

# When worlds collide – Sinatra fans, Clash fans share the street in 1984



Concertgoers heading to see Frank Sinatra at the Milwaukee Arena share sidewalk space on W. Kilbourn Ave. with a fan of the influential punk band the Clash, who were playing at the Auditorium at the same time on May 14, 1984. Credit: Journal Sentinel files

By *Chris Foran of the Journal Sentinel*

On a spring night in Milwaukee, the pop-music equivalents of matter and antimatter met — without explosion or incident.

On May 14, 1984, Frank Sinatra, the 69-year-old Chairman of the Board, was making a rare Milwaukee concert appearance before 10,728 at the Arena (now UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena). Next door, the British punk legends the Clash, were making a rare stop in town, too, playing before 3,625 fans at the Auditorium (now the Milwaukee Theatre).

As crowds made their way downtown to see the two very different shows, old school met new school. Milwaukee Journal photographer Richard Brodzeller captured it in a photo that ran on the front page of the May 15, 1984, Journal; the caption started with, "When Worlds Collide..."

In a Journal story that accompanied the photo, Gerald Kloss talked with an Oak Creek woman who was seeing Sinatra for the second time — the first time was at the Riverside Theater more than 40 years earlier.

Back then, the woman, then a 13-year-old bobby-soxer, and two of her friends got into the show for 35 cents. (They sat through it four times; the program also included a movie, cartoon and a newsreel.) Tickets for the show she saw at the Arena in 1984 were a then-steep \$25.

Although she loved the show the second time around, she told Kloss, "I wish he'd sung at least one of his old songs from the '40s. Like 'All or Nothing at All' or 'I'll Never Smile Again' or 'This Love of Mine.' The things he sang at the Riverside, you know."

As Milwaukee Sentinel reviewer Jim Higgins pointed out in his Page 1 review in the May 15 edition, the Sinatra she saw wasn't the same guy as the 1940s crooner.

"When Frank Sinatra first fought for the big purses, he was like Sugar Ray Robinson — daring and cat-quick," Higgins wrote. "Now he's like Jake LaMotta — slower, perhaps, but a brawler who could pound his way through a bank vault. The styles, though, have never mattered because the result is always the same. The audience gets knocked out, and Sinatra is declared champion."

The Clash's show that night was similarly a bit of a slugfest, wrote Terry Higgins, Jim's brother, who reviewed the Clash's concert for the Sentinel.

"The band's performance Monday at the Auditorium was a ragged but passionate defense of some pretty strong beliefs, and (was) notice that the group is not yet ready to explode under internal instability."

By the time of the Auditorium show, the band that had set the standard for smart, aggressive and still tuneful punk music was in disarray. By 1984, singer-guitarist Joe Strummer was without the band's other key driving forces, drummer Topper Headon and singer and co-songwriter Mick Jones, and struggling to retain its focus.

But the concert showed there was still enough passion, especially from Strummer, to keep the music relevant and engaging.

"The Clash has been accused of selling out by moderating and expanding its sound," Terry Higgins wrote. "But the concert was proof the group is still as involved and committed as ever."

Journal critic Divina Infusino agreed: "...Generally, the Clash gave the kind of convincing and heartfelt performance that will keep it not only alive, but also growing."

It didn't work out that way, however. The Clash never played in Milwaukee again, at least according to the list of gigs on the band's official website; the band broke up for good in 1985, and Strummer, after a vital diverse solo career, died of heart failure in 2002 at age 50. The Clash was elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003.

Sinatra, however, did play Milwaukee again, including a benefit concert for the Italian Community Center at the Marcus Amphitheater in 1990 — with Don Rickles and Pia Zadora opening — and a show at the Bradley Center in 1992.

But the voice that got him there continued to fade. The signs were abundant in the 1984 concert; in her review, Journal reviewer Jackie Looahuis noted that pitch trouble diminished the impact of many of his signature tunes, including "Theme From New York, New York."

But even then, Looahuis wrote, "Sinatra could dip into the deepest well of his range on one number and then crack halfway there on the next song. A note he missed in one verse he scooped up in his first in the next."

Sinatra continued performing, and punching for several more years. He died in 1998, at age 82.

As Jim Higgins pointed out in his Sinatra review, maybe those two worlds had more in common after all.

"In spite of what people may have heard, the Clash and Sinatra aren't all that different," Jim Higgins wrote.

"The Clash have billed themselves as 'the only band that matters.' Sinatra has always felt that way, too — about himself."

## ABOUT THIS FEATURE

The Journal Sentinel's photo archives are testament to the idea that the past is never even past. If you dig deeply enough, you can find images from Milwaukee and Wisconsin's recent history that echo today.

Each Wednesday, Our Back Pages will dip into those archives, sharing photos and stories from the past that connect, reflect and sometimes contradict the Milwaukee we know today — or at least give us something to smile about.

Special thanks and kudos go to senior multimedia designer Bill Schulz for finding many of the gems in the Journal Sentinel photo archives.

**About Chris Foran**

Chris Foran is an assistant entertainment editor, overseeing the Tap Weekend, Tap Daily, Good Morning and TV Cue sections. He also writes about movies, books, pop culture and fun stuff to do in Milwaukee.

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