33. Consider the opening of Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor’s 1990 “Black Boys on Mopeds,” in which she equates the actions of Margaret Thatcher’s government with the Chinese communist crackdown at Tiananmen Square.
34. To tie the songs more closely together thematically, “Peace in Our Time,” the concluding song of the album, also revisits the international nightclub metaphor introduced in “Dorothy’s Club.”

Chapter 7

The Universal Tongue:
Language and Image
in Raul Núñez’s Sinatra

Frank Sinatra in numerous ways has come to represent the United States, both positively and negatively, for many people worldwide. On account of this intimate association with things American, Sinatra’s very visible presence on the international cultural landscape should come as no surprise.1 Upon his death, countries ranging from the Republique Federale Islamique des Comores and Somalia to Turkmenistan and Zaire issued commemorative stamps. In 1999, Israeli filmmaker Nadav Leon wrote and directed the drama Frank Sinatra Is Dead. Stories of how Japanese schools have used Sinatra’s records as a model of English pronunciation also have long been reported. In fact, this “Sinatra approach” to second language acquisition has reached our own shores, as well. In May 1999, the “About NY” column in the New York Times ran a story of the academic success of a young Ecuadoran immigrant whose dei buss/English instructor recommended that the then-seventeen-year-old listen to Frank Sinatra records to improve his English.2 Sinatra, thus, not only stands out as one who “speaks American” but, at the same time, somehow manages to connect with those who do not have English.
"SAD-EYED SINATRA"

This powerful connection is quite evident, for example, when watching tapes of Sinatra's 1962 concerts in Japan. On the video, it becomes clear that the audience—while not comprehending much, if anything, of the meaning of the lyrics Sinatra sings—is nevertheless caught up in the music and, especially, his performance. The Sinatra persona thus has a hold on his audience that is quite distinct from his lyrical content—be they the words of a Porter, Cahn, Gershw in, or Kern.

It is this same attraction of the Sinatra persona that Raúl Núñez discovers in his 1984 Spanish novella, *Sinatra*, translated into English by Ed Emery as *The Lonely Hearts Club*. His story, set in a sleazy Barcelona hotel, of the romantic travails of a night porter who bears a remarkable resemblance to Frank Sinatra never allows its readers to forget that the American icon, and all that his name and multiplicity of images imply, has a universal significance. Not to be relegated simply to an American scene, Sinatra's aura both haunts and offers hope to the often-tortured souls who populate the novella.

*Sinatra* tells the story of the forty-year-old Antonio who, due to his resemblance to the famous singer, more commonly is known as “Frankie.” As the novella begins, the reader learns that the previous year Frankie had been abandoned by his wife for a black man. His self-dissolution ensues. Drinking heavily and abandoning his job as a successful door-to-door salesman, he winds up the “night porter” at a “cheap hotel in Calle Hospital” (Núñez 10). In an attempt to right himself, at least romantically, Frankie enrols in a mail-order lonely hearts club through which he receives responses from an increasingly bizarre roster of correspondents: a widow, a transsexual, an ex-co, a midget poet, and a homicidal religious zealot. Together with the sibling hotel owners, a sex-crazed fellow porter, a prostitute, and a runaway addict who thinks she is the mother of Frankie's child, Antonio's bachelor existence is rarely solitary.

Clearly, Núñez's darkly comic scenario seems far away from Sinatra's public (and personal) life as it possibly could be. Nevertheless, the singer's presence pervades the novella. Various female characters, for example, mention Antonio's resemblance to Sinatra. It is the characteristic that first drew his ex-wife to him (10). It is also what first attracts both Florentina García, the widow (13), and Begonia Montana, the midget poet (58), Senorita Clementina, sister of the recently deceased owner of the hotel, also alludes to it with the far fetched idea that Hollywood might want to hire him as a Sinatra double (91).

Over the course of the novella, Antonio himself also begins to accept, and draw strength from, his close affinity with Sinatra. He signs his letter to the widow with “Frank Sinatra” (Núñez 17), for instance. Another example is at the bar when he first notices Natalia, the cross-eyed girl with the doll she comes to think is Antonio's child. At first, he is tense and tongue-tied. When she asks for a cigarette, however, something or someone else takes over: “Help yourself,” he said. His words came out smooth as honey. As if it hadn't been him speaking, but the real Sinatra. She smiled” (21). At this point, the unconscious power he draws from Sinatra is short-lived and even a bit delusional since he immediately must correct his reference to himself as “Frankie” (23).

Nevertheless, his resemblance to the singer remains an inspiration to him, for as time goes on, he summons the courage to read yet another club response by first comparing his mirrored reflection to a magazine photo of Sinatra in Las Vegas (Núñez 52–53). And even later—immediately following the murder of the prostitute, Isabel, by her pimp (120–121)—face to face with his reflection, he carries on a full conversation with Sinatra concerning the options the remaining women in his life offer (125–126).

That Antonio has internalized Sinatra to some degree also is suggested further by the passing allusions to Sinatra films and recordings both when he opens a letter with the exhortation “OK, chum, Anchors away!” (31) as well as his letter to Begonia Montana, in which he complains to her that, while other club members are “droving me crazy... you can count on me” (109). Inspiration, escape, and after ego, Sinatra challenges Antonio to continue to function in a crazy world turned ugly—but, of course, that is before the virgin midget-poet vents on him in mid-embrace (141) and Brother Blasico Sol, believing him to be “the Wicked One,” tries to execute him (147).

Clearly, one of the things that Sinatra offers the novelist is the classic pop singer's distinct difference from the pop music scene of the early 1980s. The classic pop standards Sinatra sings, and the romantically sophisticated culture often associated with them, stand in stark contrast to the contemporary music that infuses much of the action. For instance, when the eighty-three-year-old hotel owner, Señor Flores, better known to his employees as “the Lizard,” forces Antonio to take him to a discotheque to meet women, the music playing at the club seems only to accentuate the loneliness of the characters: “The loud-speakers were blaring out wild rock and roll. Everybody was dancing or moving. Facing each other. Not touching each other. Not looking at each other. Not laughing either... Everyone seemed to be dancing alone” (Núñez 61). The very dance music that should bring people together (which is, after all, the need that draws the Lizard there to begin
with) only encourages them to be solitary, self-contained, and disconnected from all those around them. In fact, this is the very atmosphere that Elvis Costello conjures up in his song of the same year, “The Deportees Club,” discussed in chapter 6. For even when the Lizard spots the “carefree” and “unreal” woman “I knew that I’d find,” her appeal is utterly anonymous (61): An enormous mass of golden hair. A waterfall of locks . . . They moved on the girl’s shoulders like a magic spider, with a life of its own, and a sweet and mysterious smell” (61–62). Helplessly attracted to the smell and the hair, the Lizard approaches her, plunges his face in “the entrails of that golden tarantula,” and dies (62).

The incredible allure of the raw power of rock music is surely at issue here. Its appeal is undeniable, but as potent and sensual as the music might be, the isolation and loneliness of the rock culture cannot be denied either. While perhaps momentarily cheerful, Señor Flores cannot be considered a happy man at his death since he dies a “heart-broken ghost” (62) never even having seen the woman’s face. A nameless vision close enough to touch but too remote to know is apparently the best the rock world has to offer, and that dearly should not be enough.

The emptiness of contemporary rock and roll is once alluded to in the “Sid Vicious is Dead” T-shirt worn by Contras, a local shiby to whom Antonio’s barber directs him for the answers to his questions. While “mad as a hatter,” according to Camacho, Contras just “might give [Antonio] an idea” of what he should do (Nuñez 94). And, in fact, after the prophet chastises Antonio at forty years of age for still taking women seriously at all (96), he directs Antonio to avoid Horcasitas, Natalia, and even Isabel—the prostitute with whom Antonio had spent a remarkable night free-of-charge (81)—to pursue Regonia Montana. As Contras says: “[Midgets are] no trouble, they don’t bug you. They don’t crowd your space. Everybody passes over them, but it doesn’t worry them. They look at life from below, and have a very different take on it . . . They have more worldly wisdom. They’re more real than other women” (96). Contras, as his name implies, is offering an alternative view and celebrates the nontraditional. While perhaps not altogether correct in his assessment of the situation (Antonio’s rendezvous with Montana ends in utter comic horror), he is also far from wrong. Antonio’s circumstances certainly merit thinking “outside of the box,” and Contras’s odd take on the night porter’s opinions is appropriately novel. Logic is rarely the strong suit of seers; they tend to divine the truth through other means.

And that is how his T-shirt with the Sid Vicious headline enters the equation. The death of the bass player of that archetypal punk band, the Sex Pistols, on February 2, 1979, intensifies much about the longevity and musical accomplishments of Sinatra. For The Sex Pistols’ celebrated version of “My Way” crystallizes the extremity of punk rock as the ultimate rejection of the status quo. As Robert Pattinson writes in The Triumph of Vulgarity, it was Vicious’s very “lack of talent” that “made him a star in the rock pantheon” (Pattison 136). His having “played no instrument before joining the Sex Pistols in 1977,” allowed him to be: “the youthful Everyman suddenly transformed by the liberating pantheism in which all things are permitted and self-annihilation provides an avenue to self-realization.” Sid was the ultimate creation of the modern Prometheus, a creature of electricity’s democratic current. Poor monster!” (Pattison 136). Vicious, in short, was punk rock’s reply to Sinatra, who in his own right was the democratic voice of several generations. Ironically, it was the young Vicious (and not Sinatra) who already was dead.

The reference to his death in 1979 (the very year that Sinatra would be reclaiming his status as pop’s premier artist with Trilogy) suggests a critique of the emptiness of rock’s rebellion in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For if rock is at its core “an idea . . . a denunciation of everything old, smug, and wishful” (Pattison 1), then, according to Nuñez, it is an idea that has bankrupted itself. Having arrived at the point where musical talent was unnecessary and the very lack of it seemingly a prerequisite to be a musical star, how could Sinatra—as musician and celebrity—serve as anything but an icon of quality and significance, an image of hope for the lonely and struggling? Having refused to self-destruct like the “poor monster” Vicious (who murdered his girlfriend and took his own life but three months later), Sinatra and his art continue on.

Sinatra, however, despite the Sgt. Pepper-esque title given its English translation, is not primarily concerned with popular music, its societal role, or its decline. Everything about the novella suggests that it is concerned with the human need for love and the difficulties people face in finding it. That this Sinatra look-alike turns to a collection of photographs of other lonely people to find some connection suggests a central place for Sinatra in twentieth-century romance. The question is what his place and significance are, especially in a world as far from Frank’s as Antonio’s would seem to be.

One of the few times that Antonio seems to have the world on a string and lives a life even remotely approximating Sinatra’s fabled existence is the evening he spends his enormous bingo purse, which he wins
due to a lucky "idiot child" he rents to bring him luck (Núñez 74–75), and tastes the high life with Isabel. His single night with her is "just like in the movies," and everything about it, from the "five-star hotel room" to the "wildest night of love-making ever," is remarkable (81–82). "For the first time in his life, he was king" (79), and, with a bravado quite unfamiliar to the reader, Antonio declares that this will be "the last time" they will ever "fuck about" with him (82). As Núñez makes clear, however, as much as Antonio may want to be Sinatra—he even introduces himself as a singer to Isabel (76)—he is no Sinatra. The chapter, in fact, turns out to be a parody of Sinatra's Rat Pack life of gaining, boogie, and broods—with bingo instead of dice, a prostitute instead of Jill St. John, etc. This life as Sinatra, however, is seen to be but a chimera which begins to dissolve the next morning when Natalia returns addicted to smack (83–84) and continues when, even as he is falling in love with Isabel, he discovers that he has contracted syphilis from their encounter (105). Clearly, this scenario affirms that it cannot be Sinatra's more high-flying lifestyle that serves as his primary significance. Instead, as Núñez indicates when Clementina shows her collection of celebrity photographs to Antonio, Sinatra embodies a loneliness and a melancholy born of heartbeat that crosses lines of class and nationality. Antonio thinks that her album, filled with photos of "platinum blondes" and "famous actors," is utterly "different" from the "club's brochure, with its little photographs of each member" (131). How could anyone compare the two? But as she turns to her photo of Sinatra, readers cannot help but recognise the equivalence of the two albums. As Núñez writes: "It was a picture of one of [Sinatra's] many weddings. His wife was small and pretty, with a face that was a bit bony and with blonde hair that had been cut too short. She looked about thirty years younger than her husband... Both of them were smiling. They looked happy" (131). The obvious mismatch of Sinatra and Mia Farrow powerfully argues the difficulties inherent in finding true love. For even if Sinatra himself confessed to daughter Nancy at the time: "I don't know maybe we'll only have a couple of years... But we have to try" (Nancy Sinatra 1999), in retrospect their 1966 marriage must be considered nothing but a divorce waiting to happen. And Núñez's emphasis on the actress' less than traditional beauty (her short stature, skininess, and boyish hair), about which many of Frank's cronies joked endlessly at the time, reflects significantly on Antonio's trouble in finding the perfect woman to love—even as it perhaps foreshadows his date with the midget. If Frank Sinatra, a man who seemingly can have any woman he wants, must struggle to find that special someone, as this third of his "many marriages" would seem to indicate, then how can Antonio (or anyone) expect anything easier for himself?

The wedding photo thus accomplishes two things. First, on the level of plot, it encourages Antonio to try the club one final time: with Begonia? Second, it perhaps suggests the theme of futility of Antonio's search, for the novella ends not with his finding love, but with his dying in the comforting and protective arms of Clementina. Her embrace has less to do with romantic love than it does with a maternal concern for the younger man and his need to be mothered. Pressed against her "warm breasts," Antonio slowly but steadily drifts away, unable to respond to her comforting words (Núñez 151). In a sense, his being embraced by Clementina, whose name implies a mix of mercy and practicality, is his chance to shed his previous life and be reborn, to free himself from the weight of disappointment and death. He misses that chance, however, because his death intervenes.

It is Clementina, after all, who saves Antonio's life only moments before by disarming Brother Blanco Sol when he arrives at the hotel to kill "The Wicked One." Her simple act of removing her clothes in front of the madman reveals the would-be soldier of God as nothing more than a man who "for the first time in his life... has seen a woman with no clothes on" (Núñez 149). Not one to overintellectualize, she zeroes in on a situation by recognizing the basic needs of the people she meets, just as Brother Blanco Sol, after seeing her naked, "wouldn't hurt a fly" (149), so Antonio first and foremost needs solace... and a shave (151). Of course, Antonio is similar to almost every other character, who seeks love but actually requires something even more basic—protection. Natalia from her addiction, Rosendo/Bosita's abuse of her abusive boyfriend, Horensia from her own son, and Isabel from her pimp. While none of them finds that relief, Clementina is offering it to Antonio as he slips away at the conclusion of the novella, and they are her words on which it ends: "Take it easy, Frankie. Take it easy."

Clementina, who "understood everything" (Núñez 150), thus exemplifies the mercy and forgiveness that Antonio/ Frankie would seem to have merited for a persistence that held off his self-destruction for a considerable stretch of time (but obviously not long enough). The entire novella details his falling to pieces, and Brother Blanco Sol is "the last straw" (150), with which comes Antonio's slow, but final, surrender: "He shut his eyes and began to see a strange unaccustomed light approaching him, like the dawn" (151). He then answers "I will, I will... as if from a distance" to Clementina's mention of a shave until finally he cannot respond at all (151). In her arms, he dies broken and
lonely, if not alone. This image, almost a perverse “Pietà,” suggests the meaning of Sinatra for Núñez. Antonio dies for no reason. His death saves no one. His legacy is a sad but negligible one.

Sinatra’s unique place in the world as artist and celebrity, on the contrary, is vital and life-affirming. Just as Sinatra distinguishes himself from Sid Vicious who musically and personally destroyed himself, so Sinatra distinguishes himself from all who, having lost in life or love, accept defeat prematurely. Throughout his life, Sinatra had ample opportunity to surrender, but he never allowed himself to succumb. From Ava, Mitch Miller, and “red hating” to Mia, Mafia allegations, and early retirement, Sinatra made a career of taking blows and somehow coming back. Even in the nourishing embrace of Clementina, however, Antonio no longer can summon the strength, will, or courage to carry on. Unlike his namesake, the hotel porter welcomes defeat. As Contraera’s T-shirt might now read: “Frankie is dead! Long live Sinatra!”

NOTES
1. Consider also such diverse international decays as an August 15, 1998, Sinatra tribute at Bad Langensalza, Germany, Frank Sinatra und seine Zeit; a club named “Sinatra” in Nerja, Spain; Brazilian Candy Peixoto’s 1992 compact disc, Candy Canasta Sinatra; a Spanish language version of Lew Irwin’s Sinatra, A Life Remembered by Ana Alcaiza, entitled Sintra Una Vida en Imagenes 1915–1998; and the various life experiences of Sally de Mattia described in her 1999 essay, “A Personal Testimony and a View from Europe: The Multicultural Frank Sinatra.” Tom Rusch, in his 2001 song “When Sinatra Played Jesus,” also explores Sinatra’s cross-cultural significance and influence.
2. Pete Hamill, in Why Sinatra Matters, describes the phenomenon among Brooklynites (93–94), while the fictional Rosie Rosellini teaches her two sons a similar lesson in Michael Venturi’s The Death of Frank Sinatra, a novel discussed further in chapter 10 (219).
3. In 1988, Sinatra was made into a film, written and directed by Spanish filmmaker Francisco Betti and starring Alfredo Landa as “Antonio/Frankie” and Ana Obregón as “Isabel.”
4. The ex-con Juan Cuevas Hércules only remarks that Antonio seems to have “a sympathetic face” (51).
5. In 1945, Sinatra co-starred with Gene Kelly in the MGM film Anchors Aweigh.
7. Playwright Bernard Kops examines Sinatra’s own mournful qualities in his Playing Sinatra, which is discussed in the next chapter.
8. A comparably comic, if only passing, play upon Sinatra’s swinging image occurs in Toon Hozzka’s In the City of the Disappeared, when Peace Corps volunteer Harry Haylin patronizes the Fuente de Sosa Frank Sinatra, the “Frank Sinatra Soda Fountain,” in Santiago, Chile (133).
9. Significantly, the one Sinatra song that is mentioned by name in the novella is his 1973 recording of “Let Me Try Again,” which Florentius purchased especially for their dinner at his house (67).
10. While it is true that Juan Cuevas Hércules, the ex-con, hooks up with her for a while, then runs out with her forty thousand pesetas, the reader cannot help but sense that, while she enjoyed her time with him, she is not disappointed at his departure—even with the loss of money (148).
11. This association is not much of a stretch since, perversely, it is the Virgin Mary who Brother Blanco Sol says has ordered him to kill Antonio (106, 150).