

# 'Frank and Ava' Is a Sensational Love Story, Remembered Today on the 16th Anniversary of His Death

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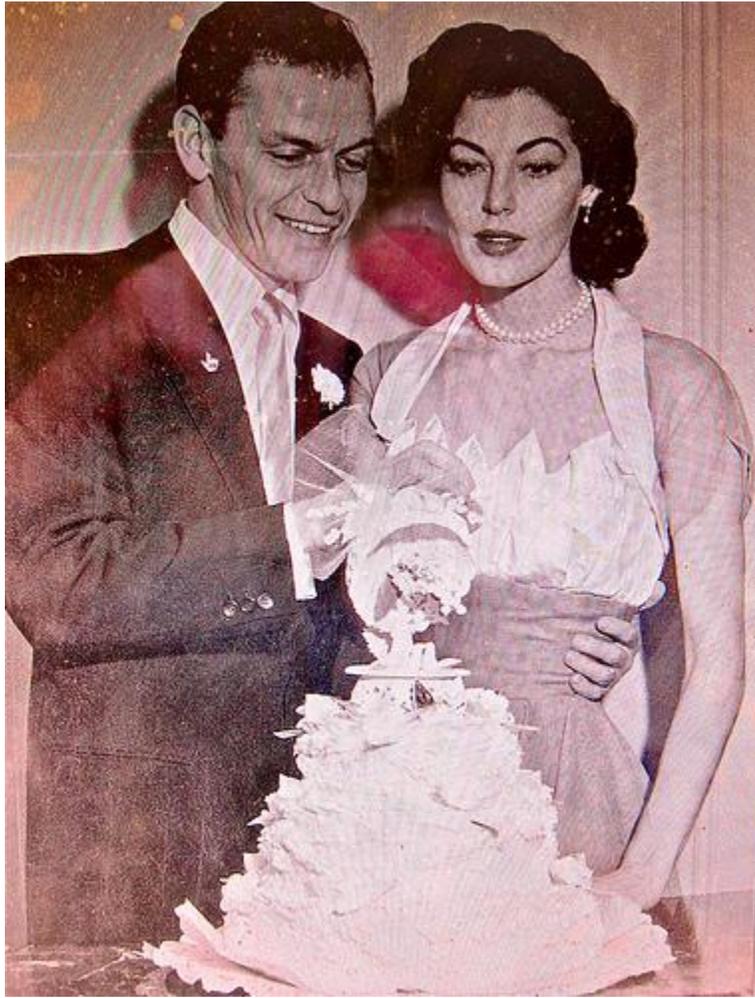
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*Frank and Ava (photo from Bettman Archives)*

It was 16 years ago this day in May that the 82-year-old Frank Sinatra died. Coincidentally, I have just been writing about him and his tempestuous relationship with the love of his life, Ava Gardner. The drama about them at the Hollywood Fringe Festival ran for several months, but I only got to see it in its last week. I wish I had gone earlier as I could have seen it again, so I asked its well-known playwright, Willard Manus, for a copy of the play, *Frank and Ava*, and read it last night.

He told me that it was developed at the prestigious Actor's Studio Playwright/Director's unit, where Manus and director Kelly Galindo are members. The venue was the Three Clubs nightclub where Frank and Ava used to drink. (The actor who played Sinatra, Rico Simonini, is also a leading cardiologist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.)



*At their wedding (photo from Bettman Archives)*

What a wonderful movie this will make. (I keep imagining Ben Affleck playing Sinatra and his wife, Jennifer Garner, playing Ava Gardner.) It deals with the tempestuous relationship between Sinatra and Gardner in the '50s, showing their multi-year love affair (and subsequent marriage). I well remember that it was the stuff of juicy tabloid headlines... they were both Hollywood icons when they hooked up, though at the time his career was on the wane because of voice problems and the problems inherent in the Kefauver Senate investigation of organized crime and the Mafia, which tarnished his reputation. The downcast Frank complains that singers like Eddie Fisher and Perry Como were stealing the hearts of young women from him. His marriage to Nancy Barbato was over, but she wouldn't grant him a divorce.

Gardner, born to a poor family in Grabtown, North Carolina on Christmas eve, 1922, was admittedly the most beautiful woman in movies, a rising star, coming off well-publicized marriages to Mickey Rooney and bandleader Artie Shaw (whom I knew in relation to my Billie Holiday movie; he was a bully and an egomaniac.) As we see in the play, Ava sticks by Frank in this difficult time, even helping him land the acting job which ultimately turned his fortunes around and won him a Supporting Actor Oscar in 1953, the role of Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*. She interceded with the wife of a powerful Hollywood mogul, which was the deciding factor in his being cast.



*Frank and Ava (photo from Bettman Archives)*

As Frank and Ava shows, Sinatra and Gardner loved each other in a passionate, intense way... yet in the end they couldn't live with the other. I have concluded that they both were mirror images of each other: hard drinking, profane, and fiercely independent. Neither one of them seems to have believed in being faithful and monogamous. Gardner went off to Africa to make Mogambo and had an affair with a white hunter, while Frank dallied with Marilyn Maxwell and Lauren Bacall while she was away.

We see that, as a married couple beginning in 1951, they were hapless: reporters pursued them everywhere, even playing them off against each other. (That was the year that I was drafted and went off to war in Korea, which is why it was memorable for me.) They fought wildly, savagely, trading insults and even blows over an abortion. But when Ava went off to Spain to make *The Barefoot Contessa* and shacked up with a famous bullfighter, the despairing Sinatra tried to kill himself. A divorce followed in 1957 (the year of my own brief first marriage)... but this drama ends on a wonderfully poignant, charming note (unlike my marriage)... there was a brief reconciliation at the party celebrating Sinatra's winning of the Oscar. At this last scene, they fall into each other's arms, hugged and kissed the way they used to when their love was fresh and tender, and dance gently 'til the curtain. The stunning, romantically sentimental ending had the audience silent, and then they stood up and applauded for several moments. I admit it, I teared up when I saw it and again when I read it last night. Having read her recent biography, *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*, I know that they remained close friends until she died, and Ava always described Frank as the real love of her life. It has been said that Ol' Blue Eyes supported her financially when she fell upon hard times. In the bio, she describes their first date, when they drove through a silent, dark Palm Springs shooting out the street lights with a pistol. Someone said that they loved each other as if love was like a battle to the death.

As I said, it will make a terrific feature film, or cable movie. Yes, no one may ever create the same magic of these two incandescent stars... but it will be fun to see it tried.

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