

It Was a Very Good Year

Bob Gaudio didn't think life could get any better. In the summer of 1969, he was living the life of a pop superstar, backing Frankie Valli as a member of the Four Seasons and writing the band's smash hits. Then one day he got a call from the biggest star of all. Frank Sinatra needed some new songs.



By Kevin Coyne

Bob Gaudio at home today outside Nashville with his wall of fame.

The limos arrived on Edgewood Terrace in Montclair one summer weekend in 1969, invited but not quite expected. The house belonged to Bob Gaudio, the John Lennon of the Four Seasons, who had been rehearsing some new songs in New York with a singer he had never worked with before. He had extended his hospitality

to the singer in the casual way of a proud homeowner: If you're not doing anything this weekend, why don't you come out? He certainly had plenty of space to share—a 28-room “Elizabethan castle,” as he describes it, a fitting abode for New Jersey's reigning prince of popular music. The other three Seasons were already at the castle when the guest of honor arrived. Chauffeured from his suite at the Waldorf Towers, trailing a cook, a bodyguard, and assorted other members of his entourage, he was maybe the only figure at the moment who outranked Gaudio in New Jersey's cultural hierarchy—who in fact outranked just about everyone everywhere: Francis Albert Sinatra of Hoboken. “That was the Jersey Boys—that house, that day,” Gaudio says now. “It's the kind of thing you wish you had a cinematic record of.”

The saga of the Four Seasons was itself deserving of record—their time on the doo-wop street corners of Newark, their battles with the Beatles for the top of the pop charts, their wiseguy ways, gambling debts, and drugs. Today that saga has found its venue in a Broadway musical. *Jersey Boys* is a certified hit, generating \$15 million in ticket sales within a few weeks of its November opening. Its success is all the more surprising given the failures of several other recent musicals based on prominent rock 'n' roll songbooks—the Beach Boys (*Good Vibrations*), Lennon (*Lennon*), and Elvis (*All Shook Up*).

That one episode that didn't make it to Broadway was that day in Montclair and the preceding and subsequent weeks Gaudio and Sinatra spent collaborating. That episode is instead documented on one of the best recordings you probably never heard of, a lost classic that preserves the heady moment when two of the greatest Jersey Boys of all went into the studio to make some music

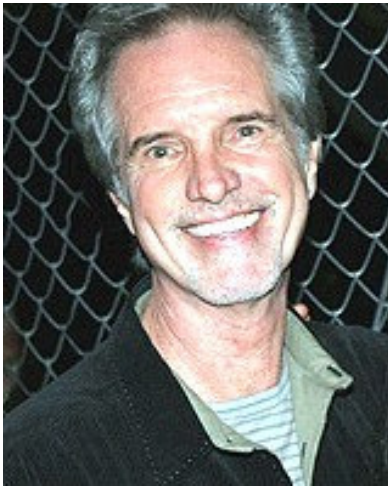
together.

In 1969, the year of Woodstock, even Sinatra grew a beard—a scraggly, short-lived, go-to-hell goatee. His marriage to a teenaged Mia Farrow had collapsed, his father had just died, and he was under investigation for the kind of mob ties that lend a raffish edge to Jersey Boys now but that threatened him with serious legal and professional harm then. He could still chart a hit—“Strangers in the Night” and “That's Life” in 1966, “Something Stupid” in 1967, “My Way” in 1968—but the gaps between them were longer. The songs being written and played were not meant for singers like him.

Sinatra had taken a few stabs at what some called “relevance,” songs that didn't sound quite right when sung with a bourbon in one hand—Joni Mitchell's “Both Sides Now,” Paul McCartney's “Yesterday,” Paul Simon's “Mrs. Robinson.” He even recorded a whole cringe-worthy album of turtlenecked existentialism penned by the platitudinous Rod McKuen. Songs? Tone poems? You decide. He palled around a bit in Vegas with Frankie Valli, whose recent solo hit “Can't Take My Eyes Off of You” was the kind of tender, brassy lounge anthem built for Sinatra. If you want good songs, Valli told him, Bob Gaudio is your man. “He had terrific respect for songwriters,” Gaudio says of Sinatra. “I don't know of anyone else before or since who would announce the name of the songwriter before singing a song.”

Gaudio wrote his first hit, “Short Shorts,” which reached number three for the Royal Teens in 1958, when he was fifteen. When he joined the Four Seasons two years later, he became their resident genius—the one in *Jersey Boys* who quotes *T. S. Eliot*, the tall guy standing at the keyboard whose songs will make the group stars. But for all his success on the rock 'n' roll charts, he spoke the same traditional pop language as Sinatra. His piano teacher was Sal Mosca, who had played with Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, and Sarah Vaughan and whose own teacher had been jazz legend Lennie Tristano. Like Sinatra, Gaudio was at a crossroads in 1969. He was tired of

the road and longing for the studio. For their last album, the Seasons had ditched their matching blazers, grown their hair, and channeled the psychedelia of Sgt. Pepper through a filter of Kinks-style social satire; *Genuine Imitation Life Gazette*, with songs like “American Crucifixion Resurrection,” impressed the critics but sold poorly. So when Sinatra’s people summoned him, Gaudio paid a call upon the court in Vegas, met the man, saw the shows, and came back home to his castle to write some songs with Jake Holmes, his collaborator from *Genuine Imitation Life Gazette*. (Holmes had also written the original song that Led Zeppelin used for its warhorse “Dazed and



Confused,” putting Sinatra about a degree and a half of separation from Jimmy Page, a connection from which, even at his most goateed, he might have recoiled.)

With one concept album behind them, Gaudio and Holmes started working on another. This time, though, they channeled not the Beatles, but Sinatra himself, the Sinatra who practically invented the concept album in the 1950s with such lovelorn classics as *In the Wee Small Hours*. With Holmes providing the lyrics and Gaudio the compositions, a story emerged in the songs: A steady, loyal man in a small town whose wife leaves him and their two sons behind for the bright lights over the horizon. She’ll come back, he just knows it—won’t she?

“Sarge Weiss called,” Gaudio says, referring to Sinatra’s music coordinator, “and said, ‘Well, Frank loves the stuff, and he wants to do everything. He wants to do it all.’ I was

in my twenties, a cocky kid, and I’m thinking, *Well, why not? Of course he wants to do all of them*. It never occurred to me that he might say, ‘Well, maybe I’ll cut a few.’”

The plan was to make it a one-man TV special. Gaudio and Sinatra worked through the songs at the Waldorf Towers and joined royal houses for that one day at the castle in Montclair, then went into the studio in New York in mid-July, just a few weeks before Woodstock nation would convene 100 miles north. They came up with a gray November day of a record they called *Watertown*. “There was no particular reason for the name,” Gaudio says. “It was just put a needle in a map and Watertown came up.”

Watertown seemed to be exactly what Sinatra needed: an emotionally rich pop novella, a 1950s barroom lament refitted to the fractured world of a new generation—“a kind of a meeting between what I do and what he does,” Gaudio remembers. And then the call came from the record company. “Frank doesn’t want to do the special.”

Gaudio remembers hearing. “He’s not comfortable with how he’s looking, how he’s feeling. He’s not comfortable he can pull this off.” Gaudio didn’t believe the album could find an audience without the TV special behind it. He telephoned Sinatra, who told him, “Look, I don’t know when I can do it—maybe a year or two or five. But I’m proud of the work, and I want it out.”

So in 1970 *Watertown* was shoved alone into the market, sheathed in a puzzling cover—a sepia-tinged drawing of a train station without a sign of Sinatra—that made it look like the soundtrack for a B Western. It peaked at number 101 on the Billboard pop charts and sold just 35,000 copies. Sinatra never did the TV special. Within a year, he announced his retirement, and when he unretired a couple of years later, he returned more as a revered icon than a vital artist. He would crack the Top 40 only one more time, with “New York, New York” in 1980. *Watertown* circulated mainly among hardcore Sinatraphiles, until a 1999 CD re-release of the album made this lost

classic a little less lost. As for Jake Holmes, he went on to implant some virulently memorable hooks in your brain as a jingle writer: “Be All That You Can Be” for the U.S. Army, “Be a Pepper” for Dr. Pepper.

Gaudio sold the castle in 1972 and moved to California. Two years later he quit touring with the Four Seasons, but he kept writing songs for them, including their two big mid-1970s hits, “Who Loves You” and “December, 1963 (Oh, What a Night).” He became a star of the studio, writing songs and producing albums for Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand, and a chartful of other artists. The Four Seasons were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990; Gaudio made it to the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1995. For the last twelve years he has lived in Nashville—“the only place in the world,” he says, “where songwriters get a better table than singers.”

Gaudio, now 63, was part of *Jersey Boys* from its conception to its opening, and he produced the cast album. “It’s obviously surreal,” he says about seeing his life as a Broadway show. “Sometimes I’m able just to watch the show, but sometimes you get a cold sweat. You feel like you want to check yourself into the hospital. You think your time has come, that your life is flashing before your eyes.”

Jersey Boys is playing at the August Wilson Theatre, on a stretch of West 52nd Street familiar to Gaudio: “It’s across the street from the old Jilly’s,” he says. Jilly’s was a major planet in Sinatra’s galaxy, his saloon-away-from-home. Gaudio and the other Seasons hung out with him there during the *Watertown* days. “It was an Italian thing. It was a Jersey thing,” Gaudio says. “There was definitely a connection there.”

Jilly’s is long gone—it’s the Russian Samovar now—and owner Jilly Rizzo is buried near his friend and famous patron in the Sinatra family plot in California. But the saloon’s old home stands watch over *Jersey Boys* like a memory of that brief, unlikely, but fruitful partnership. Once upon the 1960s, two of New Jersey’s best met here. You don’t believe it? Here, listen.