we forget we are not watching The Boss. Take us through the process of becoming comfortable with Frank Sinatra.

This is where I have to reiterate the importance of Jeremy Aldridge's approach to directing me in this production. By personalizing the performance, you're actually getting more Luca Ellis than anyone else. Both Frank and I were born with a certain tone and timber that gave our voices this similar sound. It was a matter of perfecting my ability to control my instrument as well as the Chairman. That took years. I had no problem speaking in the same fashion since my speaking voice is so similar to Frank's. It wasn't so much a question of delivering the goods as Frank, but more "like" Frank. How would a crooner address his audience? How would he react to the following? How would he sing this song? It doesn't matter who he is. Dean Martin, Bobby Darin, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra etc. It's more a question of, did he deliver the goods?

Of course, one of Sinatra's sobriquets was the voice. He has a smooth, tender, silky, rich quality to his voice. We certainly hear this in songs like "I'll Never Smile Again". Sinatra became a singularly incandescent vocal phenomenon.

What Sinatra had was God given. It was a gift to him and a privilege for us to hear this gift. At times I think even Sinatra himself didn't fully understand the ability that he had. It was beyond him. He couldn't explain what he had, but he sure knew how to use it.

You were so right to mention Ella Fitzgerald's contribution to Sinatra's success. I am sure you were referring to the Ella Fitzgerald Songbooks. A series of eight studio albums released in 1956 and 1964 that she recorded and supported by a who's who of big bands, which include Ellington, Gershwin, Arlen, Berlin to name a few. Hoboken to Hollywood is indeed "A Journey Through the Great American Songbook." We have a woman of African American heritage popularizing urban songs written by immigrant Jews to an audience of predominantly white Christians. Fascinating. What many people do not realize is that Sinatra prevented Capitol Records from re-releasing his own albums in a similar, single composer set out of respect for Fitzgerald. This is an amazing piece of history. Your performance suggests a reverence for this history.

Apparently Sinatra recorded "I Left My Heart In San Francisco". After listening to it, he decided not to release it out of respect for Tony Bennett. Apparently he said the song belongs to Tony. Sinatra was a very loyal man and artist. I'm sure that respect was extended to other's as well. Specially colleagues of equal if not higher caliber, such as Ella Fitzgerald.

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Pat Towne as Andy is a good actor and a pretty good singer.

Pat Towne is the real deal without a doubt. Jeremy originally had a different idea of who this character was type wise, but Pat knocked us out in the audition process and won the part. Being the director he is, Jeremy allowed Pat to play the character "His Way" and helped him hone and perfect it. Humility does that to people. It allows them to stay open to the suggestions of others, in turn allowing something to evolve into a brilliant performance that Mr. Towne delivers. Don't be fooled by his singing either. At that moment he's Danny, err I mean Andy! And it so happens that Andy has never sung in front of anyone before. As Andy, Pat has such an ability of rediscovering that thrill on a nightly basis. It's really a gasser just watching the guy. A good supporting cast is so important in creating a hit show. Al Bernstein as Dwight the director of the show within the show is wonderful. He's really being the character even if eyes aren't on him. At any point in the evening, just look into that sound booth of his and see this man living and breathing every second like it's 1965. Such a cast and performances only immerse me deeper into that world. I'm honored to be working with so many professionals who make my job and everyone else's job all the more enjoyable.

You possess a very fine speaking voice, a velvet timbre or light baritone with a touch of a sharp New York accent, resonating deep into your nasal cavity. I notice that you keep your tongue flat during speech which certainly avoids the problems of nasality. I dare say your speaking voice might be even better than the Chairman; I heard him up close in Las Vegas many years ago. Tell us about your voice training.

The only voice training I've ever received was for acting. Jeff Cohen with a method called "The Compelling Voice" worked with me for a few months. It was a scene study class with an emphasis on voice. Most actors overlook their most important instrument, their voice. Shortly after starting my training with Jeff, he came to hear me sing in one of the restaurants I gigged at. The next time I saw him, he merely said " You're already doing it when you sing, now do it when you speak". Just like singing, speaking is all in the breathing.

What is on the horizon for Luca Ellis and where might he pop up again?

Given the fact that I moved out here to pursue acting and not singing, I would say in the near future look for me on the silver screen or on a television set. I might even go out on a limb and say New York. I fell into singing professionally about 4 years ago. That career change gave me the opportunity to perfect a style of singing and the chops to play a role I feel I was born to play. If they ever make a biopic about Ol' Blue Eyes...well, I'm sure they'll find me. In the meantime, "Hoboken to Hollywood" is selling out performances in Los Angeles and Broadway Bound!