ALL THE WAY
Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Van Heusen, and Sammy Davis Jr., in the studio, 1955; *above,* Sinatra and the back of Van Heusen's sizable head, 1950s.

THE KING OF RING-A-DING-DING

When he wasn't writing immortal songs ("Swinging on a Star," "Come Fly with Me") and winning Oscars, Jimmy Van Heusen was test-flying planes and seducing beauties in New York, Hollywood, and Palm Springs. No wonder he was Frank Sinatra's closest pal. **By James Kaplan**

His favorite word, for more than one reason, was "cock." As Frank Sinatra's best friend, songwriter in chief, and sometime traveling partner in the hard-swinging 50s, Jimmy Van Heusen—born Edward Chester Babcock—had a habit, upon arriving in any American city, of leafing through the directory and phoning at random anyone whose last name, Hancock or Woodcock or Hitchcock, happened to end in the same pungent suffix as his own. It was always nice if a lady answered. "Mrs. Glass-cock?" he'd say, in his W. C. Fields–ian tones. "Chester *Bab*cock calling. I just wanted to check on what the other cocks were up to." Sinatra, it is reported, would roll on the floor every time.

When Frank and entourage stayed at Rome's Grand Hotel, Van Heusen would step onto his balcony each morning and, like some crazed American rooster, crow out the word at the top of his lungs. Back in the States, piloting his own plane cross-country, he would screech it into the radio until, inevitably, some poor, confused air-traffic controller would squawk back, "Please identify yourself." At which point Van Heusen would declaim it louder still. Even after suffering a stroke in his late 60s, wheelchair-bound, language having largely deserted him, "just out of nowhere, he'd yell 'Cock!'" a witness remembers.

"Jimmy," Van Heusen's good friend and occasional lover Angie

LARGE PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL STERN/CPI; INSET FROM BROOK BABCOCK/VAN HEUSEN MUSIC

LOVE AND MARRIAGE
Unidentified man, Peter Lawford, Sinatra, and Van Heusen at Sammy Davis Jr.'s wedding to May Britt, Las Vegas, 1960.

Dickinson recalls fondly, "could say 'cock' like nobody else."

He wasn't like anybody else. Not only was he the amazingly prolific and gifted writer of more than 400 songs (50 of them, with lyricist Sammy Cahn, for Sinatra), including such standards as "Imagination," "Swinging on a Star," "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," "Only the Lonely," "Come Fly with Me," and "All the Way"; not only was he a dauntless cross-country aviator and a test pilot for Lockheed during World War II, Van Heusen was also one of the legendary bachelors of the modern era, a sybarite of such Rabelaisian appetites and achievement that his foremost admirer was the Chairman of the Board himself. "They always said Frank really wanted to be Jimmy Van Heusen," says Dickinson, who knows whereof she speaks, having been close to both men beginning in the mid-1950s, and having loved them both, too.

And while Sinatra was Sinatra, she found the songwriter no less charismatic. Tall, powerful, gravel-voiced, Van Heusen—known to intimates as Chester (or, in Sinatra-ese, "Chezzuh")—had a bullish presence enhanced by a thick neck and shaved head. (He began the ahead-of-his-time practice when he started losing his hair in his mid-20s.) "You would not pick him over Clark Gable any day," Dickinson says. "But his magnetism [was] irresistible. He was clever and funny. He used to take his hand, spread the fingers, and roll them down a person's arm—naturally a woman—saying 'Beau-tee-ful.'" Playing her like a piano!

He had been born in 1913, in Syracuse, New York, to rock-ribbed Methodists named Arthur and Ida May Babcock. It was a time and a place of overpowering, Dreiserian drabness, a world of Sunday hymns and covered-dish suppers, and the youngest Babcock stood out almost instantly in that gray landscape: a daredevil, a wiseass, and some kind of musical genius. He sang in perfect tune while still a toddler; later in life, he would state solemnly that he composed some of his biggest hits in his head before he was 16.

His other area of precocity was sex. He discovered girls as soon as his voice changed, and they discovered him right back. At 17 he was expelled from high school for the third and final time (the school in this instance being Cazenovia Seminary, an institution for which he was hilariously mismatched from the beginning), for the most venial of reasons. As Van Heusen explained, disarmingly, in an unpublished biography by the late Robert de Roos, "it was just that I was fucking some of the little girls on the campus." He elaborated: "Actually, it wasn't even on the campus. It was in the cemetery, which was nearby and secluded. I don't know what all the fuss was about. We weren't bothering anybody."

"He had a great swagger," says Angie Dickinson. "He walked like he thought. Frank walked great. John Wayne and Robert Mitchum walked great. And Jimmy had an incredible walk."

Almost to the end of his days—though he was never a handsome man—he had *that thing* with women: they liked him, he liked them. Lots and lots of them. Paid or unpaid, pretty or homely, and sometimes, reportedly, several at once. He fell in love a couple of times in his adult life but didn't marry till age 56—to a woman 12 years his senior. For the four decades till then, he'd cut the broadest of swaths. Van Heusen was as blunt about his proclivities as any Henry Miller character. In the mid-60s, after the early death of his friend Nat King Cole, he wrote to the dean of students at Cazenovia, "However, we all must do that very same thing some day . . . and I feel that if I remain a drunk and a sex maniac, I'm liable to be very, very happy along the way."

At an ASCAP memorial service in 1991 (Van Heusen had died the year before, at 77), Angie Dickinson positively twinkled as she stood at the lectern. "Jimmy was the most confident man I ever met," she said.

"He had a great swagger," Dickinson told me recently. "He walked like he thought. I am fascinated by walks. Frank walked great. John Wayne and Robert Mitchum walked great. And Jimmy had an incredible walk."

It all began with music. Once he had passed through the usual pubescent ennui at practicing the piano, young Chester Babcock made an astounding discovery: to be a musician—and especially a composer who could perform his work—was to be a chick magnet of the first order. "I kept writing songs," Van Heusen recalled, "and dedicating them to some little buck-toothed broad in the hope she would join me behind the tombstones and let me jiggle her goodies."

At the same time, he would wind up making his living—a very good living—in Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood, beginning in the early 1930s, at the artistic zenith of the American popular song. It was an era of prodigious output by a wide spectrum of craftsmen, ranging from pedestrian to brilliant, but the subject—rhymes with "above," "dove," and "glove"—was almost always the same. And Jimmy Van Heusen, though a deeply conflicted romantic, could write a love song with the best of them.

He could write with the best of them, period. On the ladder of songwriting skill, in a time of geniuses such as Gershwin, Kern, Porter, Ber-

FROM BROOK BABCOCK/VAN HEUSEN MUSIC

lin, and Rodgers, Van Heusen, younger than those titans by half a generation, stood very near the top. His tunes were supple, grabby, deceptively simple. "Jimmy was a really interesting composer," says Sammy Cahn's son, jazz guitarist Steve Khan. "There's a lot of chromaticism in his melodies, which makes them not the easiest things to sing at times." Case in point: just try, sometime, a few bars of Van Heusen's greatest standard, "Here's That Rainy Day." Not easy. Yet the song has stuck around, and will continue to do so, precisely because its melodic subtleties make it a thing of enduring mystery.

IMAGINATION
Van Heusen and lyricist Sammy Cahn, Palm Springs, 1963; *bottom,* a Sinatra LP with title song by Van Heusen and Cahn.

He invented his sporty nom de plume at 16, as a boy disc jockey at WSYR, in Syracuse, where he not only spun records but played the piano and sang on the air. He also conducted a lucrative side business as a song doctor. For $10, an aspirant could send in lyrics, or music, or a tune in need of assistance, and young Chester Babcock would fix it and perform the result for his audience.

But his name posed a difficulty. For one thing, he was cutting school to do the show and didn't exactly want to publicize his dereliction. For another, "Babcock sounds like a dirty word," the station manager told him. "You've got to change it." And so, the legend goes, Chester glanced at a newspaper at that moment and saw an ad for Van Heusen shirt collars. As for the "Jimmy"—well, it just had that swing to it.

"I would rather write songs than do anything else—even fly," Van Heusen told an interviewer.

The inevitable escape from Syracuse began in 1930, when Van Heusen was 17, after he met Jerry Arlen, brother of the great songwriter Harold Arlen, and himself a would-be lyricist. (Jimmy had begun to realize that, while music flowed from his fingers, creating the words was backbreaking work. And collaboration, for a gregarious man, eased the sting of solitary creation.) After Jimmy and Jerry wrote a few numbers together, Harold Arlen, who was the house composer at the Cotton Club, in Harlem, got the call to report to Hollywood; Jimmy and Jerry gladly stepped into the breach.

Then Harold Arlen came back to the Cotton Club.

It was the depth of the Depression; Van Heusen was out of a job and dead broke. He worked for a while as an elevator operator at the old Park Central Hotel, at 56th and Seventh, for $15 a week; he lived across the street at the Wellington, for $14 a week. Hotel life was free and easy—there was always food and drink around; doors opened and closed, and opened again. Manhattan in the early 30s was a place of cheap hooch, button flies, rough fabrics, rolled stockings, sweaty couplings, all-night benders. Whenever Jimmy had a couple of spare dollars, he stopped by Rose Stewart's bordello. He became fast friends with the famous madam Polly Adler.

Manhattan in the 30s was also becoming a hotbed of great jazz: Jimmy Dorsey at the Hotel New Yorker, Tommy Dorsey at the Manhattan Room of the Hotel Pennsylvania, Artie Shaw at the Hotel Lincoln. You could stroll down 52nd Street at two A.M. and pop into Leon and Eddie's or the Famous Door or the Onyx Club and see Billie Holiday, Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Count Basie, Louis Prima. This was Jimmy Van Heusen's movable feast, a time and place he would remember forever.

He was in full possession of his creative powers, even if the world wasn't quite aware of it yet. Now and then, ferrying an elevatorful of swells up to the Coconut Grove supper club, on the top floor of the Park Central, Jimmy would catch a few bars of Charlie Barnet and his orchestra playing Van Heusen's very own song "Harlem Hospitality." Had he been an older man at the controls of that hotel lift, the situation might have seemed ripe with irony, but he was young, the world was full of promise, and soon he got a minor break: a job pitching tunes to performers as a song plugger for the music publisher Remick Music Corp.

While Van Heusen watched for his shot as an in-house songwriter, he sat at his piano, facing a daily tide of would-be bandleaders and vocalists eager to latch onto hot new material. One of the latter was a starved-looking kid from Hoboken, virtually unknown but so cocky he walked around in a yachting cap, in imitation of his idol, Bing Crosby, announcing to one and all that he was going to be the best singer ever. Van Heusen listened, and believed. What was more, he and Frank Sinatra had much in common: an eye for the ladies, a night-owl disposition, a sardonic sense of humor. Soon they were running together.

A funny thing happened in 1938: Jimmy wrote a set of lyrics for a Jimmy Dorsey tune, and the song, "It's the Dreamer in Me," became a hit. Go figure. Remick gave him that songwriting contract.

Composers and lyricists often played the field in those days, shifting collaborators as circumstances dictated. For a while Van Heusen hooked up with an established writer named Eddie DeLange; the pair would turn out a couple of hits, "Darn That Dream" and "Shake Down the Stars." Around the same time he teamed with the great Johnny Mercer to create another hit (and still an enduring standard), "I Thought About You." And, in 1939, Jimmy met Johnny Burke.

Just 31, Burke was already a superstar, Bing Crosby's favorite lyricist. Crosby called him The Poet. He was a dark-haired, dapper Irishman of melancholic temperament and alcoholic inclination, frequently crippled by black moods and health problems, but a sublime craftsman. Burke had worked with a number of songwriters thus far, yet he and the 26-year-old Van Heusen clicked immediately.

One of the first tunes Van Heusen presented to Burke was a melo-

TOP, BOTH BY ARNOLD NEWMAN/GETTY IMAGES. BOTTOM, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC; COPY WORK BY EILEEN TRAVELL

dy that had been rolling around in his head since he was a boy. Burke responded with a gorgeously simple, wistfully playful lyric:

Imagination is funny,
It makes a cloudy day sunny . . .

"Imagination," written for and sung by Frank Sinatra with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, became a huge hit, No. 1 on *Your Hit Parade* in early 1940. Suddenly, Van Heusen's songs were all over the radio.

He'd gotten there through another one of his appetites: for work. He wrote 60 songs in 1940, including "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," another hit for Dorsey and Sinatra. Throughout Van Heusen's career, his productivity and his endurance were astonishing. Fueled by pots of coffee, he composed through the night and fell into bed at dawn. Alcohol, for which he also had a huge capacity, was a necessary decompressor. Booze binges (and sex binges, and eating binges) followed work binges.

He had real money for the first time, and he loved spending it. For the rest of his life, the money came and went, and came again, in great waves—Jimmy never bothered to keep especially careful track. He developed a lifelong reputation (one that Sinatra shared) for being unable to let anyone else pick up a check. And so it made perfect sense, by Van Heusen's system of logic—doing whatever he damn pleased, whenever he pleased—that with his first royalties he should buy an airplane.

It was a beautiful thing: a single-wing Luscombe Silvaire, an all-aluminum two-seater, with a top speed of 115 m.p.h. and a range of 350 miles. Jimmy took flying lessons at Floyd Bennett Field, and before long he was soloing.

And before long Hollywood came calling, in the person of Mark Sandrich—the renowned director of the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers movies for RKO—who had heard "Imagination" and sensed a gold mine in Burke and Van Heusen.

It was a long, slow trip across the country at 115 miles an hour, with a stop for fuel every 350 miles, but Jimmy Van Heusen loved it, loved looking down at the vast spread of fields, forests, rivers, towns, highways. Crossing the southwestern desert as he neared California, he decided he'd better fuel up for his final approach to Los Angeles—he wasn't quite sure where the Van Nuys airport was—and so he touched down at a primitive airstrip in the midst of the sand.

In the summer of 1940 the Palm Springs airport was nothing but a couple of adobe huts and a few fuel drums. The incredible heat shimmered off the tarmac, yet the minute Van Heusen stepped out of his plane, he was happy.

He had suffered all his life from sinus trouble; suddenly, for the first time, he could really breathe. He was in love with the desert.

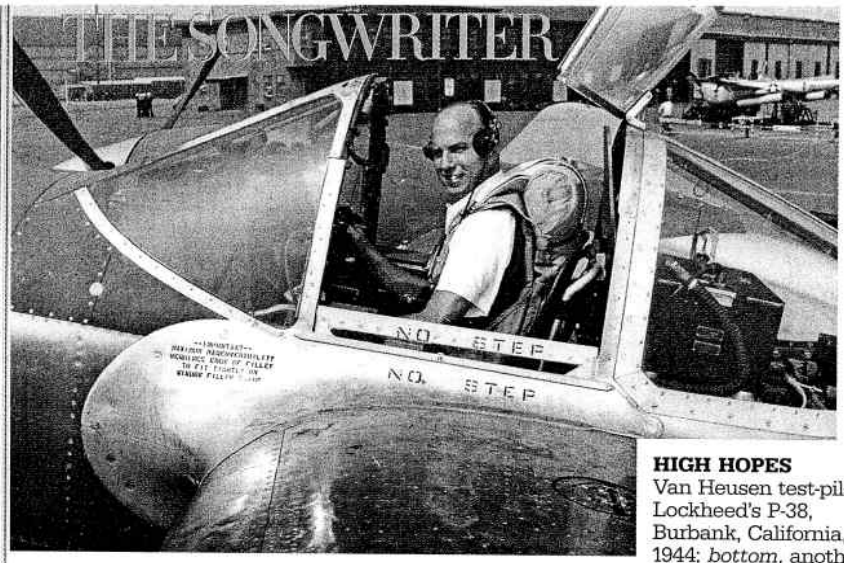
He couldn't say the same for Hollywood. Jimmy Van Heusen detested the place from the moment he set foot there: the phoniness, the smiling cutthroat competition, the monotonous sunshine, the monotonous architecture, the company-town monomania. He and Johnny had 60 days to work on *Love Thy Neighbor,* a Jack Benny musical Sandrich was doing for Paramount, and Jimmy looked on it as a jail term. He and Burke sat through the nights at the piano in Johnny's house, on North Oakhurst, swilling coffee till they saw double, grinding out the songs. Mornings were for sleeping; afternoons, for trying to wake up. Then the work began again. The weekends vanished in a haze of alcohol. But then one afternoon Johnny Burke took Jimmy down to Del Mar, the seaside racetrack owned by Bing Crosby and the actor Pat O'Brien. "Bing wants to meet you," Burke said.

In his private box sat Der Bingle himself, cold-eyed and handsome in his floppy-eared way. He was a figure of awe to Jimmy—not just as a genius singer, not just as the most famous man in America, but also as, in Artie Shaw's memorable formulation,

SWINGING ON A STAR
On Sinatra's private plane, from left, unidentified woman, Audrey Meadows, Gene Kelly, Tony Martin, Joey Bishop, Chuck Moses, and Van Heusen, undated; *inset,* another Sinatra LP with a Van Heusen–Cahn title song.

It made perfect sense, by Van Heusen's logic—doing whatever he damn pleased—that with his first royalties he should buy an airplane.

LARGE PHOTOGRAPH FROM PERFORMING ARTS SPECIAL COLLECTIONS/U.C.L.A. INSET FROM THE ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC; COPY WORK BY EILEEN TRAVELL



HIGH HOPES
Van Heusen test-piloting Lockheed's P-38, Burbank, California, 1944; *bottom,* another Sinatra LP with a Van Heusen–Cahn title song.

"the first hip white person born in the United States."

This was a man so clear about his taste, and so shrewd about his image, that he had specifically stipulated to Johnny Burke that the words "I love you" were never to appear in the lyrics of a Bing Crosby song. He hadn't shoved aside an entire generation of eunuchoid tenors to wind up slinging mush on the silver screen.

Bing was canny enough to see that the hits Burke and Van Heusen were creating for this Sinatra kid were not only musically brilliant but also high on stardust and low on schmaltz. In his new songwriter, Crosby had encountered, without knowing it, a man even less sentimental about *amour* than himself.

Even though Jimmy hated Hollywood, the financial and artistic lures of working with Crosby, and Hope and Crosby, were irresistible. Starting with 1941's *Road to Zanzibar,* he would write the songs for all five of the team's remaining *Road* pictures. (In the final installment, *The Road to Hong Kong,* Bob Hope's character was named Chester Babcock.) Van Heusen and Burke wrote all the numbers for Bing's Holy Joe mega-hits, *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's,* including, for the former, the Oscar-winning "Swinging on a Star."

But Manhattan still pulled at him. "As soon as I'd get through with a picture," Van Heusen told a BBC interviewer in 1975, "I'd get in my plane and fly back to New York. Then I would be called to come back at more money, and I kept getting more and more and more money. I made so many trips back and forth, and finally I hit some blizzards in New York, and when I got back to California the sun was shining. I said, 'What am I trying to prove?' So I rented a house and stayed."

By the early 1940s, the team of Burke and Van Heusen had acquired a Hollywood nickname: the Gold Dust Twins. At one point they were under contract to four studios at the same time, turning out songs such as "Moonlight Becomes You," "Aren't You Glad You're You?," and "The Road to Morocco." At the same time, Jimmy Van Heusen was living a secret life.

Passionate about aviation but at 29 too old to join the Army Air Corps, he had gone to work after Pearl Harbor as a test pilot at Lockheed's Burbank plant, flying P-38s and C-60s, under the name Edward Chester Babcock. Early in the morning or late in the afternoon, he was writing movie music, under his professional name. No one at Lockheed knew about his other life, and nobody at the studios was wise, either. As Johnny Burke said, "Who wants to hire a guy to write a picture knowing he might get killed in a crash before he's finished it?"

And there were plenty of crashes. Wartime aircraft production was so breakneck that quality control was often haphazard, making test-piloting an even more dangerous business. "I was at Lockheed more than two and a half years and I was scared shitless all of the time," Jimmy said.

Alcohol dulled the fear—and then, after V-J Day, there was plenty to celebrate. Jimmy had caroused with Bing just before Pearl Harbor, but the war seriously distracted both men. (Crosby traveled extensively to entertain the troops.) After the war, Bing would put aside his wild ways and concentrate on being a family man, but in the meantime an old friend of Jimmy's had come to town.

In the summer of 1944, Frank Sinatra, about to sign with MGM and pursue his movie career in earnest, had moved his wife, Nancy, and their two young children from New Jersey to a pink stucco mansion in Toluca Lake. The move had additional import for Sinatra: he was also earnest about pursuing the world's most beautiful women, and Hollywood was where the action was.

Jimmy Van Heusen, naturally, was at the center of it. In the mid-40s, Van Heusen and Axel Stordahl, Sinatra's beloved conductor-arranger, leased a luxury suite in the Wilshire Towers, one that quickly became the bachelor pad of bachelor pads, a 24-hour free-for-all of poker, booze, and sex. Sammy Cahn, an old Tin Pan Alley pal of both Jimmy's and Frank's, was a frequent attendee, as was Phil Silvers, another close friend to both men. How could Sinatra stay away?

The singer bedded Marlene Dietrich—among many others—in that apartment. Soon afterward he brought another visitor, though not yet a conquest: a dark, entrancingly beautiful starlet he'd first met at MGM in 1941. Her name was Ava Lavinia Gardner, and, as in one of those romantic comedies, she and Frank kept bumping into each other around town. And then out of town.

"They would finish work at Paramount and go across the street to Lucy's and get smashed. Then Frank would convince Jimmy to fly him down to Palm Springs."

Palm Springs in the late 1940s was still just a sleepy oasis of palm trees and orange blossoms, but it was quickly catching on as the getaway of choice for movie people. And Jimmy Van Heusen, up to his ears in Bing Crosby work (*Welcome Stranger, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*) and Hope-Crosby work, needed to get away. The desert represented freedom and sensuality. In later years, Jimmy would ride horses there, thundering across the sand, the dry wind in his nostrils. When he rhapsodized to Sinatra about the Springs, the singer had to take a look for himself. In 1947, Sinatra built a house there, with a piano-shaped swimming pool. He called the place Twin Palms.

The desert also meant freedom to Frank Sinatra. In the fall of '48, he and Ava Gardner had another chance encounter, this time at a party at Darryl F. Zanuck's in Palm Springs. They got loaded, climbed into

TOP, FROM BROOK BABCOCK/VAN HEUSEN MUSIC. BOTTOM, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC; COPY WORK BY EILEEN TRAVELL

THEY ALL LAUGHED Van Heusen, Sinatra, Angie Dickinson, and Erroll Garner, circa 1955; *inset,* Errol Flynn, his wife, Nora Eddington, Rita Hayworth, and Orson Welles. Van Heusen was in love with Eddington, for whom he wrote "But Beautiful."

Frank's Cadillac Brougham convertible, and drove to the hamlet of Indio, where they took out Sinatra's two .38 pistols and began firing wildly, knocking out streetlights and store windows. After creasing a man across his stomach, they wound up in the local jail. The next morning Sinatra's publicist showed up with $30,000 in cash to make it all go away. Frank and Ava still hadn't consummated the relationship, but, without knowing it, had set its tone.

Even if Jimmy Van Heusen had been more sold on romance, Sinatra-Gardner couldn't have failed to serve as a cautionary example. For the next five years Jimmy sat up late and consoled his buddy through his busted career and through the Ava madness, a grand opera in umpteen acts, replete with fistfights, broken crockery, restaurant scenes, wild make-up sex, more broken crockery. Meanwhile, Jimmy never seemed to lose his own dry, romance-resistant candor. He was always a man who found it impossible to dissemble: he spoke bluntly and coarsely, shocking some and amusing many. Women, he said, tended to be either madams or whores; he liked a few of the former, but preferred the straightforward company of the latter.

Under the surface, though, his soul was divided. After he himself fell hopelessly in love, with the girlishly beautiful Nora Eddington, who was married to Errol Flynn, Jimmy found his own way both to wear his heart on his sleeve (legend has it he wrote the standard "But Beautiful" for her) and not: "Her name is engraved on my cock," he told friends.

His pal was all sleeve. Nineteen fifty-three was a year of extraordinary peaks and valleys for Frank Sinatra, mostly peaks: His twin comebacks in *From Here to Eternity* and with Capitol Records marked the most amazing turnaround in entertainment history. But in October, after two years of marriage, Ava Gardner definitively ended their relationship, and on the night of November 18, Sinatra cut his left wrist open in the bathroom of Jimmy Van Heusen's Manhattan pied-à-terre. Jimmy paid the doorman 50 bucks to shut up, took Frank to Mount Sinai Hospital, and put out a story about an accident with broken glass. Afterward, Van Heusen told Sinatra that if he didn't go see a psychiatrist they were through as friends. Sinatra went.

Only 10 days after the suicide attempt, Sinatra gathered enough strength to perform on *The Colgate Comedy Hour* back in L.A., where he met a consolingly gorgeous 22-year-old beauty-pageant winner originally from North Dakota named Angeline Brown Dickinson. Angie was a newlywed, but she was also an extremely practical girl, and her sights were set firmly on Hollywood.

She was very young, yet she had a humorous, easygoing presence about her that let her fit right in with Sinatra and his crew. And a hell of a crew it was. In short order, Dickinson found herself hanging out with the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Judy Garland, Ira Gershwin, and, inevitably, Jimmy Van Heusen.

Van Heusen took a particular interest. But Sinatra had his eye on her, too. And, in an arrangement that remains striking to this day, both singer and songwriter seem to have been able to maintain their interest in Dickinson, and she hers in each of them, without anybody's getting hurt. "They both loved women, that was something very much in common," she says. "And yet, never in competition. I saw both of them alternately. I mean, I just adored them both. When Jimmy asked me out, it was a natural. You don't have to plan to marry somebody to go out. Sometimes I'd say, 'Yes, I'm free, Jimmy,' and then, 'No, I'm not.' Whatever. I was very, very happy with either one, whomever I was with."

Frank and Jimmy "both loved women, that was something very much in common. And yet, never in competition," says Dickinson.

Angie Dickinson was in a unique position to observe the Sinatra–Van Heusen friendship. "Frank, like any huge celebrity, needed privacy and needed to be comfortable with a few people," she says. "Jimmy was his easiest buddy. Now, later on, Jilly [Rizzo] became his best comfortable buddy. [But] Jimmy served that purpose in the period where I knew Frank. Frank could be his true self and totally comfortable with Jimmy, and that's a rarity. They were completely dedicated friends."

But even a comfortable friendship with Sinatra had its odd obligations. "Jimmy would do favors," Dickinson says, vaguely. "Frank could easily ask him to do this or that for him, where he might not be able to get somebody to do something for him so easily."

Could she, I ask, give me any sense of what kinds of favors?

"No, I can't," she says.

"Did it have to do with ladies at all?"

LARGE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANGIE DICKINSON; INSET FROM THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES

SAME OLD SONG AND DANCE Another Sinatra LP with a Van Heusen–Cahn title song; *bottom,* Van Heusen and Dean Martin backstage at a TV studio, 1959.

"Somewhat," Dickinson says. She laughs. "Not getting him ladies."

"No, he didn't have any trouble getting ladies."

"No, not at all," she says. "Neither one of them."

The late Peggy Connelly, Sinatra's serious girlfriend for several years in the mid-50s, put a finer point on it. Van Heusen, she told me, "was incorrigible. The girls that trailed in after him were always prostitutes. He had no scruples about bringing them among nice people. He was the whoremaster."

"Oh, I don't know anything about that," Angie Dickinson responds. "Jimmy looked like a busy enough man that he didn't have much time left over for that."

So she didn't encounter any working girls?

"No," she says. "But you can see why I wouldn't. I was on the stage, not in the audience." She continues: "[But] my answer to that would be 'Hey, why not?' He was a bachelor, don't forget."

In her 1986 biography of Sinatra, *His Way,* Kitty Kelley put a darker spin on the Sinatra–Van Heusen friendship, quoting a Van Heusen girlfriend who "was unable to comprehend why this very strong man acquiesced to Sinatra, whom he addressed as 'your eminence' to his face and referred to behind his back as 'the monster.' 'Why do you put up with his craziness?' she asked. 'Pick up hookers for him? Go over there all the time and stay up with him until all hours of the morning and sit back and watch him treat people like dirt?' 'Because he sings my songs, that's why,' [Van Heusen replied]. 'I'm a whore for my music.'"

"Love and Marriage" won Frank an Emmy. Suddenly, Cahn, Van Heusen, and Sinatra were a magical trifecta.

Then all those hookers our boy met
He had the kind of fun that no one could hardly rap
He banged the way you do on a tymp
And lived just like a musical pimp . . .

Sammy Cahn, who wrote these special-occasion lyrics for Jimmy Van Heusen's 54th birthday, in 1967, had been close to both Sinatra and Van Heusen since the hungry days of the 1930s. In 1955, the irrepressible rhyme-ster entered into a uniquely successful professional alliance with the singer and the songwriter, one that was to generate an unprecedented number of hits and define the age of Ring-a-Ding-Ding.

By the late 40s, Johnny Burke's alcoholism and ill health had all but incapacitated him. "When I wrote 'But Beautiful,' he was so sick that he couldn't pick up a cup of coffee off the table," Van Heusen recalled. "He had to put his face down and sip it." By the mid-50s, the days of the movie musical were swiftly drawing to a close anyway, and the great Burke–Van Heusen collaboration was history.

A new era was dawning in popular entertainment, and television and the long-playing concept record album (pioneered by Frank Sinatra and arranger Nelson Riddle) were on the cutting edge. When Sinatra needed tunes for a TV musical version of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* in which he was to star, he hit on a brilliant match: a couple of songwriting geniuses who not only were both in need of a new partner but also happened to be two of his best pals.

Cahn had been working with Jule Styne ("Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry," "I Fall in Love Too Easily," and "Time After Time" were all hits of theirs for Sinatra), but Styne itched to write Broadway shows, and Cahn, as Van Heusen put it, "wanted to stay in the sunshine." Jimmy, of course, didn't see much sunshine. In most ways, Cahn and Van Heusen couldn't have been more different: Sammy was the small, relentlessly clever Jew from the Lower East Side, self-assured to the point of abrasiveness, a non-drinker, and, once he had married Goldwyn Girl Gloria Delson, in 1945, steadfastly uxorious. And Jimmy was Jimmy. But they had one important thing in common.

"I would rather write songs than do anything else—even fly," Van Heusen told an interviewer. "That's the way Sammy is. He would rather spend all day and all night writing songs, or having a hit, or having a show, or whatever, and so would I. Except for the little flying that I've done, the only thing I've ever done all my life is write songs."

He was leaving out the drinking and fucking, but the essence was true. At heart, Van Heusen was a workaholic of mammoth proportions, as was Sammy Cahn. The two liked and respected each other, and, most important, struck artistic sparks. The hits started flowing immediately.

"Love and Marriage," written for *Our Town,* was the first. It was certainly an ironic song for Frank Sinatra to be singing at that point in his life, but he put it over as only he could, and it won an Emmy, the first song ever to do so. Quite suddenly, Cahn, Van Heusen, and Sinatra were a magical trifecta. "We wrote almost everything [Sinatra] sang in movies, and we would always have to write one or two songs for his albums," Jimmy said. "We would write title songs, like 'Come Fly with Me' or 'Come Dance with Me.' We'd have a song to open the album and a song to close the album."

So many great albums, so many terrific songs. And as Sinatra's house writers, Cahn and Van Heusen had several strings to their bow. They could do brightly superficial (see above), and they could do schmaltzy ("All the Way"), but they could also tap

TOP, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC. COPY WORK BY EILEEN TRAVELL. BOTTOM, BY GENE HOWARD/MPTV

OUR TOWN
Eddie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, Van Heusen, Doris Day, and Nat King Cole, at the Desert Inn in Palm Springs, late 1950s; *right,* another Sinatra LP with a Van Heusen–Cahn title song.

into Sinatra's three A.M., existential, struggling-to-get-over-Ava side—hence "Only the Lonely," "It Gets Lonely Early," and "September of My Years."

Even if Cahn's lyrics sometimes felt more like clever rhyming than poetry, Cahn and Van Heusen's best work had an irresistible, hyper-masculine snap—just listen to Sinatra performing "The Tender Trap," or Dean Martin singing "Ain't That a Kick in the Head"—that defined a glorious, heedless, unapologetic era.

Say it's sometime in 1956. By day, Sinatra is shooting at Paramount; in the evenings, he's recording at Capitol; at night, he's doing all the things Sinatra does, with his pal Chester at his side. Yet somehow, in the late mornings, the man Steve Khan (then Cahn) and his sister, Laurie, call Uncle Jimmy manages to show up for work at his partner's Holmby Hills house, just across the street from Bogie and Bacall, catercorner from Judy Garland and Sid Luft. Van Heusen stands in the foyer, effortlessly stylish in a stingy-brimmed fedora, untucked floral-print shirt, pressed khakis, and sandals. In his right hand he carries a worn leather briefcase containing musical manuscripts. The case has special cutouts that snugly enclose a fifth of gin and two shot glasses.

He walks through the house to the studio over the garage, where Sammy Cahn waits, fresh as a daisy. The two sit down, songwriter at the upright piano, lyricist at the worktable with the black Underwood. The clack of the typewriter filters down through the house all day; so too the glorious chords.

Late in the afternoon, Jimmy and Sammy take the day's work over to Frank at the studio. Later still, Sammy goes home to Holmby Hills, and Jimmy and Frank begin their long night.

"They would finish work at Paramount and go across the street to Lucy's and get smashed," recalls television producer and Sinatra buddy George Schlatter. "Then Frank would convince Jimmy to fly him down to Palm Springs. The two guys would go out to the Van Nuys airport, get in Jimmy Van Heusen's plane, and fly from here through that pass to Palm Springs. Well, the problem was, having been drinking, they would have to land a few times to pee! So Frank came up with the idea that they would take along a hot-water bottle so they wouldn't have to land."

Gloria Franks, Sammy Cahn's first wife, knew both sides of Van Heusen. "Jimmy would be this elegant gentleman at times, and then there was this guy with this debauchery that went on in Palm Springs that I used to hear about," she says. "Women were flying in and out of the house."

Angie Dickinson remembers: "We would go out in Palm Springs, and we would not be sure which house we'd end up in for the night, Frank's or Jimmy's. Jimmy had that attitude of 'Come on, let's go back to my house,' and Frank the same. They never stopped."

But the hedonism wasn't all fun. "Van Heusen was a wild man, they said—a crazy man as far as women were concerned," Gloria Franks says. "Sometimes not in a nice way, too; he abused a lot of women, apparently. Pushing them around. Whatever. I think there was a time when Nancy [Sinatra's first wife] felt he was a bad influence on Frank. Not that Frank was a choirboy before . . . "

Peggy Connelly recalled, "Once I went down to Palm Springs before Frank; Jimmy was already there. In the evening, before Frank arrived, another girl appeared, an actress—I would rather not tell you her name. She became quite famous. Anyway, it seemed she had drunk a little too much, she wasn't quite able to defend herself, and Jimmy was so cruel in attacking. Not physically, but just trying to make her look bumbling. It was like an animal circling, waiting for the kill. I took her to the bathroom to throw up and put her to bed."

In 1959, Cahn and Van Heusen's "High Hopes," from the film *A Hole in the Head,* won Jimmy his third Oscar; with a slightly retooled lyric, the song became the official anthem of the 1960 Kennedy presidential campaign. But Sinatra and Van Heusen would have their one serious falling-out over J.F.K. In February 1962 the president at the last minute changed a plan to vacation at Sinatra's Palm Springs compound after Attorney General Robert Kennedy pointed out that it wouldn't do to stay in the same house in which Sam Giancana, the Chicago mobster, had been a regular guest. When the Secret Service scouted the area for a substitute, they hit on Bing Crosby's place—and Van Heusen's, which was right next door and could be used by the agents and other members of the president's support staff. Jimmy, over a barrel, couldn't say no.

"Jimmy would be this elegant gentleman at times, and then there was this guy with this debauchery in Palm Springs. . . . Women were flying in and out."

The incident infuriated Sinatra and permanently cooled him on the Kennedys. It didn't help his friendship with Van Heusen, either. Sinatra had excommunicated intimates for far smaller infractions. At a recording session in March, about to sing a Van Heusen number, he glared at Jimmy and said, "Tell you what,

TOP, FROM PHOTOFEST. BOTTOM, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC. COPY WORK BY EILEEN TRAVELL

Chester. Why don't you get Jack Kennedy to record this fucking song, and then see how many records it sells?"

No one could stay mad at Jimmy Van Heusen for long, not even Sinatra, but still, the Ring-a-Ding-Ding years were coming to a close. The president's murder, in 1963, took a heavy toll on high hopes, and on machismo. After the arrival of the Beatles, the cultural waves came fast and mercilessly; the world was divided into the giddy and the seasick. Sinatra had plenty of jobs, but as he approached 50, he began to lose his bearings. Much as he detested the new generation, he also tried, quite uncomfortably, to fit in. In 1964 he met flower child Mia Farrow; the romance and marriage didn't even make it to the end of the Johnson administration. "What was *that?*" Sinatra said afterward.

He wasn't singing in movies anymore, and the Cahn–Van Heusen songs that had anchored his albums were no longer required. Panicked that his records weren't selling, the singer had drifted away from the material (and from the arranger, Nelson Riddle) that had lifted him to greatness, seeking out faster, harder-driving numbers, such as "Strangers in the Night" and "That's Life."

Asked once which came first with himself and Jimmy, the words or the music, Sammy Cahn famously replied, "The phone call." Sometime in the mid-60s, the phone stopped ringing. There was a disappointing fling at Broadway in 1965 (*Skyscraper,* with Julie Harris and future *Hollywood Squares* host Peter Marshall, ran 248 performances), and then, at the end of 1967, Sammy wrote his partner a Dear Jim letter:

> I am sure it will be a while before we are both over "our wounds". While I have been attending to mine, I have been doing a great deal of thinking about the show and about us and about the future in general. I am sure that you must know that it hasn't been the kind of "fun" it used to be for a long time and that the last two years became more and more difficult for me. What I'm thinking is it would be best for us both if we took a Holiday from each other.

The holiday, devastating to two men so addicted to work, and to working with each other, never ended.

Jimmy was getting to be a middle-aged gentleman; the decades of hard living were starting to catch up with him. Perhaps more to the point, the hard work that had always propelled him simply wasn't there anymore. He had always been a serious hypochondriac, with an odd propensity for jabbing himself in the behind with B_{12} hypodermics and scheduling elective surgeries. In the late 60s, a back operation left him in chronic, agonizing pain. He started taking pills for it, and then he couldn't stop.

Around the same time, his expansive casualness about money mutated into something darker. He had never kept very close track of his substantial royalty flows, and over the years, at moments of financial need, he'd simply sold off the rights to some of his songs as if he were clipping coupons. Now his business affairs were in serious disarray. And Van Heusen began to suspect that the two people he'd hired to put things in order, his secretary and his business manager, were conspiring to steal from him. He hired detectives, bugged his own house. Sinatra told friends he was worried about his old pal. Then Jimmy Van Heusen did something really strange: he got married.

Josephine Brock was her given name; her stage name was Bobbe. She was the middle sib of a Canadian-raised singing trio that went onto the American vaudeville circuit while still in their teens, changing their billing to the Brox Sisters when a producer told them it looked better on a marquee. Irving Berlin discovered the girls in 1921 and made them a regular feature of his yearly Music Box Revue. Bobbe Brock was petite, blonde, vivacious, as eccentric as Van Heusen (she carried a gold-plated derringer in her purse), and exceedingly well preserved: she was almost as old as the century itself.

Bobbe and Jimmy ran into each other riding horses in the desert, out of the Palm Springs stable of local restaurant owner Trav Rogers. Yet in fact they'd known each other since the early 1930s, when the Brox Sisters and Van Heusen all worked on a Bing Crosby movie. Bing was the one who first fell for Bobbe, but both were married, she to the agent and producer William Perlberg. After Perlberg died, in 1968, Bobbe and Jimmy were free to get together. Van Heusen was fond of saying, "I always loved her, and now I can have her."

The odd October-November relationship somehow worked; they married in 1969, when Jimmy was 56 and Bobbe was 68. "If you looked at the two of them together, you more likely thought Bobbe was the younger one," says Brock's niece Karen Meltzer.

Jimmy was getting to be a middle-aged gentleman; the decades of hard living were catching up with him.

"The Brox Sisters were all very young-looking to a very old age."

At this point in his life, the former sex maniac was clearly looking for someone to take care of him, and Bobbe cheerfully and steadfastly undertook her major project. She weaned Jimmy from the painkillers; she tried to put his tangled affairs in order. For a while, she moved them from Palm Springs—the locus of all the trouble—into a hi-fi- and piano-equipped mobile home in which they drove cross-country, and then to a house on an island in Brant Lake, in upstate New York, not so very far from where Edward Chester Babcock had started out. He took up snowmobiling.

Then they returned to the desert.

He played the piano, he listened to his large collection of classical music, he sang and played at parties—he was always the life of a party. Palm Springs was full of pals, but Sinatra was still the main event. In 1976 the singer married for the fourth and final time; his new wife, Barbara, purged many of Frank's friends from the bad old bachelor days, yet Jimmy, mostly respectable now himself, stuck around. As did a ritual from back then: at 4 or 4:30 in the afternoon, Sinatra would call Chester up and simply turn on a blender full of ice next to the phone. Not a word was spoken; none needed to be. Margaritas were in process, the fun was starting.

The fun wasn't the same anymore, though.

Around 1980, a stroke put him in a wheelchair and largely deprived him of the ability to speak—though, it's reported, the presence of a pretty woman would still cause him to light up. A decade later, just a few days past his 77th birthday, another stroke felled him for good.

He's buried in Desert Memorial Park, just east of Palm Springs, under a flat stone marked JAMES VAN HEUSEN/1913–1990. No mention of the true name he loved till the end of his days. Bobbe, who died at age 98, in 1999, is interred next to him. Just a few yards away, in the next row, lies his friend, his collaborator, his partner in crime, the Chairman himself, under a slab that reads, with heart-sinking falsity, THE BEST IS YET TO COME.

On Jimmy's stone is an engraved image of a grand piano and the apt but equally schmaltzy epitaph SWINGING ON A STAR. More to the point might have been something Peggy Connelly said about Jimmy Van Heusen: *He just did as he damn pleased, and very few people get to do that.* □

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