

print.
Simon & Schuster revealed this

famously secretive and distant from writers — with the exception of a little

to him?
“I talked to him several times, but

Nothing, for example, about his marriage afterward to Marilyn Monroe. So

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The Other Hoboken Singer With

BOOK REVIEW

MAKING THE WISEGUYS WEEP: The Jimmy Roselli Story, by David Evanier. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 260 pp., \$24.

By Michael Kramer

IN ITALIAN-AMERICAN communities, Roselli is like a god,” says the disc jockey Ron Cannatella toward the end of David Evanier’s cheery, fast-paced biography of the Hoboken-born singer Jimmy Roselli. Though Roselli’s career in popular music has been overshadowed by a certain other Italian-American singer from Hoboken, Cannatella explains, “If you mention [Roselli], it’s ‘Oh, Jimmy!’ It’s almost like a secret kind of thing.”

Thanks in part to Evanier’s biography, Roselli — now 73 and still singing strongly — is no longer just a celebrated cult secret. Evanier uncovers other secrets, too. As the title indicates, Roselli, like Frank Sinatra (10 years his senior) and many other Italian-American entertainers who came of age in the mid-20th Century, interacted with the Mafia while rising to success. Evanier clarifies these rather murky associations, bringing to light the subtleties of an often stereotyped relationship. He avoids the cliché of Italian-American culture as exclusively Mafia-dominated, instead focusing on the musical qualities of Roselli’s gifted singing and offering a somewhat simplistic, but wholly plausible, psychological interpretation of Roselli’s tempestuous personality. In slight contradiction with his book’s title, Evanier argues that Roselli’s connection to the Mafia is only one aspect of his career. Roselli may have made the wiseguys weep, but he also touched the larger Italian-American community, and music fans in general, with his expressive voice.

Born in Hoboken in 1925, Roselli grew up living with his grandfather, a candy

store owner, after his mother died and his father refused to care for him. From a young age, he sang professionally, becoming a master of everything from turn-of-the-century saloon songs to jazz standards to traditional Neapolitan bel cantos. Soon enough, Roselli was performing on the radio and in clubs, at the weddings of reputed Mafia leaders and at Carnegie Hall. Beginning in 1965, he recorded albums for United Artists, and in the 1970s, Roselli formed his own record label, M&R Records.

As his career blossomed, Roselli gained a reputation for his movingly pure singing and difficult attitude. He was concerned (rightly so) with not being exploited by Mafia-associated bookers and club owners, and with, to paraphrase the Sinatra song that Roselli also performs, doing things his way. Roselli’s stubbornness led to big career blunders, including turning down important television appearances because he felt they didn’t pay a respectful amount of money. Roselli’s refusal to conform to the Mafia’s (or anyone else’s) rules also may have caused him to be blacklisted from clubs and the radio for a time. And his career suffered because he feuded — sometimes comically so — with Frank Sinatra. Even though Roselli revered the Chairman of the Board, he once refused an invitation from Sinatra’s mother, Dolly, to sing at a benefit because she didn’t ask him personally. Despite all these problems, Roselli gained fame for literally making Mafia members cry. He may have survived mafioso attempts on his life, according to Evanier, because the mothers and wives of the wiseguys loved his singing.

For Evanier, “[Roselli’s] voice captivated me. . . . Wildly theatrical, it was also

heartfelt, with unabashed feeling and raw torrents of emotion.” Evanier is an eloquent music critic, supporting his admiration for Roselli’s talents with specific examples from the singer’s many albums and performances. Surprisingly, however, his book lacks a discography. Nonetheless, “Making the Wiseguys Weep” is an excellent Roselli primer.

Unfortunately, Evanier only somewhat successfully puts Roselli’s career in the context of Italian-American culture. To his credit, Evanier judiciously chooses accuracy over sensationalism, moving beyond mere Mafia cartoons. But his earnestly researched and well-written summaries of the history of Italian immigration to America and the sociological intricacies of male honor in Italian culture are simply too brief, too sketchy. Evanier’s quotes, by contrast, offer a more nuanced vision of Italian-American life. He relays the story of Roselli’s

grandfather telling the young singer about the mafiosi: “Guys like them, they’re not the Italian people. We work a lifetime for a few coins, and they steal them from us. I’m proud that I work hard for a living. Be a good man, Jimmy. From your singing you will make an honest living.”

When he does write about Roselli’s connections to wiseguys, Evanier brings depth to their shared motivations. They are all rather stereotypically distrustful, moody, unpredictable — above all else passionate to the point of rashness. But, as the publicist Harriet Wasser remarks to Evanier, mafiosi “are ashamed and proud both at the same time . . . It’s a real double thing.”

Evanier conveys the idea that wiseguys, and those like Jimmy Roselli who must



Singer Jimmy Roselli

Mob Ties

deal with them, are more complicated than their caricatures. Furthermore, Evanier explains, Roselli’s stormy personality is due more to his own distinctly arduous upbringing than to anything else. Feelings of abandonment from never having a mother and essentially being separated from his irresponsible father at birth underlie a longing for a home he can never possess. This desire for an unobtainable home relates to many Italian-Americans’ immigrant experiences, but, as Evanier argues, it has very particularly cursed Roselli with a tough life even as it has blessed him with a deeply emotive singing style.

The music is what counts in the end, and if David Evanier’s entertaining and informative biography of the singer who makes the wiseguys weep isn’t perfectly conceptualized, the book does offer music listeners a chance to become wiser themselves for learning about Roselli, his relationship to the larger Italian-American experience and his inspired voice. ■

Michael Kramer edits the Books / Talks and Pop / Jazz sections of *nytoday.com*.

COMING UP

Reviews of these books will be featured on Sunday.

BOOKS FOR THE HOLIDAYS:

ART BOOKS: including tributes to American folk and Haitian voodoo art, Mary Cassatt, Pierre Bonnard, Mark Rothko and more; reviewed by Ariella Budick

PHOTOGRAPHY: including books by Man Ray, Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White; reviewed by Charles Taylor

ARCHITECTURE: a look at buildings of the 20th Century; reviewed by Albert Mobilio

FASHION: Barneys’ window designer, Princess Diana’s couturier and Diane Von Fürstenberg tell all; reviewed by Sara Nelson