

A Tale of Two Vagabonds

There's the motel and there's the nightclub. So where did Sinatra hang out?

By Terence Cantarella
BT Contributor

On a sweltering summer night in 1954, Frank Sinatra swaggers into a plush nightclub on Biscayne Boulevard. America is booming. Miami is its ritzy, neon-lit playground. And Sinatra has the world on a string.

He struts over to the bar, where his pals Dean Martin, Jackie Gleason, and Arthur Godfrey are drinking with tanned showgirls. He orders a Jack on the rocks, loosens his silk tie, and settles in to watch the stage show. Several drinks later, he's onstage too, snapping his fingers and belting out his latest hits with the house band. It's Miami in the Fabulous 50s, and impromptu performances by Ol' Blue Eyes are part of what gives the town its glamour.

Where those legendary performances took place, however, has been misreported and wrongly promoted in the decades since Sinatra and his cuff-linked crew left the scene.

For many years, local lore — abetted by newspaper and magazine reports — maintained that one of Sinatra's favorite late-night hangouts was the Vagabond Motel at 7301 Biscayne Blvd. Still standing today, the Vagabond is considered the jewel of the Boulevard. With its glamorous, quirky Miami Modern (MiMo) style, the motel has been featured in books, received historic designation by the City of Miami, and has been nominated for awards by the American Institute of Architects.

The Vagabond was designed by one of the top architects of his time in the Miami area, Barnet Robert Swartburg, who also designed the Delano Hotel in Miami Beach. Built in 1953, the whimsical, tropical feel of the Vagabond was meant to lure vacationing



The motel was a magnet for vacationers who took advantage of the post-war automobile boom.

families as they drove into town looking for a fun place to stay. Like other flashy motels on the Boulevard, the Vagabond had a pool, restaurant, and cocktail lounge.

It's in *that* lounge Sinatra is said to have spent many a wild night.

Former Vagabond owner Eric Silverman often touted the motel's supposed star-studded past. "This place was a retreat for guys like Sinatra, away from the spotlight of Miami Beach," he told the *BT* in 2008. "It's not like there was an announcement that he was here. He'd come to hang out at the bar and maybe get up and do a number. It was more of a private thing."

At his office in the motel, Silverman was fond of pulling out a collection of photos purportedly showing celebrities Jackie Gleason and Arthur Godfrey performing together on the motel's stage in the 1950s. Silverman, who hoped to reinvent the now-derelict Vagabond, ran out of money and abandoned the property in 2010.



New owner Avra Jain wants to restore the Vagabond to its former glory.



Opening in 1953, the motel featured the latest in design and amenities.

Local newspapers promoted the legend, too. In 2006 the weekly *SunPost* stated that the "Vagabond is said to have attracted popular performers of the time, such as Frank Sinatra." In 2007 the *Miami Herald* said the motel "is rumored to have once been the spot where Sinatra and friends hobnobbed with showgirls." That same year, the *Atlantic Monthly* claimed that "in its heyday, the

Vagabond had a raffish, Rat Pack charm," and that Jackie Gleason and Dean Martin performed in its bar.

Sadly, those tales are all fiction.

While Sinatra and his friends did indeed imbibe on Biscayne Boulevard, they didn't do it at the Vagabond Motel.

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DB Lewis Architects

Courtesy of Larry Wiggins



A fleeting scene in the documentary *Miami Beach: Fabulous 50s* shows The Vagabonds Club with the Freedom Tower behind it.



Jackie Gleason and Arthur Godfrey cutting up with the Vagabonds at their club.

Vagabonds

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Prominent local historian Seth Bramson says there’s no documentation to support the illustrious claims: “I doubt very seriously that Sinatra, Gleason, or anybody else hung out at the motel. There would’ve been no reason for them to.”

Antolin Carbonell is a retired architect and historian who leads walking tours of the MiMo Historic District. They start at the Vagabond Motel. He

doesn’t believe the stories either: “I’ve lived within walking distance of the Vagabond Motel since 1963. It was just one of the best of a series of middle-class motels that competed for clients on price and location. It was never a glamorous destination.”

Miami attorney Michael Tarre knows for a fact the stories are false. He’s the nephew of Sidney Goldberg, who built the Vagabond. Tarre spent much of his youth around the motel in the 1950s and 1960s, and even worked



The Vagabonds opened a club on Biscayne Boulevard and named it for themselves.

as lifeguard at the Vagabond’s pool as a teenager. His father was one of the investors. “I can assure you,” he says, “Frank Sinatra never showed up at the motel. There was no place to perform.”

The Vagabond’s in-house restaurant, he says, was really just a small coffee shop that sat no more than 12 people. Guests stopped in for breakfast and lunch, but usually dined elsewhere on the Boulevard at night. The adjacent cocktail lounge was so small “you could barely fit a case of Budweiser in there.” And there certainly was no stage.

The Vagabond’s floor plans from 1953, on file with the City of Miami Building Department, reflect those descriptions. They show a roughly 900-square-foot coffee shop and tiny, 300-square-foot bar/lounge — much too small for any kind of entertainment.

How, then, did a casual, middle-class family motel hijack history? And where did Sinatra and his pals really carouse after hours when they ventured across the causeway from Miami Beach?

The answer lies in a downtown parking lot.

Two years before the Vagabond Motel was built, another place with a similar name — the Vagabonds Club — opened its doors at 732 Biscayne Blvd., a block north of the Freedom Tower. A 300-seat supper club with a lounge, stage, and full kitchen, the Vagabonds Club was named after its owners, a musical-comedy quartet called The Vagabonds.

The Vagabonds achieved stardom in the early 1950s after appearing on the popular TV show *Arthur Godfrey and Friends*. Their club quickly became one of the hottest spots in town.

Sam Youngmans was a friend of The Vagabonds and regularly hung out at the club. “Many celebs came to the club,” he recalls. “It was a very popular place in its time. The last act to perform there before they shut it down was Tony Bennett. They sold out every night. I was their stage manager for that show.”

Another veteran of the Vagabonds Club is 95-year-old Shorecrest resident Ann Carlton, who performed there briefly with her late husband. She sang and played accordion. He sang and played violin. “A lot of people from showbiz like Jackie Gleason came in there,” she says. “Frank Sinatra, Victor Borge. They’d sometimes come in and perform free for the Vagabonds because they wanted them to be successful. It was really a wonderful place.”

Confusingly, Carlton says she performed at the motel, not the club. Her descriptions, however, clearly point to the downtown club. A recent documentary about the era, *Miami Beach: Fabulous 50s* (produced by Pavlov Pictures), shows a brief clip of the neon-lit club that fits her descriptions, too.

That same kind of confusion led to a lawsuit half a century ago. “The

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Vagabonds sued us for using the name,” says Michael Tarre about his family’s motel. “But the name Vagabond isn’t trademarked. In the end, we entered into an agreement saying the motel won’t go into the nightclub business and the nightclub won’t go into the motel business.”

The band eventually sold the club in 1956. It operated as a strip club with the same name until the Miami City

Commission revoked its license in 1960. It’s not clear when the structure was demolished, but the site is now an asphalt parking lot.

A casual researcher today might still confuse the two Vagabonds, as did former motel owner Eric Silverman, whose celebrity photos (downloaded from the Internet) were clearly taken at the downtown club, not the motel. Miami’s dearth of historical records and a relatively young preservation movement make researching the past even more challenging.

But while the Vagabond Club has fallen to the wrecking ball, the boarded-up Vagabond Motel now has another shot at glory. Developer Avra Jain recently signed a contract to buy the place. She has hired architect Dean Lewis with plans to restore it to its mid-century splendor and attract well-heeled guests.

That prospect makes former Vagabond lifeguard Michael Tarre happy: “I’m glad to see Uncle Sid’s dream project revived.” Uncle Sid, he says, was a pharmacist and liquor store owner from Chicago who managed to

get his dream motel designed by one of the greatest architects to work in South Florida.

The motel has survived Miami’s ritzy decades and sleazy ones, has hosted families and prostitutes, has witnessed festivities and murders, has been dressed up and boarded up. It’s now recognized as an architectural masterpiece worthy of a multi-million-dollar renovation.

With a history like that, who needs Sinatra?

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

Election

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are challenged by the disconnect that reflects a lack of leadership. I’m the people’s candidate. Fundamentally, much of my work is centered around organizing people, and I see myself as a community builder.”

Says Hardemon: “When Edmonson voted for the Marlins stadium deal, she didn’t even look at the financials. As a lawyer, that’s the equivalent of failing to take a deposition before trial.”

Of Austin, he says: “What separates me from Alison is my training, with an

MBA and a law degree. I can understand complex business matters and am trained in advocacy. Public service has always been part of my life, and I’ve come home to make a difference.” (Austin, at age 52, is pursuing an executive master’s degree at the University of Miami in community organizing and social change.)

Says Moreno as Braman’s pollster: “Edmonson, unlike some of the others like Moss, for example, does not have an overwhelming base. There is a lot of discontent with her performance on the commission. She is not as actively engaged with her constituency as her

predecessor Barbara Jordan was.”

But Sean Foreman, an associate professor of political science at Barry University, and a local political junkie, does not count Edmonson out. “Audrey Edmonson has lots of money and a strong core of backers,” says Foreman. “She hasn’t been a county commissioner that long, so she’s less susceptible to Braman’s line of attack than the others. She’s one of the relative newbies. There’s no cloud of corruption over her, no investigation.”

Foreman’s verdict on Braman: “I give him credit for keeping the sustained effort toward county reform. After the recall

of Alvarez and Seijas, he had to follow through with changes either to the charter or to the candidates. Without Braman’s leadership, we wouldn’t have this much emphasis on county charter reform.

“How much of his money, his time, and his reputation does he want to spend on this? What if all four incumbents win, or three out of four? Is it a sign the county commission is so impenetrable that it can’t be taken down by a reform-minded billionaire? Nobody else is ready to pick up that mantle.”

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