

SINATRA AND VIOLETS FOR YOUR FURS

Alfredo Bryce Echenique

Love affairs and lovers quarrels to the sound of Sinatra with Paris in the backercuns. In the following pages Alfredo Bryce Echenique recalls his affairs at the beginning of the Seventies in the City of Light. Abandoned first of all by Maria (“always so pretty and reserved”) young Jenny, dressed in her “best furs”, invites him to a concert given by Sinatra the Voice at the Olympia and then to stroll a while by the Seine: “for a moment it was April in December....”. Twenty years later, celebrating a happy wedding anniversary with Karim, once again it becomes “April in December”

For Jenny Woodman and Karim Dannieri, on the floor taking photos, in the garden , in the afternoon and in the Underground: for German Arestizabal, in my profoundly beautiful Chilean south: and for Frank Sinatra, in his eighties, here on my record player, tonight and without strangers...

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Old Blue Eyes was singing that night in Paris for everyone- “le tout Paris”-and Jenny, that mixed up and sensitive child, was going to pick me up at the house. Grace Kelly was still alive in those days and half of Monaco, together with other assorted crowned heads, would be at the concert in the Olympia theatre. Jenny had invited me because the price of the cheapest ticket was still too expensive for me, because I wasn’t, as they say, a crowned head and because she knew that I had been stuck on Sinatra since I was fifteen or thereabouts. Everything had started with a record in a violet cover and the song “Violets for your Furs”, and then when I brought you violets for your furs and it was, just for an instant, April in December, spring in winter, remember...

Now it was December in Paris and people with furs were going to the concert at Olympia or rather the smooth- skinned rich were going , as that’s what I felt about them. . But I hadn’t bought violets. I didn’t have any violets nor did I have the faintest idea where I could find a flower shop that sold violets in the Latin Quarter where I lived. The only flowers in my life in those days were those of the Californian hippy type and I was looking to them to bring me up to date about my immediate past. Maria and I had inherited the flat (where Modigliani’s widow had committed suicide) from a revolutionary Spaniard who had left the place with the wallpaper filthy and greasy and gone back to his own country to start a revolution with FRAP, ending up, I understand, as peppermint frappé.

The Spaniard had inherited the flat from someone else, who had inherited from someone else etcetra etcetra like one of those Chinese boxes, right back to the last century when presumably the wallpaper, which was now full of greasy dust and black with soot from the chimney, had been clean, new and gaudy. As she had long since resigned herself to putting up with the man she had married (myself) I believe that it had become relatively easy for Maria to resign herself as well to the fact that the act of showering involved a piece of pure theatre in which the shower had to be used over a huge wash bowl in the kitchen, after taking out various stools and moving the fridge plus everything else and doing this in such a way so as to block out the filthiness of the four walls within which we lived on the seventh floor, staircase only.

Molly and Antonio Solis used to hate our filthy walls and were always going on, trying to convince me of the need for doing something, of papering over all that feeling of dirt and misery in which I made poor Maria live. Molly was more discreet because she was from California but Antonio was an Andaluz who had a very high voice and a strong but simple extrovert accent and who clearly couldn’t put up with a day more begging food in our

house (they were even poorer than we were) or having to eat between the same walls. Maria eventually caught on to the plan, got enthusiastic about it and I remained in the minority. Until finally I gave in:

“Look” I said to them “ go off the three of you and buy any wallpaper that takes your fancy but I’m telling you this-I’m going to disappear the day you come round to hang it or whatever the hell you do with those flowery rolls you keep on talking about”.

Jenny had to park the car in the usual forbidden place so I still had time to look at my warm- coloured walls. And that was just how the owner of the flat found them-flowery, colourful, Californian Hippyish- on the day he came to inspect the improvements made to the wallpaper in his property and, at the same time, charge me cash for the rent so as not to declare anything to the taxman.

“These walls are actually quite frightening for a person of my age, Sir” he said, looking at the bright floral patterns with his nose in the air “ but I must admit for once in my life that they do give off a sort of warmish feeling”.

Very soon afterwards I found myself sad, lonely and at a dead end with only my warm- coloured walls for company and comfort. Molly and Antonio went off to live much better in the U.S.A. while Maria, always so pretty and reserved, announced in that sweet and gentle voice of hers that we had now become shipwrecked and, according to the laws of machismo and feminism now in fashion, I was and had to continue to be, the captain of the boat and to stay on her until I died or she sunk, because she, Maria, was going back to live much better in Peru like Molly and Antonio were doing in the U.S.A. Our marriage had broken up and as a parting present Maria asked me to buy a new record player and to let her take all our record collection, except Sinatra. I agreed and accompanied her to the airport and Maria kept her part of the bargain by leaving me all the Sinatra records, and especially the record in the violet cover, and with it, the most important thing in the whole wide world, the third track on side A which I knew by heart, “Violets for your Furs”. I was now free to listen to “Night and Day” and she was also free and relieved that she didn’t have to listen to Sinatra night and day for the rest of her life ever again. Knowing her, she wouldn’t remember the violets on the day she bought her first fashion coat in Lima to travel five stars to Europe, after having returned to Peru and done America. What was supposed to be our record, our singer, our symbolic violet hadn’t only failed to keep us together but was also the reason, I believe, behind our separation.

Jenny must have been chatting to the police to convince them not to charge a fine for parking in the place where it said “ Parking not permitted”

and, as she really is something of a flirt, I had time enough to remember what was going to be my future over more or less the next twenty years. It allowed me to come to the conclusion that there are people who cannot stand living with Sinatra around but that the person that gets left at the end of the day is me. There are also people who always get on with Sinatra and with my records of Francis Albert Sinatra especially when I tell them everything about the man, born in Hoboken, New Jersey, whose parents weren't born in the U.S.A. but who took every precaution imaginable to make sure that Frank was: "Democracy is America to me" he used to sing although this was Little Italy, neighbour to Little Central America, bad news Hispanics, what are we going to do, and Frankie, born into the American Dream, will get us out of here one day, woman. And while we continued listening to Sinatra I went on telling them about how Frankie Boy became Old Blue Eyes or how in Australia they used to call him Big Mouth because he used to swear and insult the press and how they called him Bones at Paramount Films and how through whisky, beer, wine and champagne but above all through pizzas he became (several years of pizzas later) a fat and balding old man, a specialist in marrying Groucho Marx's widow, for example, and how he and his voice together were called "THE VOICE"-just like that, in capitals- and "only him" and how they became together serious, deep and tobacco stained and arrived at what they are today: and now he's in his eighties and insists on singing "New York, New York" with the help of Lisa Minelli who suddenly appears out of the public and steps up onto the stage with roars of applause, especially invited for his salvation...

There are dearly beloved people who have lost all interest in Sinatra, in his music, in me and in my scene for Sinatra. On the other hand there are strokes of luck in life too, I don't know: once going to Chiloe, right down in the south of Chile to visit an old friend, German Arestizabal, and finding him in great form although he'd fallen over out of his mind when drunk and broken his right elbow and he's a painter: I don't drink anything now, German, but like Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in Casablanca still have Paris, so we've still got each other...

"Sinatra", German and I toasted each other with water.

But there are also strong blows in life too, those in the Vallejo poem, like the time that Lilian Long, in spite of the name that she got as an actress in the 1950's, gave up. Sinatra was too much for her because her guy was a Trotskyite and hit her, beat her up, for singing that imperialistic song "Strangers in the Night". Lilian gave up, left through the window in my place with the warm feeling walls, gave up, poor girl, just at the finish, like Leguisamo's horse that Gardel used to sing about who weakened right at the

finish line and had to go back again proving, so it seems, brother, that you're better off not betting... Troskyite shit, just when I was convincing her that she was going to find the violet even if she didn't have the furs...

Sinatra used to dress well and when he was slim used to wear those really narrow trousers that nobody knows how to wear today because they would crease, not like Dominguez's, the Spanish stylist who used to say "Creases are beautiful", but at the buttocks, at the knees, everywhere, and without that immaculate crease line: because now they don't wear or use those healthy and so so comfortable braces and neither do they have the personality. To wear today's clothes is to be unisex and unidimensional, vague and confused, and to be identified by the label on the clothes...

Well, now I'm in my present-i.e. about twenty years ago- because Jenny is coming up the stairs and I'm opening the door and she is wearing her best furs. I am dressed in my one- and- only suit which has a waistcoat and she has brought me a beautiful tie, hot and flowery with touches of violet to liven up the black colour of my- one- and only suit and my shirt cuffs. Maria forgot to take her nail scissors and I was clipping some of the stray threads on my smart but worn out shirt "Old England". Finally I put on the tie and live like Cesar Vallejo did in his life and work. From time to time Sinatra rewards himself with Black Label in a crystal glass and he smokes and gets better until he's The Voice at the Olympia in Paris. Nobody knows how he got there but he arrived at Paris in his private jet and took a helicopter from the airport to the roof of the French Radio and TV building. Old Blue Eyes... how you used to make fun of Grace Kelly between songs but always finishing off with a couple of respectful words or with the title of your next love song ! In the interval I tell Jenny that the person who knows Sinatra best is a little old lady who carries his sixty wigs in a suitcase around the world... I've got a lot of hair-I hope Jenny doesn't take it badly, that I'm so much older than her and, on top of that, separated from Maria, and, on top of that... opposition from her family... heavy...but it's not the moment to go into that, no way, and we laugh to ourselves as we watch the Grimaldi girls from Monaco. Today it's a thousand years ago that Grace Kelly died and the Grimaldi girls have grown up with a tendency to double chins like their father and their brother, Rainier's heir, and Claudia Schiffer, top model. It was also a thousand years ago that, after the concert, we went walking by the Seine gazing at the river so much that we didn't even have dinner, and we stayed there looking forever ...It so happened that I didn't cut the big thread on the right hand cuff of my shirt as a way of telling if Jenny liked hearing Sinatra with me or not. In "Violets for your Furs" she began to search for the thread in the darkness of the stalls, the only light coming from above the black and white of the stage, catching the

Voice in this chiaroscuro effect, and at times making the microphone or the crystal glass with its reward and no ice, glitter. Afterwards, for a moment, there by the Seine, it was April in December and Jenny wasn't going to go either with Sinatra or with my Sinatra records. However there is one song in my past which opens one of Sinatra's most recent compact discs, and now it's the present, my marvellous present, even though it makes me remember, with a lump in my throat and more, that Jenny ended up buying her own Sinatra records. The opposition from her family of such terribly important people was brutal and ended up destroying everything, leaving me once again sad and alone among my warm- coloured walls. There were years afterwards I imagined myself walking behind her, because the song is about her marriage and much more. The song tells how I'm walking behind Jenny on her wedding day and how I'm listening when she promises to love and obey her husband. I then tell her that although she's forgotten me, for me she'll always be present, and that she's only got to look over her shoulder: I'm going to be there behind her, just in case. And if things go badly for you and destiny doesn't treat you right, Jenny, look over your shoulder and I'll be there- "What a Sinatra type song, my God"... It's obvious that it sounds better in English in the same way that "anyway" sounds better, in the sense of "apart from", "in short", "change of subject", or "different nuance", than "inasmuch as" which seems like an obstacle course...

We continue celebrating great wedding anniversaries, Karim and I, but we always remember that the first was in New York. "Love's been good to me" Sinatra sings, about a guy at the end of years of sticks and stones... but "anyway" we continue walking through the city that Karim loves best in the world; we've been married a year and that old flirt the Seine is really doing her job. It's April in December, it's the 9th, and I'm talking to you about Sinatra: that almost sixty years ago when he was with the Harry James Orchestra he was only a pretty voice, what they used to call a crooner in those days, Karim, and that the bobby socks... 15 years later, when he sang "Violets for your Furs" and then "These Foolish Things" he was the only guy of his age that wasn't in World War 2 because the era when his voice, singing on the radio, was so necessary for peace had disappeared...

From Tommy Dorsey he learned his unique phrasing, unexpected, seductive and friendly to those who had been seduced. Everyone sang along with him and he sang for everyone and for you... by some trick of Darwinian chemistry, love had converted his voice, it didn't matter what he sang. From Billy Holliday he'd learnt that the rhythm accompaniment had to make the voice drag, opening each phrase of the song just before the voice came in, making the music turn the song into something that was

spoken as well as sung. Inexplicably he tried to sing one like another Stevie Wonder, maybe because he felt old and the years were rolling by, but the worst of all was that this meddling with his voice only worked with a public that didn't deserve Sinatra...

Finally he gets to accept things and say " Nowadays nobody writes songs for me", although he didn't do too badly borrowing from Brasil. Now he's finished so what can you do with him and yet I bet that even today the sex you hear in his songs is the sex you hear in your memories. Tomorrow, when he won't be able to hit an octave, he'll sing songs that require less than an octave just as passionately because centuries ago, Karim, Bing Crosby also learnt to seduce with the microphone and sigh...

" Yes, Karim, I know. You could get to be very badly educated but you don't necessarily need to be an artist's neighbour or invite them to eat..." We stay locked in a kiss and it's the Seine itself that passes by our side on our new wedding anniversary, marvellous tonight, giving us a continuous bass, then a trumpet solo... " The river's so beautiful", Karim exclaims " It's so beautiful, my love, it only needs the tie.... !" I moved quickly and lovingly and there into the river below me went my warm and flowery old tie with its touches of violets.... □

Translated by: John Bell