

Fresh Jersey

Stories from an Altered State

Mike Kelly

Sparky's Dream

December 13, 1990

In New Jersey, there are six great religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sinatra. Here is a visit to one of the shrines.

Down the hall from the room with the cheesesteaks on the griddle and the bowling trophies in the window, Sparky waits for his dream to come true in the place he calls his "Sinatra Den."

Sparky even put out a new bottle of Dewar's and cooked extra Pasta Lenticchie. He invited the usual crowd—Angelo, Uncle Louie, Cosmo, and Big Ears. And then, he ordered a cake with eight blue roses and this inscription in blue and red letters:

"Happy Birthday, Mister Sinatra. We Love You."

"After 75 years," says Sparky, "he deserves to be called 'Mister.'"

But Frank never showed.

Not that anybody expected him to. A few days before, Frank turned 75. But in the back room at Sparky's Piccolo Clam Bar in Hoboken, another birthday passed with another cake and no birthday boy.

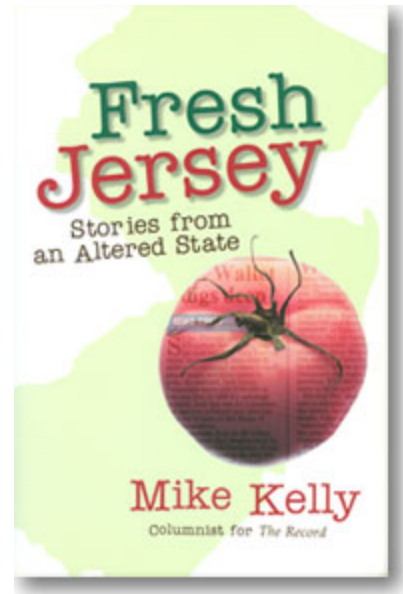
"That's my dream," said Sparky, whose real name is Joe Spaccavento. "My dream is to meet Frank Sinatra."

Explaining why is something else. "He's an entertainer. He's the tops. He's . . ."

Sparky knows the next question as well as he knows "Night and Day." Why would Hoboken care about a man who has done his best to ignore his hometown?

"That personal stuff, that's different," Sparky says. "That's his life."

No matter. Here, on Hoboken's car-clogged streets, around the corner from Laja's Tavern and the Hudson County Homing Pigeon Club, Sparky's



restaurant is the place to pay homage to the man Hoboken once called "Skinny" and Hollywood still calls "The Chairman of the Board."

Outside, the cops don't mind if you double-park. Inside, you can still get an egg sandwich for \$1.40. And in the back room, beyond a "Sinatra Drive" sign, Sparky serves up Sinatra in the "Sinatra Den."

All day, Sinatra sings from the stereo. And on the walls, Sinatra smiles from dozens of photographs. There is Sinatra with Tommy Dorsey, Sinatra with the Hoboken Four, with President Reagan. And—yes—there is Sinatra with Sparky.

Sparky points to a photo of Sinatra in the bleachers at a 1939 high school baseball game. Behind Sinatra is the mischievous face of a 10-year-old with black, wavy hair.

"This is me," says Sparky, now 61. "I never even said hello."

But this is no time to wonder why. It's 12:26 p.m., and 23 people are in the Den, telling stories about Sinatra concerts, Sinatra autographs, Sinatra sightings. On the stereo, Sinatra sings "Under My Skin."

And the phone rings.

"Maybe it's Frank," someone calls out.

It's not.

"You never know," says Angelo Palladino, 53, an electrician.

"Yeah," adds builder Frank Trombetta, 61, "they try to get him."

Cary Silken, 34, walks in. He has eight tickets to the night's Sinatra concert, but there are no takers. Everyone here has a ticket.

Miriam Aponte, a 38-year-old secretary, nibbles on a piece of Sinatra cake and announces: "I want to give him a kiss and a hug."

Tony Dibranco, 67, tells how his father, a tailor, sewed buttons on Sinatra's blazer before a concert long ago. And Hoboken Police Lt. Anthony Falco, 41, tells how he once lived in the "same house and same apartment" on Monroe Street that Sinatra was born in.

Sparky beams with pride at each story, then points to a Sinatra poster, signed "To Sparky, All the Best, Frank Sinatra."

"I just wish I could meet him," Sparky says. "That's the one wish I have."

"How about a daily double?" Falco says, laughing.

But Sparky cuts him off.

"Forget about it. Never."