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Frank Sinatra and the Hoodlum Priest

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Frank Sinatra and the Hoodlum Priest

Stephen Werner (bio)

A little over fifty years ago a remarkable event linked Frank Sinatra to a fascinating Jesuit: Father Dismas Clark, The Hoodlum Priest. On Sunday evening June 20, 1965, Frank Sinatra gave a concert in St. Louis with his

Rat Pack buddies Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. Also performing were Johnny Carson, Trini Lopez, and the Count Basie Orchestra, led by Quincy Jones. The show, called the *Frank Sinatra Spectacular*, had been organized by the local Teamsters Union President, Harold Gibbons, to raise money for Dismas House, the first half-way house for ex-convicts in the country.¹ Dismas House helped ex-cons become productive members of society. The Teamsters also lent support by giving jobs to the men at Dismas House

The concert was shown via closed-circuit television in movie theaters in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles; then quickly forgotten until a recording of the show was rediscovered in the 1990s and wound up on cable TV. Seeing anew the *Frank Sinatra Spectacular* reignited interest in the Rat Pack and their “The Summit” act made famous in Las Vegas during the filming of the 1960 film *Ocean’s 11*. The show can be viewed online. The humor still works and Frank, Dean, and Sammy provide great performances with typical onstage playfulness.

The *Frank Sinatra Spectacular* is the Rat Pack at its best, although missing two of the originals. Joey Bishop hurt his back, so Johnny Carson replaced him as MC. Peter Lawford and Frank had been at odds for some years after a planned visit of President Kennedy to Frank Sinatra’s home in Palm Springs, California had been cancelled for fear of bad PR because of Frank’s friendships with underworld figures. Lawford, the go-between for setting up the visit, became the fall guy when the plan failed. **[End Page 101]**



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The “Rat Pack”: Dean Martin, Johnny Carson, Frank Sinatra, and Sammy Davis, Jr. backstage before the *Frank Sinatra Spectacular*, June 20, 1965. From the collections of the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Dismas House had been created by Father Dismas Clark, S.J. Father Clark had died two years earlier in 1963, an exhausted man. In the weeks before his death, he worked hard in a futile fight to save a young man from Missouri’s gas chamber.

In 1960 a movie about Father Clark, *The Hoodlum Priest* was released starring Don Murray. This fascinating movie was filmed on location in St. Louis and in Jefferson City, Missouri at the state penitentiary and at the governor’s mansion. Keir Dullea played the role of the convict, Billy Lee Jackson. He went on to a long TV and movie career including the lead in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.²

Father Clark had sought out Don Murray to make a TV series to raise money for Dismas House. In June 1959, Murray was in St. Louis **[End Page 102]**



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Dismas House, the first half-way house for ex-convicts, opened in 1959. Dismas House, Collection 192, The State Historical Society of Missouri, Photograph Collection.

promoting his film *Shake Hands With the Devil*. At a press screening of the film *Father Clark* slipped in next to Don Murray.

“Now listen, kid,” the man said in a reedy, agitated voice, “I ain’t no square priest, you see.” Out of the corner of his eye, Murray was taken aback to realize that the Runyonesque interloper beside him was wearing a priest’s collar. “I was instantly intrigued by the dichotomy,” Murray says. “He was dressed like a priest, but he spoke like a character out of *Guys and Dolls*. One sentence out of his mouth and he had me fascinated.”³

The project turned into a movie.

This meeting of Clark and Murray is described in an excellent article, “Forgive Me Father, For I Have Cinema’ed” by Dennis Brown.⁴ The article explores in detail all the complications around the making of the movie and why after doing well when it was released, the movie drifted into obscurity...

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Stephen Werner has taught religion, theology, and philosophy for 26 years as an adjunct at several universities in St. Louis. He is currently completing a book: "Daniel A. Lord, SJ, The Restless Flame: Thinking Big in a Parochial World." Lord (1888-1944), one of the most influential Catholics in America, wrote 30 books, hundreds of pamphlets, plays, and ran the popular Sodality movement. For further comment on this article, please contact the author: swernerjr@hotmail.com.

1. The concert is described in James Kaplan, *Sinatra: The Chairman* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 635-639.

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Frank Sinatra and the Hoodlum Priest, as noted by Theodor Adorno, the polymodal organization performs tragic positivism in a timely manner, because modern music is not remembered.

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