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'My Way' celebrates Sinatra

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Seven years after Frank Sinatra's death, his place in American culture looms larger than ever.

Sinatra's albums still sell briskly on Amazon.com. XM Satellite Radio devotes an entire channel, called "Frank's Place," to Ol' Blue Eyes and the great American songbook.

"As popular as he was when he was alive, people did sort of take him for granted," Sinatra biographer Will Friedwald recently told the St. Petersburg Times. "Now that he's gone, he's discussed in the context of these great creative people ... someone like Frank Lloyd Wright or Orson Welles.

"In terms of popular singing, Sinatra really is the alpha and the omega."

Sarasota's Florida Studio Theatre will celebrate Sinatra's legacy and the cool, swaggering sophistication he epitomized with the musical revue "My Way." It kicks off FST's Cabaret season on Thursday.

A four-member cast will sing dozens of Sinatra hits, from "All of Me" and "I've Got You Under My Skin" to "New York, New York" and "Somethin' Stupid."

But don't expect any of the performers to attempt a Sinatra impersonation.

"That's not what this show is about," said director Dennis Courtney. "Sinatra's image doesn't even appear in the show. Instead, we use Sinatra's songs to capture his essence, and the essence of his era."

That era began about 1940, when the skinny kid from Hoboken, N.J., began attracting attention as a vocalist with the Tommy Dorsey band.

Two years later, as a solo act, Sinatra was performing before 5,000 screaming bobby-soxers at New York's Paramount Theater.

Sinatra brought a new style of natural phrasing and interpretation to his songs. His rich baritone stood in sharp contrast to the bland tenors who were crooning at the time.

Although his career slumped in the early '50s, Sinatra rebounded dramatically after teaming up with arranger Nelson Riddle. Together, they helped make the LP popular with a series of albums for Capitol Records.

At the same time, Sinatra and pals Dean Martin, Peter Lawford and Sammy Davis Jr. made

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TICKETS

My Way

By Florida Studio Theatre Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Opens 7:30 p.m. Thursday, following previews at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday. Through Jan. 7. Tickets are \$19 to \$29. Call 366-9000 or access www.fst2000.org.

Las Vegas the mecca for '50s hipsters.

"Sinatra really epitomizes a generation," said Stephen Hope, one of the performers in "My Way." "He was the guy every woman wanted, and the man every guy wanted to be."

Because Sinatra liked to describe himself as a saloon singer, "My Way" is set in a New York supper club.

"Four friends gather there to spend an evening together, and through Sinatra's music, we learn about their relationships, past, present and future," Courtney said. "Because that's what Sinatra's songs are about: seduction, romance and relationships."

In casting, Courtney was looking for performers "who tell the truth when they sing and act. When they're telling a story in their songs, I have to believe every second of it. I also wanted people who avoided sentimentality. If you feel sentimental when you hear these songs, that's great. But we don't throw it in your face."

Hope, a veteran of FST productions including "The Exonerated" and "Ruthless! The Musical," gets to sing many of the classics from the Capitol Records era. "Stephen has the charisma and life experience that those songs demand," Courtney said.

Michael Zahler sings the songs from the earlier, bobby-soxer days. "His character is the young, skinny crooner, full of enthusiasm, who is still figuring out how to be cool," Courtney said.

Jennifer Johns represents "the starlet type whom young Frank would have dated," Courtney said. Kelly Atkins is "the dame, the broad, in the Ava Gardner–Judy Garland style."

"My Way" was created by David Grapes and Todd Olson. "I was always taken by (Sinatra's) ease... his remarkable way with a simple lyric, his charisma and the epic, in-your-face way that he chose to live his life," Grapes said.

"But how could that be translated into an evening of theater? The solution was obvious. The key was his music."
