



Frank Sinatra
Songs for Swingin' Lovers!
Recorded: October 17, 1955
January 9, 10, 12, 16 1956
Record Label: Capitol Records
Arrangements: Nelson Riddle
Conducted by Nelson Riddle
Producer: Voyle Gilmore
Mixer: John Pallidino
Original Release: March 1956

Frank Sinatra with Nelson Riddle working on orchestration charts during recording session for *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!*



A definitive classic and highly recognized as one of Frank Sinatra's most beloved albums, *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!* is an evident departure from prior collaborations between Sinatra and orchestral arranger and conductor Nelson Riddle. Prior to this release in 1956, Sinatra released 3 Capitol albums with Riddle: *Songs For Young Lovers* (1953-1954), *Swing Easy* (1954), and *In The Wee Small Hours* (1954-1955). George Siravo primarily arranged *Songs For Young Lovers*, though Nelson Riddle co-arranged and also conducted. *Swing Easy* in its entirety was arranged and conducted by Nelson Riddle, but was done in the style of Red Norvo with a small backing combo group and Frank Flynn performing the classic Norvo vibraphone parts. *In The Wee Small Hours*, also entirely arranged by Nelson Riddle, reflects Riddle's ballad style that perfectly signifies the elegance, honesty, and heartfelt theme of the album. Which brings us to *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!*, which was the first Sinatra LP to highlight Riddle's up-tempo and swinging side. One Sinatra expert, Matthew Lutthans, notes how Riddle's high, sustained string accompaniment underpins

the swinging, and often driving, big band sound that propels each lyric and song forward. Sinatra himself also possesses a more pronounced playful and unfettered style on this album that later became his trademark.

It is important to recognize that Sinatra's albums all center on a certain theme. Sinatra biographer James Kaplan notes that "Frank organized each of his Capitol albums around a specific mood or mode: downbeat or upbeat, ballads or swingers. The term "concept album" wouldn't be coined until much later, but Sinatra invented the idea, and it was Riddle who helped him perfect it. More than ever, with *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* he was far more than just a singer: He was an artist shaping his medium."

Even when Sinatra chose the title for this 1956 album, it wasn't just a marketing gimmick but an accurate portrayal of his musical dramatic ambition: Sinatra showed the world how a singer could be at once romantic and rhythmically playful. And this is nowhere more apparent than on the milestone performance of "*I've Got You Under My Skin.*" For example, author Will Friedwald notes how Sinatra is supersensitive to the intimate nuances of Cole Porter's lyric at one moment, and then, eight bars later, being swaggeringly indifferent. When Sinatra adds an ad-lib line, most famously "it repeats – how it yells in my ear," Sinatra is simultaneously kidding the text and underscoring it. This was not by accident. Pure artistry is at work. And Kaplan notes how even the exclamation point in the album title was a fitting punctuation for Sinatra's life at that moment. Kaplan notes, "Sinatra was clicking on all cylinders—making great records, turning in memorable movie performances, and earning serious money. *TIME's* August 29, 1955, cover story on him had estimated his income for that year at "something close to \$1,000,000"—an astronomical number in the mid-1950s. The old days—the bad, poor days—were a blip in the rearview mirror. *Swingin'* was the operative word."

By 1956, dance music was becoming all the rage, and *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* was considered its hippest kind: swinging, infectious, supremely listenable. Rock 'n' roll started to take shape, but its appeal was initially visceral and primitive. Sinatra and Riddle had visceral and sophisticated locked up in a way that would last. It wasn't just



that Frank's voice had deepened; it had also toughened, through time, heartbreak, cigarettes, and liquor. "I didn't care for his original voice," Riddle once said. "I thought it was far too syrupy. I prefer to hear the rather angular person come through.... To me his voice only became interesting during the time when I started to work with him.... He became a fascinating interpreter of lyrics, and actually he could practically have talked the thing for me and it would have been all right."

But what makes *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!* among the very best in the legendary Sinatra canon? As a concept album with an upbeat romantic feel of being young and in love, the song selections flow brilliantly

and effortlessly from track to track. Sinatra and Riddle perfectly capture the childlike and exuberant innocence the moment the needle drops on track one, even with the opening horns of "You Make Me Feel So Young." As one reviewer put it, the opening track, "You Make Me Feel So Young," amounts to "Young At Heart" in swing-time. "You Make Me Feel So Young" modulates from mere cheerfulness to exalted rapture so overpoweringly it could make a statue want to fall in love."

I find Sinatra's capacity for emotional expressiveness unparalleled compared to other artists. All of what makes Frank "The Voice" and having that "IT" factor comes alive on this album, whether it be his aura of cool, intimate and transparent phrasing ability, or impeccable breath control. Much has been stated and immortalized regarding Sinatra's phrasing ability to connect lyrics with emotions, sensitivity, and universal appeal, and it is clearly evident on this album. Combine that with Nelson Riddle's orchestral arrangement and this album produces a magical collaboration. Riddle has a way of adding the perfect crescendos in the right places and arranging in such a way as to add to the pace and tension of each song without getting in the way or drawing too much attention away from the lyrics.

Also worthy of mentioning, *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!* marks the last Sinatra album to be recorded at the historic Capitol Melrose Studio, which had placed Capitol artists in the best sonic light. Especially from about 1953 -1956, the engineering crew at Capitol Melrose Avenue Studios produced some of the best pop recordings in the world. For a short few years, Capitol was well ahead of its time, setting the standard for clarity, warmth, and tonal balance both technically and musically. Thus, these early Capitol Sinatra recordings sound as fresh and presented with such realism as anything in the Sinatra canon, and *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!* was the last to be recorded at the famed Capitol studio. As Matthew Lutthans highlights, "Studio A, the large theatre-style studio upstairs really shines on *Songs For Swingin' Lovers!*, with Sinatra positioned in the audience seating area and the band up on the stage. The brilliantly captured instrumental balances never feel cramped, and the open instrumental sound wraps beautifully around Sinatra's voice. It just works on all levels."



Capitol Studios, Melrose Avenue



The Recording Sessions

Only one track was recorded on October 17, 1955 (Love is Here To Stay), while the rest of the album was recorded January 9, 10, 12, and 16, 1956. Setting the scene for recording sessions in January, biographer James Kaplan adds some detailed background information. The musicians assembled on the stage in Studio A were truly a starry group, an amalgam of some of the finest classical string players and jazz instrumentalists around: Frank demanded no less. The group included Eleanor and Felix Slatkin (a cellist and Sinatra's concertmaster, respectively), bass trombonist George Roberts, and minimalist trumpeter Sweets Edison. The orchestra included trumpeter Zeke Zarchy (another Dorsey alumnus), the great Duke Ellington valve trombonist Juan Tizol (who was also the composer of "Caravan" and "Perdido"), and alto saxophonist Harry Klee (who doubled on flute and can be heard swinging beautifully on the outro of "Feel So Young"). Sinatra's musical right hand, pianist Bill Miller, was also on hand. And then there was the sad-eyed trombonist with a jutting lower lip, Milt Bernhart, who would play a critical role in the most famous song Frank Sinatra ever recorded, "I've Got You Under My Skin."

Kaplan notes how Frank carried the excitement and success of the previous two years with Nelson Riddle into KHJ Radio Studios on Melrose Avenue on that Monday night, January 9, 1956 in Los Angeles. Sinatra usually strolled into Studio A, upstairs at KHJ, at about 8 P.M., and always with an entourage: In this period the group would have consisted of Jimmy Van Heusen (one of whose songs would be recorded on the night of January 9); friend, music publisher, manager, and sometime bodyguard Hank Sanicola; Don McGuire, who was directing Frank during the day in the Western *Johnny Concho*; a prizefighter or two; sundry members of the Holmby Hills Rat Pack, such as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, Judy Garland, and Rodeo Drive restaurateur Mike Romanoff; and the blonde or brunette of the moment. The atmosphere tended to crackle with excitement.

Trombonist Milt Bernhart recalled: "There was always a crowd at those Sinatra sessions on Melrose. They should have charged admission! Because the studio had been a radio theater, it had an auditorium. And the place was packed to the back. You weren't just playing a record date; you were playing a performance. They took a great chance on the people applauding, because they could get caught up in the thing, and ruin a take ... but believe me - they were sitting on the edge. And it was an "in" crowd: movie stars, disc jockeys. It was big, big.... It was hard to get in; you had to be invited. But they'd fill the damn place!"



While others were bubbling with excitement, Nelson Riddle had an uneasy anticipation of this recording session: "At a Sinatra session the air was usually loaded with electricity. The thoughts that raced through my head were hardly ones to calm the nerves. On the contrary—questions such as: "Will he like the arrangement?" and "Is the tempo

comfortable for him?” were soon answered. If he didn’t make any reference to the arrangement, chances are it was acceptable. And as far as the tempo was concerned, he often set that with a crisp snap of his fingers or a characteristic rhythmic hunching of his shoulders.”

The tempo that first January night [Monday the 9th] was upbeat, in keeping with the album’s preplanned scheme. The one slower-paced number Frank recorded that night, Andy Razaf and Eubie Blake’s “Memories of You,” didn’t make it onto the album. The other three songs on the set were Sammy Fain, Irving Kahal, and Pierre Norman’s “You Brought a New Kind of Love to Me,” Johnny Mercer and Van Heusen’s “I Thought About You,” and Mack Gordon and Josef Myrow’s “You Make Me Feel So Young,” a song that had debuted, without much of a splash, in the 1946 musical film *Three Little Girls in Blue*. Riddle and Sinatra were about to turn it into an unforgettable classic.



“You Make Me Feel So Young” modulates from mere cheerfulness to exalted rapture so overpoweringly it could make a statue want to fall in love.”

And Sinatra’s more playful interpretation was definitely noticed by those in the session. The conductor Leonard Slatkin—whose parents were part of Riddle’s orchestra on the album—said, “Imagine that you’re delivering a sentence in a particular cadence, a particular rhythm, where the strong syllables come on strong beats and the weak syllables come on weak ones. When you listen to Sinatra’s songs, even ones that are highly rhythmically charged, you’ll find that often he’ll delay that strong syllable. It may not occur right on the downbeat. It will be just that fraction late, giving a little more punch to the word itself. I’m sure he thought about it. I’m sure that this was not just improvisatory on his part.”

Sinatra knew how to play with syncopation with the best of them. “Syncopation in music is important, of course, particularly if it’s a rhythm song,” Sinatra said. “It can’t be ‘one-two-three-four/one-two-three-four,’ because it becomes stodgy. So, syncopation enters the scene, and it’s ‘one-two,’ then maybe a little delay, and then ‘three,’ and then another longer delay, and then ‘four.’ It all has to do with delivery.” And Sinatra’s delivery was now at its zenith. Listen to Sinatra’s version of “You Make Me Feel So Young” and you hear a great singer in joyous command of every component of his art—voice, tempo, lyrical understanding, expression. It was and is (imagine the seats in the radio theater, packed with rapt listeners) simply a magnificent performance. It is also a perfect union of singer, arrangement, and musicians.

One of the Greatest Recordings is Born

It is hard to imagine one of Sinatra's most iconic performances of all-time and the album's climactic performance, "I've Got You Under My Skin," was mostly an afterthought, written and pieced together in Riddle's back seat in minutes. But so the story goes.

According to Frank Sinatra, Jr., his father finished the second recording session of the week in the early hours of Wednesday, January 11, 1956, and planned to go to his house in Palm Springs first thing on Thursday. The final *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* session was set for Monday the 16th, and Frank wanted to rest up over the weekend. Instead, producer Voyle Gilmore called him at one A.M. on Wednesday and said that, because the album looked to be a big seller, Capitol vice-president Alan Livingston had made an executive decision to put three more songs onto the 12-inch LP. This would necessitate an extra recording session on Thursday the 12th. Frank was not pleased. He phoned Riddle at home, waking him up, and told him that he had to arrange three more songs, immediately. "Sinatra gave him three songs real fast. Either he had them already written down or he pulled them out of a hat," Frank Jr. said. He went on: "Nelson got out of bed and started writing. By seven o'clock the next morning he got two songs to the copyist. He then had a few hours' sleep and started writing again at about one o'clock in the afternoon. Nelson knew that "you-know-who" wasn't going to be a very happy person that night because he did not want to be working.... With [Riddle's wife] Doreen at the wheel of their station wagon, Nelson was in the back seat finishing the arrangement while holding a flashlight."

Kaplan continues, "When the Riddles arrived at Capitol Melrose KHJ Studios on the evening of January 12th, Vern Yocum, the copyist, had several of his associates there. Sinatra recorded the first two tunes — "It Happened in Monterey" and "Swingin' Down the Lane" — with Nelson and the orchestra while the copyists were writing down the last arrangement. Frank then shifted gears and, with a chorus, recorded a single [not on the album] called "Flowers Mean Forgiveness." Then he returned to the album, with Cole Porter's "I've Got You Under My Skin."

Sinatra's usual method with Riddle when planning out arrangements was to sketch out ideas verbally—"make it sound like Puccini"; "give me some Brahms in bar eight"—while Nelson took rapid notes. All this usually happened well in advance of recording. In this case, with one day's notice, Frank told Riddle, about "I've Got You Under My Skin": "I want a long crescendo." "I've Got You Under My Skin" was the last song Sinatra recorded on the night of January 12, which means that by the time the tape started rolling, the clock may have ticked over into the early hours of Friday the 13th. First, though, the band ran through the number once while Frank stood in the control booth with Riddle, producer Voyle Gilmore, and recording engineer John Palladino. Sinatra was listening carefully, making sure the recording balances were correct and the arrangement sounded right. Riddle's heart was in his throat. Though he had dashed off the chart under maximum pressure, he knew Frank expected nothing less than greatness. "There's only one person in this world I'm afraid of," Riddle once confided to George Roberts. "Not physically—but

afraid of nonetheless. It's Frank, because you can't tell what he's going to do. One minute he'll be fine, but he can change very fast."

When the run-through was finished, though, the battle-scarred studio musicians stood as one and gave Riddle a warm ovation, "probably because somebody knew that he wrote it in a hurry," Bill Miller recalled. But Frank knew it was awfully good. Though he was usually One-Take Charlie on movie sets, in the recording studio he would spend as much time as necessary to get a song right.

Trombonist Milt Bernhart recalled, "it was unusual that he would have to go past four or five takes. Accordingly, I left the best stuff I played on the first five takes." But, Bernhart remembered that Sinatra knew that something special was happening. Bernhart continues, "Frank kept saying, 'Let's do another.' This was unusual for Sinatra! I was about ready to collapse—I was running out of gas! Then, toward the tenth take or so, someone in the booth said, 'We didn't get enough bass... could we get the trombone nearer to a microphone?' I mean, what had they been doing? There was a microphone there for the brass, up on a very high riser. 'Can you get up to that one?' they asked. And I said, "Well, no—I'm not that tall." So they went looking for a box, and I don't know where he found one, but none other than Frank Sinatra went and got a box, and brought it over for me to stand on! Eleven takes, twelve, thirteen—some of them would have been false starts, only seconds long, but some went longer, until Frank raised a hand, shaking his head, stopping the music and telling the band and the control booth what had to change. Then, take 22." "Milt perspired a lot to start with," recalls guitarist Bob Bain, who played on the session. Now the trombonist was soaked through. "He looked at me and said, 'I don't have another one left.'"



Sinatra singing through his Neumann U47 microphone.

Kaplan notes that by this time, "Frank was in high gear, ready to push forward into the 22nd take. Take 22. "I've Got You Under My Skin" starts at a lope, in 2/4 time, with a baritone sax or bass clarinet playing the now-famous repeating figure—bum-ba-dum-BOM ba-dum-BOM ba-dum-BOM—in the background. Despite the lateness of the hour and the number of takes, despite the number of unfiltered Camels he has smoked that day, Sinatra, under that Cavanagh fedora, is singing as easily and bell-clearly into the Neumann U47

microphone as if he had just stepped out of the shower and taken it into his mind to do a little Cole Porter. Perhaps, now and then, as he loses himself in the great song and the

sound of the great band around him, he closes his eyes. The heavenly strings and the bright brass interplay effortlessly behind the first and second choruses, and then, as Frank caresses the last lines of the bridge —

But each time that I do,
 just the thought of you
 Makes me stop before I begin,
 'Cause I've got you under my skin....

—Roberts and the strings lift the long crescendo higher and higher and higher until it seems they can go no higher. And then Milt Bernhart, drawing on reserves he didn't know he possessed, goes wild on his slide trombone, simply blowing his lungs out. It is to Sinatra's immense credit that his powerful final chorus, driving the song home, is as strong in its own right as Bernhart's historic solo. It was a wrap, and an instant classic was born for ages to come. “

Notable Album Releases:



Initial Release Cover



Revised Release Cover



D1 Pressing



D34 9:00 Rainbow Label Pressing



MFSL 1983 Pressing

2016 - Current Pressing

Songs For Swingin' Lovers! was originally released as a 15-song mono LP (gray label pressing). An alteration was soon made to the cover artwork very soon after the release and then by 1962, new editions were released with additional processing in mono, fake stereo, and Duophonic versions, as well as album reissues cut to 12 songs. Herein lies the problem for many future releases of the album, as many were sourced from these heavily reprocessed tapes. As rumored, the cover changed in about 1 year (so by 1957), as Capitol executives thought the album looks friendlier with the revised Frank looking TOWARD the couple. The original cover has Frank looking AWAY from the couple with a titled hat.

As far as US pressings are concerned, sound quality and overall tonal balance is all over the map. As a general rule, more problems exist in the later 60s to early 80s reissues as compared to mid 50s gray label and late 50s rainbow label pressings. More of the reverb, EQ, and fake stereo/Duophonic mastering problems become readily apparent in these Capitol reissues (such as the Capitol yellow label abridged pressing from the 1970s) as well as with the Mobile Fidelity 1983 release in the Sinatra Box Set.

In comparing mint copies of all releases, the original Capitol "D" pressings to my ears sound superior. There is Sinatra "presence" and unparalleled smoothness that just sounds right. Granted, it can be a bit rolled off on top and can sound too warm and "pillowy soft" for some, especially with the modern day focus on transparency and dynamics. But nowhere does Sinatra's voice sound so palpable and connected to the listener than those original Gray label pressings. The challenge becomes finding them in excellent condition with limited groove wear.

Which brings us to the 9:00 Rainbow Label pressings (note the 9:00 Capitol logo on the photo above), for example the D13 or D34 pressing. These still have that midrange magic and palpability, but there seems to be a bit more tightness and focus in the sound which some may prefer – more defined if you will. But there is a little more distance to Sinatra's voice – pushed further back into the orchestra and a smidge less prominent. There seems to be a hint of reverb added to this pressing, but it is very minor and is still a fantastic listen. However, even more reverb is added to the 12:00 Rainbow Label pressings, circa

1961/1962, and Sinatra's voice tends to sound even more distant and razor-like and less warm, which I would tend to avoid in favor of the aforementioned "D" pressings. The 1983 MFSL reissue used these later 60s reverb tapes, which makes it an inferior choice. It simply doesn't sound right to my ears and has a technically incorrect presentation as well. The treble also has a bit too much bite and is a little bright to my ears, personally.

So what's the big deal about reverb, you may ask? As Matthew Luthans notes, "adding reverb affects more than just how much reverb you perceive. It can affect overall tone, blend, and dynamics. Maybe adding 2% reverb isn't a big deal as far as the reverb goes, but if that 2% reverb causes the tone and blend to be 1% worse and the dynamics to be a little less impressive, suddenly you have a release that, through subtle manipulation on one front that subtly affected other fronts, is maybe 4 or 5% worse overall. You probably won't even notice it on its own terms, but if you actually compare carefully you may find that you just don't enjoy one version of the album as much as another, and it may be because of all those nearly-imperceptible alterations that add up to have an affect on the overall enjoyment of the album."

In 2016-present (or so), Capitol released an anniversary edition of the LP. This is an excellent option, especially if one favors clarity, transparency and dynamics over warmth, presence, and tonal balance. There is definitely a more apparent crispness to the sound with greater presence of the cymbals and more bite to the cymbals. It was likely sourced from the digital 2014 Mobile Fidelity Hybrid disc, and thus you lose some of the richness, fullness, body and warmth of the original analog tapes in the early pressings. For those who prefer full range treble and clarity without the sentimental warm glow of the original, you will likely prefer this updated release.

Conclusion: This Riddle-Sinatra collaboration is one for the ages. This album is as good as it gets for any music lover and plenty of great vinyl options exist for different tastes. Though my favorite is the original gray label "D" pressing, I would be perfectly happy with other releases. In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea to own a copy of each.

Note: I pooled the majority of the information for this review from multiple sources. I am especially grateful and give special thanks to Matthew Lutthans, James Kaplan's "I've Got You Under My Skin: Full Story," and Will Friedwald's "Sinatra! The Song Is You: A Singer's Art" for their invaluable contributions on this album. Much of the background information has not been altered from their work to maintain historical context and accuracy.