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## **Similar hats on similar heads: uniformity and alienation at the Rat Pack's Summit**

### **Conference of Cool**

#### **Abstract**

This article considers the nightclub shows of the Rat Pack, focussing particularly on the Summit performances at the Sands Hotel, Las Vegas, in 1960. Featuring Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop, these shows encompassed musical, comic and dance routines, drawing on the experiences each member had in live vaudeville performance. The discussion outlines these individual histories, and draws attention to a shared fascination with impersonation, which forms an explicit and implicit part of the act, as the performers' stage personas are already emulatory. In addition to the influence of vaudeville, the construction of the Rat Pack also draws on the structures of blackface minstrelsy, with the interactions of the five members being patterned on a fluid variant of the interlocutor-endmen relationships. The interweaving of these influences and performance styles underpins a dominant concern of the troupe, as the comic material frequently negotiates the racial, national and religious identities of the individual performers. In particular, this deals with their shared status of having immigrant ancestry, a status which I term as being 'hyphenated-American', suspended between historical, public and aspirational identities.

#### **Introduction**

The Rat Pack remains a somewhat amorphous collection of associates in the popular imagination, in terms of its constituent members and their range of activities. Richard Gehman's contemporaneous book *Sinatra and his Rat Pack* (1961) notes that a tendency to mythologise has always accompanied the group in the American national psyche:

All the members of this group vehemently deny that it exists. Yet it does, if only in the minds of those who are not in it, for we in this foolish yet good-intentioned country tend to think in terms of groups. We feel troubled when we cannot think of all of us together putting similar hats on similar heads.

(Gehman 1961, p.36)

He considers the Rat Pack to be primarily a social clique centred on Frank Sinatra that, invested with the glamour, wealth and power of Hollywood, privately indulges in hedonistic entertainment. Bill Zehme (1997 p.56), alternatively, identifies ‘the quintessential membership’ as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford, with all other associates as satellites.<sup>1</sup>

Sinatra instigated a project in which this select group assembled in Las Vegas between 26 January and 16 February 1960 to make the film *Ocean's 11* (1960). He termed this gathering ‘a “summit conference of cool”’ (Quirk and Schoell 1999, p.182).<sup>2</sup> At the close of the film, the fictional gangsters of the story amble dolefully away from Las Vegas having accidentally cremated the loot from their heist. Gradually emerging in the background is the iconic marquee for the Sands Hotel, which lists Sinatra, Martin, Davis, Lawford and Bishop as the resident entertainment, appearing in its nightclub space The Copa Room. This sequence of live performances ran alongside the filming of *Ocean's 11* and was continued later in 1960 at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami. The act was largely organised around the five central performers, in various combinations, engaging in an apparently chaotic programme of songs, dances, comic routines and improvisation. It is these nightclub performances, often abbreviated as The Summit, which most emphatically engage the core membership of the Rat Pack.

Comparatively little attention has been paid to these live shows. Levy and Gehman are more concerned with the personal, professional and social biographies of the players. Quirk and Schoell also cover these, while paying close attention to films featuring members of the Rat Pack. Towards the end of their book there is a suggestion why this might be the case, acknowledging only two points of access to the live performances: the Museum of Television and Radio's event *The Rat Pack Captured* in 1997, which screened a video recording of a 1965 concert at Kiel Opera House, St. Louis; and unreleased audio recordings of 1963 performances in Chicago. These recordings are now in the public domain (Dean Martin et al., [1963, 1965] 2003, [1963] 2008; Frank Sinatra et al., [1963] 2011) but are limited as reference points since they cover later performances that only feature Frank, Dean and Sammy of the original quintet. The existence of these later performances and recordings, combined with the comparatively greater fame of these three performers, has given rise to another constituent membership of the Rat Pack which is limited to this trio.

Amateur camera recordings of The Summit meetings featuring all five performers, however, are also now available and open up further avenues for analysis.<sup>3</sup> These recordings, filmed on separate nights, offer a valuable insight into the construction of the act, the nature of the material and the interaction between members. While this demonstrates considerable variation between performances, it also reveals points of consistency. In the sections below, central principles of this structure will be addressed to start to identify the workings and significance of the Rat Pack.

Beginning with a sole focus on the recordings of The Summit performances in Las Vegas, the discussion will expand to cover the later performances with the reduced membership of Davis, Martin and Sinatra. The analysis draws attention to factors that unite these performers, the similar hats that sit on similar heads. The most evident of these is, perhaps, the

collaboration of five entertainers whose public images are typical constructions of historical masculine and heterosexual identities. The Summit performances indulge these identities through libidinous posturing, the unambiguous objectification of women and acts of stereotyping aimed at the emasculation of gay men. These will be touched on below, though they do not form the focus of discussion. Much more complex, however, is the performers' negotiation of their own cultural backgrounds and shared immigrant ancestry. Sinatra and Martin were of Italian-American heritage, Davis was African-American, Lawford had a British background and Bishop's parents were Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe. Thus they were connected by a partially alienated relationship to nationality that I term below as hyphenated-American.

The discussion begins with the professional influences on, and experiences and tendencies of, these performers that bring them together in the particular context of nightclub performance. This attends to the various points of engagement with vaudevillian performance in their backgrounds, and opens up the range of artistic elements that constitute The Summit shows. It leads also to the observation and discussion of a particular shared interest in acts of impersonation. As well as focussing on the aesthetic impact of such influences, these similarities start to point towards individual relationships to the act, and the structure that is operating within it. This is reflective of the more historical performance model of blackface minstrelsy, itself a significant influence on vaudeville. Involving its own forms of impersonation, minstrel performance lends the Rat Pack particular modes of interacting in which identities are claimed, challenged and reformulated. The development of blackface performance in America reflected a desire, primarily amongst working class audiences and performers, to develop national forms of popular entertainment, with aesthetics and concerns that were distinct from European traditions (see Cockrell 1997, Lott 2013, Toll 1977). As such, participation in the form staked a claim to American assimilation while, through the

performance of other identities, negotiating cultural difference. Eric Lott (2013, p.36) has detailed how minstrelsy's 'role as a mediator of northern class, racial and ethnic conflict – all largely grounded in a problematic of masculinity – has much to do with the equivocal character of blackface representations'. The shifting traces of blackface tradition found in the Rat Pack's live performances illuminate the discussion below of the troupe's internal negotiation of its own hyphenated-American status.

### **Vaudevillian roots**

Bob Hope: I have really enjoyed this Seagram's Talent Contest and I don't care who wins. It's been a hell of a lot of fun, hasn't it?  
[onstage with the Rat Pack, last night of The Summit]

Shawn Levy depicts The Summit performances as a casual social occasion placed before an audience, rather than a considered performance event. The Rat Pack would 'make millions and all they had to do was show up, have a good time, pretend to give a damn, and, almost as an afterthought, sing' (Levy 2002, p.3). Although the shows certainly contained musical numbers, Levy's emphasis on song presumes the eminence of singers Sinatra, Martin and Davis. Songs were far from the only element of the early performances, however, or even the most dominant as they sat within a range of components encompassing dance, stand-up comedy, clowning, impressions and sketches. When Sinatra, Martin or Davis held the stage alone, it became a hallmark of the act for the other members to disrupt their singing through comic interjections from an offstage microphone. At the end of The Summit shows, other performers could be invited to join the Rat Pack on stage. As noted in the epigram above, Bob Hope in this role described the evening as 'a lot of fun', and Milton Berle in his turn declared it 'one of the greatest comedy events that I have ever seen in my entire career'.

Notwithstanding the bias of these two comedians, the emphasis is placed squarely on the comic value of the performance over its status as a musical extravaganza.

Chris Rojek notes that the Rat Pack performances ‘borrowed some of the classic motifs and routines of high vaudeville’ (Rojek 2004, p.39). This extended beyond the formal variety contained within the shows. Snyder’s description of vaudeville as an ‘often exuberant, irreverent, sensual style of music, drama, and comedy’ (Snyder 2000, p.132) is equally applicable to The Summit. The indulgent atmosphere of Rat Pack performances also resonates with Snyder’s recognition that vaudeville replaced ‘an older culture of asceticism, hard work, and an endless quest for morality’ with ‘a new urban vision of success and happiness based on luxury and consumption’ (Snyder 2000, p.132). Equally significant for the constituent membership gathered at The Summit is the perception that ‘[v]audevillians often seem to have been from an immigrant, ethnic, or working-class background’ (Snyder 2000, p.44). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that vaudeville exerts an influence on the careers of each member of the Rat Pack through their experiences in nightclub entertainment, working as part of various teams.

Sammy Davis Jr, widely acknowledged as the most versatile performer of the five, exemplifies the variety of The Summit shows, excelling in all of the diverse entertainment forms. From an early age, he toured the American vaudeville circuit in a company led by his nominal uncle Will Mastin. As he grew older the company reduced to a trio, comprised of Will, Sammy and his father Sammy Davis Sr. Sammy focussed mainly on dancing and impersonations, with singing only coming to the forefront later in his career at the encouragement of Sinatra. His schooling in vaudeville is also evident in a number of speciality acts he later developed, including lip-synching and gun-slinging routines.

Dean Martin had come to prominence in a double act with Jerry Lewis. Like Davis, Lewis – whose father was an all-round entertainer – had an early initiation into vaudevillian performance. Although primarily remembered as a film partnership, he describes the double act of Martin and Lewis as ‘vaudevillians, stage performers who worked with an audience’ (Lewis and Kaplan 2006, p.7). The double act was honed and presented in celebrated nightclubs such as the 500 Club in Atlantic City, the Chez Paree in Chicago and the Copacabana in New York. Jerry provided clowning and comedy, while Dean sang and acted as the straight man. Martin’s own abilities as a comedian and actor only became widely apparent once the double act had disbanded in 1956.

Although an admirer of the form, Sinatra had less professional experience of vaudeville having come to popular notice as a big band singer. It was as a solo performer that he subsequently achieved widespread public acclaim, idolised as a recording artist and star of film, radio and television. There were elements of vaudeville in his professional background, however. In his early career he performed as part of the Hoboken Four, a vocal group that appeared under a variety of pseudonyms on the radio programme *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour*. Once famous, he also briefly undertook the role of straight man as a favour to the comedian Phil Silvers for a series of performances at the Copacabana.

Bishop was a great deal more experienced in live nightclub performance than he was in any other media. Appearing in New York, Chicago and his home town of Philadelphia, he largely performed solo spots of stand-up comedy before Sinatra hired him as an opening act at the Riviera, New Jersey in 1952 (Starr 2002). At the start of his professional career, however, he performed as part of a comedy trio under a shared, adopted surname – the Bishop Brothers – an act incorporating clowning and impressions with a smattering of song. Billed as ‘3 Mad Maniacs of Mirth and Mimicry’, they appeared on a bill of ‘Internationally Famous Vodvil



[sic] Acts' at the Havana Casino, Buffalo in 1938. One 'mad maniac' was later replaced with a singer and straight man, extending the performative range of the group.

By contrast, Lawford came comparatively late to the world of vaudevillian entertainment.

Like Davis, he had been a child star but in films rather than live performance. As a Hollywood actor in the integrated entertainment industry of mid-twentieth century America, however, his limited skills in variety performance were put to marketing use when MGM:

had such stars as June Allyson, Janet Leigh, Peter Lawford, and numerous others travel to major cities to appear before the showing of a film. The stars would talk to the audience and perform, often doing a song-and-dance number.

(Lawford and Schwarz 1988, p.65)

Lawford also performed in a nightclub act with Jimmy Durante that pre- and post-dated his appearances at The Summit. Although he maintained a successful career in the entertainment industry, he did not attract the excesses of critical acclaim or public enthusiasm drawn by Sinatra, Martin and Davis. And while Bishop had not reached the same level of fame as Lawford, his artistry drew greater industry respect as 'a comedian's comedian, the sort of indisputably talented performer who lacked the charisma to reach beyond an audience of aficionados' (Levy, 2002, p.90). Even so, Levy's observation that Lawford had 'looks, breeding, savoir faire but no real talent' (2002, p.65) is excessively harsh. In a 1955 televised performance, Lawford appeared in an under-rehearsed chorus line sketch with Durante, Liberace, Johnnie Ray and George Raft.<sup>4</sup> Although not a polished number, Lawford displays more focus than, and comparable ability to, the other performers with the exception of the precise Liberace. His contribution also observes a spirit of ensemble commitment

unconcerned with upstaging the other entertainers, which may be partly why he appealed as a collaborator to both the Rat Pack and Durante. Within the sketch, he demonstrates an easier rapport with Durante than the other guests do, and his performance echoes traits of Durante's own vocal styling. It is as a collaborator in live performance, through his proximity and relationship to more capable entertainers, that Lawford makes his contribution.

Like Davis, Lawford could span the range of performance modes embraced by The Summit, only with much less skill and conviction. It is by comparison with Davis, or the other performers in their respective fields, that he attracts comments such as Levy's above, or Quirk and Schoell's observation (overlooking his collaboration with Durante) that 'he was not really an integral part of the group of which he was supposed to be a primary member; he had never been a "showman" or entertainer like the others' (Quirk and Schoell 2003, p.183). Lawford's lesser abilities in the vaudeville spectrum certainly distinguish him from the other performers, but they do not make him a secondary member. As an experienced dramatic actor, he holds a more central position in the Rat Pack's films than he can in the nightclub shows. But even at The Summit, when approached as a performance structure in its own right, his range of weaker abilities determine rather than disavow his integral position within the concerted troupe.

Just as he reinforces the vocal style of Durante in that particular collaboration, Lawford also understudies some characteristics of other performers at The Summit. In his duplication of Davis's versatility, he is the only other performer who commits himself to dancing as well as singing. His general performance demeanour echoes the suave manner of Martin, and he incorporates the latter's physical comedy on occasion. The persona presented here differs from the clownish one he adopts in partnership with Durante. The other performers adjust their solo acts to this collaboration; Lawford, by contrast, synthesises aspects of their

personae and consequently constructs a composite identity in order to belong. He aims to present the idealised model of a Rat Pack member: talented, relaxed, confident, attractive, and emanating power and dignity. In failing to realise this persona convincingly, he appears alienated from the very image that he has constructed, pointing to two further indicative features of a Rat Pack identity. First, that it is more concerned with an aspirational mode of identity than an assured one. Second, that this manifests itself amongst all members in a further similarity: investment in the art of imitation.

### **Impressions and emulations**

Dean: Well, let's drink up and be somebody

Frank: Let's drink up and be anybody!

[onstage at The Sands Hotel]

As a child star, Lawford was not only known for his dramatic ability. A photograph caption in the 1930 edition of magazine *New Health* noted his 'ability as an actor and impersonator' (cited in Lawford and Schwarz 1988, p.17). Davis, as already observed, had an established reputation as an impressionist on the vaudeville circuit. It was also a staple element of Bishop's act with the Bishop Brothers and beyond: 'I could always do the impressions [...] I did [Eddie] Cantor, [Al] Jolson, Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, Fred Allen' (Starr 2002, p.27). Levy comments on the impressions given in The Summit performances: Sammy 'did all the usual guys, plus novelties like Billy Eckstien [sic], Vaughan Monroe, and Al Hibbler – but Dean could do an okay Cary Grant and Clark Gable, and Frank, well, Frank could do Cagney at least as good as a school kid' (Levy 2002, p.127). This overview appears to come from the later Rat Pack performances featuring Sinatra, Martin and Davis alone. The recordings of The Summit performances include Sinatra, Davis and Bishop all contributing Cagney impressions, with Bishop also impersonating Robinson.

The mutual interest in impersonation points to a related yet underlying similarity: the role played by emulation in shaping their professional identities. Within *The Summit*, Lawford's reflection of the personae of the other performers is an internal act of emulation. In turn, their craft as performers was developed by emulating idols of their own. For Martin, this was most notable in his vocal similarity to Bing Crosby; the cultivation of an easy going vocal manner, frequently emphasising the lower baritone registers and echoing the latter's use of ornaments such as appoggiaturas, mordents, and slurs (Tosches 1999, p.74). Tosches notes further that '[n]o singer who came after Crosby would ever approach a microphone or a song without passing through his shadow' (Tosches 1999, p.74). Sinatra was also inspired by Crosby, but wanted to distance himself musically: "I never wanted to sing like him, because every kid on the block was boo-boo-booing like Crosby. My voice was up higher" (cited in Lahr 1999, p.14).

For styling, Sinatra turned to more idiosyncratic sources of emulation. Vocally, he sought the authenticity and intimacy achieved by Billie Holiday, and the articulation of Mabel Mercer. He also appreciated the sustained phrasing of violinist Jascha Heifetz, finding a vocal equivalent by observing the trombone-playing of big-band leader Tommy Dorsey, who would sneak a breath from the corner of his mouth while holding a note. This emulation of Dorsey's breath control underpinned Sinatra's musical technique, his innovative ability to sustain a phrase which offered greater potential for the interpretation of a lyric.

Such emulation is not limited to musical technique in the case of Martin and Davis.

Following his split with comedy partner Jerry Lewis, Martin developed a drunken stage persona that became a trademark of his live performances and public identity. According to his wife Jeannie, Martin 'got the act originally from Phil Harris, one of his idols' (cited in Gehman 1961, p.63). Coming full circle, Levy detects the influence of Jerry Lewis on the Rat

Pack persona of Sammy Davis Jr. Describing himself as a hero of Davis's, Lewis observes that 'Sammy played off Dean as well as I did' (Lewis and Kaplan 2005, p.102). There are noticeable reflections of Lewis's technique in Davis's onstage relationship to Martin, as well as Sinatra and Lawford. Both performers adopt high physical and vocal energy to counterbalance the more restrained, less expressive, delivery of their collaborators; both use height, proxemics and eye contact to emphasise themselves as the junior member of the act; both frequently adopt exaggerated facial expressions and comedy voices in their responses (Davis sometimes lapsing into an impersonation of Lewis); and both employ a turn to the audience to comment on their collaborator and the unfolding performance situation.

There is a third strand of impersonation that runs through the Rat Pack performances of the 1960s. In a recording of a 1963 Rat Pack performance at the Villa Venice nightclub in Chicago, Davis impersonates white performer Sinatra and black singer Nat King Cole. Sinatra, watching from the sidelines, comments to his Italian-American compatriot Dean Martin 'Have you noticed he does his people better than he does ours?' (Frank Sinatra et al., [1963] 2011). Ethnic impersonation is a staple feature of The Summit performances: Sinatra in particular exploits Jewish and Chinese stereotypes. The pervasive influence here trails back further than vaudevillian styles to the blackface minstrel traditions of the nineteenth century.

### **Mr Interlocutor(s) and the endmen**

Sammy: You sound awfully colored, Peter.

Peter: South of England, Charley.

[onstage at The Sands Hotel]

In some cases, the Rat Pack's early experiences of vaudeville entertainment brought them into direct contact with blackface performance. Clarke recounts Sinatra's first professional connection with the Three Flashes, the vocal trio that he would later join to form the Hoboken Four. Sinatra was given a small part in two films they were making for the producer Edward 'Major' Bowes:

called *The Night Club* and *The Minstrel*, and Frank didn't sing but played a waiter, in blackface, which is an indication of where Major Bowes was at: blackface as a vaudeville tradition left over from minstrelsy was already corny in 1935.

(Clarke 1998, p.21)

Clarke underestimates the continuing influence of the American blackface tradition, which had proven the dominant form of popular entertainment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Tosches describes minstrelsy as 'still a going form of entertainment in the late thirties' when Dean Martin performed as a blackface singer in a minstrel show (Tosches 1999, p.75). Even Davis's first stage appearance as a child, c.1930, involved wearing blackface for a parody of Al Jolson's song 'Sonny Boy' (Davis et al., 2012).

The Summit performances make no overt reference to blacking up as a motif.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the influence of minstrelsy infiltrates the performance structure in other ways. The organisation of the troupe in particular echoes the characters, relationships and roles that were developed in the blackface tradition. Toll describes the key figures of 'the interlocutor' and 'the endmen' that emerged in the blackface format. These figures were utilised during the opening section of a typical minstrel show, which (like The Summit) included a mixture of jokes, comic and serious songs, dances, topical material and a lively, concerted number to

finish. The performers were seated in a semicircle, with the interlocutor in the centre and the endmen at the outer points. The interlocutor

orchestrated the loosely structured, heavily improvisational first part to meet the particular audience's tastes. Although unnoticed by the audience, his talent for knowing when to draw out or cut off comedians, when to change to a different type of humor, and whether to vary the prearranged musical selections largely determined the difference between a good and bad first part.

(Toll 1977, p.53)

In the Rat Pack's nightclub shows, Bishop undertakes a very similar practical role, although solely concerned with the comic force of the event, as its musical choices were best delegated to the greater expertise of Sinatra, Davis and Martin. An often-cited story demonstrates the responsibility and trust placed in Bishop for determining the comic shape of the performances:

When Peter wasn't thrilled with a bit about pretending to be a busboy, Frank spat daggers: "Do it how Joey says or get the fuck off the show".

(Levy 2002, p.127)

Such evident tensions in rehearsal counter Levy's perception that the shows were casual, uncontrolled affairs. Bishop's judgement in comedic matters carries over into the performances themselves, as he continues to manage the direction and impromptu elements of the event. Although the blackface arrangement of a semicircle of chairs is not operative here, as the performers frequently leave and return to the stage, Bishop often remains in the

background alert to the developing performance and orchestrating the comedic flow of the show.

The traditional interlocutor, by contrast, was not a comedian in his own right but undertook a more representational role in which he 'personified dignity' (Toll 1977, p.53). Consequently, he was primarily a source of humour as the comic victim of the endmen, Tambo and Bones. In the blackface tradition, according to Pickering, these characters 'represented the antic spirit of madcap buffoons in ways that stepped the tightrope between black stereotype and subversive humour', supplying the 'temporary abandonment of prevailing norms, that made the minstrel show so popular' (Pickering 2008, p.16).

The interaction between interlocutor and endmen 'was a test of their opposed personae and, while the butt, Mr Interlocutor was meant to rise above Tambo and Bones's comic sallies' (Pickering 2008, p.16). His dignity is therefore treated with both reverence and scorn, perceived ambivalently as authoritatively superior yet ridiculously pompous. Within the Rat Pack, the role of interlocutor is broadly split along comic and authoritative lines between Bishop and Sinatra, with the latter taking on this representational function.

Uncontested as holding the most celebrity power amongst the troupe's members, throughout The Summit performances Sinatra is referred to variously as 'The Leader' and 'The Pope'. There are traces of deference to him that maintain his elevated position in the hierarchy. When presidential candidate John F. Kennedy attended a performance, for example, it was accepted as Sinatra's uncontested prerogative to introduce the Senator from the stage, despite Lawford's position as the would-be president's brother-in-law. He is also allowed the final word on performance choices at points, even by Bishop, and his authority in such matters does not brook contradiction.



Yet this same authority is lampooned by other members of the Rat Pack. Bishop is complicit in this: in one show, he kneels and pretends to kiss Sinatra's hand in mock-fealty; elsewhere he refers variously, and sarcastically, to Sinatra as 'O Ruler of us All, O Exalted One' and 'Danny Dumbwittage'. Bishop's participation in the undercutting of Sinatra's superiority indicates that the relationships of minstrelsy are more fluidly adopted here, as the emcee moves between his own responsibilities as interlocutor and the subversive humour of the endmen.

Lawford, consistent with his diminished role as an alert understudy to the other performers, moves between the roles of deputy-interlocutor and deputy-endman. Introducing Lawford before a duet based on the song 'Shall We Dance?', Davis notes that Lawford 'represents all the dignity and charm of *Ocean's 11*'. Following the routine, Lawford adopts a deputy-interlocutor role advising Davis to get off the stage and make way for 'The Leader', as a mark of respect and gratitude for being cast in *Ocean's 11*. He is also subjected to ridicule in the interlocutor tradition. As Dorinson notes, Lawford's 'pompous British persona sparked mirth in others' (Dorinson 2004, p.29). When Lawford presumes to introduce Davis's fiancée from the stage, despite admitting to not knowing her, it is Sinatra who now shifts into the endman role, asking 'what the hell are you introducing her for, then?'

All performers at The Summit mock and receive mockery. It is when this is directed towards an elevated status that it echoes the blackface relationship between endmen and interlocutor. For this reason, it operates whenever Sinatra is the recipient, puncturing his in-group status as The Leader, but also the adulation he receives in the wider public context which Adamowski calls 'the imaginary domain in which Sinatra ruled as Aristocrat of the emotional life' (Adamowski 2004, p.112). Lawford also participates in the undercutting of Sinatra's dignity. During the latter's version of 'Pennies from Heaven' he appears, with Bishop, and crosses

the stage in his underwear. Nevertheless, Sinatra takes pleasure in these jokes, acquiescing in his own belittling in ways that leave the effect safely contained. Cockrell (1997, p.53) notes that early blackface performances have roots in festivals such as the Lord of Misrule which ‘demands that those in superior positions willingly take on the role of servants’. The subversive potential of such inversions is highly limited, however, as ‘generally the status quo is maintained, with the power still invested in the powerful’ (Cockrell 1997, p.54). The same restorative outcome is evident in the Rat Pack’s passing diminishment of its Leader.

The consistent endmen of The Summit shows are Martin and Davis, who rarely if ever ascend to the status of interlocutor. Davis had always stood publicly in Sinatra’s shadow, since he was:

the baby of the Rat Pack, born four days before Frank’s tenth birthday, and that banal fact – more than race, size, taste, line of work, personal habits, common friends, political leanings, money, sex or power – was the single governing factor in their relationship. Frank was always the big brother allowing the kid, Sammy, to hang out with the older guys.

(Levy 2002)

Martin, on the other hand, was so dismissive of his own celebrity status that he could not assume the mantle of interlocutor with any seriousness. Both performers have greater credibility in mocking Sinatra than Bishop or Lawford as they are his closest equals as entertainers, not only within the Rat Pack but also in the wider field of popular entertainment.

Within The Summit performances, Martin satirises Sinatra's intense persona directly.

Beginning a short set of songs, he opens with 'It Takes a Worried Man', before calling the orchestra to a halt:

Martin: Hold it. [To the conductor] Who the hell's worried, boy? That's Sinatra's music. Play my music. Start it where it says 'As he staggers in'.

Davis is more circumspect in his undercutting of Sinatra's power. When Lawford asks whether he is grateful for his role in *Ocean's 11*, he dolefully replies 'you mean the garbage collector?', an act of pathos which exposes the irony of gratitude being expected for such a demeaning role.

As the Rat Pack performances continued into the 1960s, with Bishop and Lawford participating less frequently, Davis became more confident in challenging Sinatra.

Furthermore, the trio of Sinatra, Martin and Davis established a more consistent relationship between The Leader as interlocutor and the others as endmen. At the Kiel Opera House performance in 1965, Sinatra commands the audience and performers to applaud the two orchestras that have performed. Martin replies rebelliously 'I didn't like either band', to Sinatra's apparent displeasure. Later, when Sinatra is disrupting Davis's introduction to 'Birth of the Blues', Davis looks menacingly at him and jokingly threatens 'You may be my leader, but I'm going to punch you right in your mouth!' (Dean Martin et al., [1963, 1965] 2003).

Such echoes of the structures of blackface minstrelsy are neither explicit nor, arguably, conscious in The Summit performances, and are probably more indicative of the pervasive influence the tradition had on popular entertainment. The cultural legacy of the minstrel

tradition is not only carried in the wearing of blackface or subversively structured relationships, and the use of black-voice is more explicitly assimilated into The Summit's nightclub performances. Sinatra adopts black-voice most readily, dropping in and out of an affected Southern black accent for no apparent purpose other than broadly comic effect. In one sequence at the Copa Room, when a drinks trolley covered with a tablecloth is wheeled onstage, he remarks 'look like Danny Thomas is unner dere. Somebody wid a big nose or sumpin' else'. Later in the routine he revives the same accent, criticising Martin, 'cos you kinda hesitated dere for a moment, boy'. The vocal impression here is consistent with the sonorous tone, grammatical traits and emphatic accenting associated with stereotypical black characters from the blackface tradition through to representations in early Hollywood films.

Such imitation is barely perceptible in the case of Dean Martin who, as Tosches (1999, p.309) observes, 'already spoke with a [Southern] drawl in real life. God only knew where it came from ... No one else from Steubenville ever talked that way'. This accent is not racially specific, and fluctuates between white and black emphases. Lawford's occasional imitations of stereotypical black-voice offer a more striking contrast to his aristocratic English accent, and he employs it within a pointed network of references. During the 'Shall We Dance' routine, Davis executes a showstopping tapdance, and then invites Lawford to compete provoking the following exchange:

Peter: It's nice. [adopts black accent] But I ain't goin' follow it

Sammy: [adopts British accent] I say, old man, I thought we were going to engage in something together, as it were?

Peter: [in a broad black accent] No, I think I'm goin' go home, Kingfish.<sup>6</sup>

The use of the black accent here is not only part of mutual ethnic impersonation between the two performers. The introductory dialogue to the sequence is developed against the background of the contemporary political situation regarding civil rights. When Lawford first proposes the song and dance duet, it is Davis who introduces black-voice, responding ‘Would you lay dat on me one more time, dere, daddy?’ The dialogue later continues:

Sammy: If I were you, I wouldn’t want to dance with one of the great Jewish  
Mau Mau dancers of our time.

Peter: Sam, I’m not prejudiced, you know.

Sammy: Yeah, I know your kind. You’ll dance with me but you won’t go to  
school with me, will you?

Peter: Wanna room together?

Once the duet is underway, Sinatra interrupts from the offstage microphone ‘I’d like to see them try this in Little Rock’. The references scattered throughout the section allude to the national crisis that emerged from the attempted integration of nine black students into the previously segregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Widespread resistance to the move escalated the situation to the extent that the State Governor deployed troops to blockade the school and deny entry to the black students, before President Eisenhower ordered his own troops to intervene and escort the black students into the school.

The question of integration – symbolically channelled through Davis’s membership of the troupe – is a consciously repeated comic theme of *The Summit*. In one show, while Davis is pouring himself a drink, Bishop’s comment ‘Attaboy, Sam, mix’ (Rat Pack, 1960a) plays on the double-meaning of making a cocktail and racially integrating. In another, when Bishop

suggests to Sinatra that they should stay in the background during Davis's performance, The Leader replies 'there'll be no segregation here'. The inclusion of Davis in the otherwise white troupe is an act of integration that carries its own political statement. It is also indicative of a wider similarity, the status of all five members as hyphenated-Americans at one remove from a full American identity by virtue of an immigrant ancestry. The negotiation of such compound identities fuels the collaboration, and lends the most complex dimension to its material.

### **The similar hats of hyphenated-Americans**

Joey: [To Sammy] Try not to act so orthodox  
[onstage at The Sands Hotel]

Sinatra's 'outspoken belief in the basic dignity of all human beings, regardless of race or ethnic origin or religion' (Mustazza 2004, p.34) is well-documented, arguing throughout his career that black entertainers should be afforded equal treatment and hospitality to white entertainers. Hamill records Sinatra's own perspective that his sympathy for the African-American position arises from a shared sense of injustice as an Italian-American: 'we've been there too, man. It wasn't just black people hanging from the end of those fucking ropes' (Hamill 2003, p.45). Hamill suggests that this is not sensitivity or paranoia on Sinatra's part by pointing to the execution of eleven Italian-Americans by a lynch-mob in 1891 following their acquittal for the murder of corrupt police chief David Hennessy. Berg notes that the overwhelming number of lynchings targeted African-Americans. At the same time:

racial and ethnic hatred not only played a role in the lynching of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Asians. Even so-called white

victims sometimes belonged to ethnic groups whose “whiteness,” measured by the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant standard, seemed in doubt. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Italian immigrants fell into this category.

(Berg 2011, pp.117-8)

The alienation that Sinatra experienced and observed as a consequence of being Italian-American led to a number of public and forceful statements advocating racial and religious tolerance. By contrast, the jokes at Sammy Davis Jr’s expense in *The Summit* and later *Rat Pack* performances are criticised for demeaning Davis on racial grounds. Taraborrelli suggests they ‘baffled’ commentators through their ‘complete disregard for the ideal of racial tolerance during their shows’ and cites Davis’s later perspective that ‘I had to bite my tongue a lot’ (Taraborrelli 1999, p.285).

The question is far more vexed than the simple accusation of racist humour would allow for. Racial jokes provoke anxiety by operating on the border between tolerance and intolerance: should the joke itself be tolerated as a non-serious, or even ironic, act? Or are such jokes always already markers of intolerant attitudes? Such troubling questions of racial (in)tolerance certainly circulate within *The Summit* performances. In line with Sinatra’s perceptions, however, the *Rat Pack*’s treatment of ethnic status extends beyond the single issue of black identity.

In his response to the *Rat Pack*’s shows at the *Fontainebleau Hotel*, Gehman ‘began to feel that perhaps at times they went too far in their references to each other’s ancestry and religion’ (Gehman 1961, p.74). The viewpoint here provides contemporary recognition that matters of national, racial and religious identity were a noticeable preoccupation of *The*

Summit shows. It further suggests that this was not solely, or even primarily, perceived as directed towards Davis. Bishop's persistent referencing of Sinatra and Martin's Italian heritage is equally judged to have worn thin over the course of the evening. As already seen, Lawford was similarly lampooned for his Britishness, and as 'the only WASP [...] became the comic foil' (Dorinson, 2004, p.29). Bishop's non-American ancestry received no explicit attention, except through jokes related to his Jewish faith as the distinguishing marker of a white East European character distinct from the Christian heritage of Italian-Americans.

Whether Gehman considers 'too far' to be a matter of the volume or character of such jokes is not clear. There is a point of restraint and forethought in the Rat Pack's own limitations on racial and religious banter at The Summit. Bishop vetoed the onstage use of the word 'dago', a derogatory term for Italians jokingly applied by Martin and Sinatra to each other. He argued his objection on the basis that the Italian-American performers could not subsequently challenge the use of the term outside of the act: Sinatra already had a reputation for violence against anyone who insulted him on ethnic grounds. According to Taraborrelli, 'Frank agreed, and neither he nor the rest of the fellows used the word onstage again' (Taraborrelli 1999, p.284). This is not strictly true. Live recordings of the Rat Pack post-1963 – minus Bishop and Lawford – clearly include Martin using the term, or the abbreviation 'dag', in reference to Sinatra.

It is also in this later context, 1963 – 65, that discomfort with such jokes became more specifically focussed on those about Davis's black identity and most of the onstage jokes that are cited come from this later period. The racially-allusive nickname 'Smokey the Bear' that is applied offstage to Sammy Davis Jr is not used onstage at The Summit shows, but is included in performances in Chicago in 1963. This may be reflective of the ongoing intensification of the civil rights debate during this period, which consistently informed



media discourse about Davis (see Early 2001). Within the act, it was also a question of numbers: the circulation of jokes at The Summit covered a diverse range of national, religious and racial identities. Once the quintet reduced to a trio, it was emphatically two white Italian-Americans of Christian heritage exchanging banter with one Jewish African-American. An outnumbered Davis was viewed as a more isolated victim.

Santurri argues that:

it is hard not to wince at the accounts of Sinatra's public racial jokes at Davis's expense – even though the jokes seemed bereft of genuinely racist motivation and were clearly part of an act incorporating the kind of good-natured barbs one innocuously hurls at the best of friends. Yet the reason the jokes are unsettling despite their apparent lack of authentically racist intention is that they reinforce the patterns of subordination constitutive of Sinatra's relation with Davis. [...] only the most privileged among the vassals were permitted by the lord to respond in kind. From all indications, Davis was not so permitted.

(Santurri 2004, p.206)

Broadly speaking, this account seems a reasonable overview of the source of the unease that accompanies the racial jokes in these later Rat Pack performances. There is little question that the jokes constitute mockery grounded in racial identity, or that they presume a certain power relation. In one joke, Martin carries Davis to the microphone to 'thank the NAACP for this trophy'.<sup>7</sup> Davis is physically, professionally and verbally diminished by the action. Furthermore, the white performer claims credit for the contribution of a black performer in a way which exposes the real power relation behind the onstage camaraderie and integration. This could, of course, reflect that Sinatra's authority over Davis is not only a consolidation of

their personal and professional relationship, but also emblematic of the wider political oppression of black (and Jewish) people from a dominant white (and Christian) position. With civil rights as a highly divisive issue in contemporary domestic politics, such jokes would undoubtedly be deeply uncomfortable.

There are difficulties with such a reading, however. In the first instance, given the combined professional experience and backgrounds of these performers, it seems unlikely that they would be naïve about the impact of such material. Although initiated in the light entertainment of vaudeville, Sinatra and Davis were both politically sensitive, out of commitment and necessity respectively. Sinatra in particular had been politically outspoken throughout his career, since his controversially public involvement in Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 re-election campaign. He had similarly rallied The Summit performers as Kennedy supporters in 1960. His closeness to the Kennedy campaign also forced him to compromise two defiant political statements he intended to make in that year: the hiring of Albert Maltz, a screenwriter who had been imprisoned as a communist in the McCarthy era; and his agreement to act as Best Man at Davis's interracial marriage to Swedish actress May Britt. As a concession to the Presidential campaign, Maltz was sacked (with full pay) and Davis's wedding was postponed until after the election.

Despite Davis's own support and concessions, the Kennedys refused to allow him to appear at the inauguration gala that Sinatra produced in 1961 following electoral victory. According to Nancy Sinatra, 'it was one of the few times [Frank] ever felt at such a loss. In the past he'd [...] been able to protest, had helped bring about change. But now he could do nothing' (Sinatra 1985, p.98). Sinatra's frustration was mainly due to his longstanding activism on behalf of advancing civil equality. It also demonstrates his awareness of the public statement that would be made by the inclusion or exclusion of Davis at such a significant event.

Quincy Jones, who conducted the orchestra at the 1965 Kiel Opera House performance, suggests that Davis's level of inclusion in the Rat Pack was an act of substantive political importance:

Sammy could do anything that anyone else in that group could. And that was the first time you ever saw anything like that going on. Before that, you would just have [...] situations in which the black person was always in some subservient role. Sammy, on the other hand, was an equal.

(Jones 1990, p.119)

The profound racial statement, in this view, was Davis's equality in terms of ability, as well as the onstage and offstage privileges he accessed alongside his white colleagues. Implicit in this view is a perspective that the full inclusion of Davis in the troupe was as progressive and contentious in its public commitment as his interracial marriage. Significantly, Jones's perspective on equality counters Santurri's view that Davis is locked into subservience by the use of racial humour.

The matter of integration was not in itself a radical statement at this time. In 1957 the black journalist Evelyn Cunningham (1957, pp.219-220) wrote an open letter to Davis gently challenging him for holding an exclusively black press conference and noting that 'in many, many quarters, integration is fashionable and chic'. Sinatra's own commitment to racial integration is well-documented, and dates back to early days in his career before it was a fashionable stance. As Mustazza (2004, p.36) notes, even in his days as a big band singer under Tommy Dorsey Sinatra was given to outraged attacks on those who would not offer equal status to his black colleagues. Similarly, his resistance to Harry James' plan to replace his Italian surname with 'Frankie Satin, or Frankie Trent, or some other such catchy and

easily pronounced name' (Mustazza 2004, p.33) demonstrates an unconventional refusal to compromise on matters of ethnicity and assimilation, unlike other immigrant performers including Bishop and Martin, who had abandoned their respective family names of Gottlieb and Crocetti.

Davis, seemingly, had a more pragmatic view of integration and understood it as an inevitably lengthy process. No individual performer, in his logical view, could resolve racial tensions singlehandedly. Each could only make small advances, opening whatever apertures they could for subsequent performers to capitalise on. This perspective led him to champion earlier black performers whose work had been denounced for its racial capitulation: 'Possibly Stepin Fetchit made it a bit easier for Richard Pryor [...] Great strides have been made, but more often than not they were made up of tiny footsteps which pushed a little farther on each tread' (Davis 1980, p.549). As one journalist noticed, Davis had taken such symbolic steps in his private life through his marriage to May Britt: '[a]n unwritten law in Hollywood is that interracial romance is okay, so long as it's kept quiet, but interracial marriage is taboo' (Putnam 1963, p.269). His participation in *The Summit* shows takes further progressive steps because of its visibility, both in the sense of its prominence and the explicit references to it, though like the work of Fetchit these also run the risk of upholding reactionary attitudes.

Within the Rat Pack performances, no racial joke exists as a self-contained closed statement that captures the meaning or intention of the act. In the framing of banter, as seen in the exchange above between Davis and Lawford, jokes are sites of dialogical interplay open to challenge, rebuttal and contestation. This is the fundamental difference between the Rat Pack's jokes about national, racial and religious identity and their jokes rooted in gender and sexuality. From the avowedly public masculine and heterosexual identities of its members, the Rat Pack's belittling of women and gay people is a simplistic act of homogenization that,

in its sexist and homophobic finality, is closed against contradiction. None of the members defend a feminist or homosexual position, while women and gay people are performatively excluded from a right to reply.

Throughout The Summit performances, for example, Sinatra repeatedly refers to a seemingly isolated female member of the resident orchestra. The disparaging remarks he makes compare her to the characters played by Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in the recently released film *Some Like It Hot*, evidently masculine musicians attempting to disguise themselves as women. Elsewhere in the performances, the entertainers refer to women as 'broads' who are valued primarily for their physical appearance or sexual promise. The performers also lapse into stereotypically camp impressions of gay men. A stock gag at The Summit, usually employed when one performer appears intimately close or tactile with another performer, involves the recipient asking 'Wanna meet tomorrow and pick out the furniture?' In later performances, when Davis adopts a gay persona, Martin refers to him as the African Queen. Sinatra makes the same joke about Johnny Mathis, the gay African-American singer. In each of these instances, the actual targets of the insult are too silent, absent or disempowered to challenge or contradict the offence.

On questions of race, nationality and religion, however, the troupe's shared hyphenated-American heritage covers a heterogeneity of personal identities that is internally subjected to ongoing attack and defence. Performed through such a comic framework, Davis's opportunity and ability to retaliate was often the very point of a sequence of jokes concerning race. The recordings of the later performances suggest that Sammy was not obliged to bite his tongue publicly in response to the racial jokes.

His retaliations included jokes that tested Sinatra's leadership, consistent with the structural role of the endman, such as the threat to punch him in the mouth quoted above. This joke also

suggests the intensification of the violence of such humour – far removed from Davis’s gentler humour at The Summit – consistent with the deepening battle for civil rights. Outside of the Rat Pack performances, Davis was known to comment on Sinatra’s status as leader in racial and political terms:

Another fan asked him about Frank Sinatra and he answered with the crack he reserves for predominantly white audiences: “Sinatra? Sure, he’s the leader,” he said, “but he’s your leader. My leader is Martin Luther King.”

(Brown 1962, p.229)

Through such public statements, the challenge to Sinatra’s authority that informs the interlocutor-endmen relationships spills over from the performative to the political context, and places a specifically racial limitation on his leadership. It also marks a critical point of racial difference between Sinatra and Davis, despite the former’s observations of shared experiences of bigotry across Italian- and African-American histories.

Alongside the diminishment of Sinatra’s authority, Davis also draws power around himself through allusion to events in the ongoing battle for civil rights. During a performance at The Sands Hotel in September 1963, Sinatra interrupts Davis’s performance with one of the stock racial jibes adopted by the trio in such darkened nightclub rooms:

Frank: Better keep smiling, Sam, so everybody knows where you are.

Sammy: [laughing] You fellers go ahead. You ain’t got many rights left.

Dean: No, but we sure got a couple of lefts.

(Dean Martin et al., [1963] 2008)

While Sinatra and Martin score moderate laughter, it is Davis's comeback which achieves the most resounding response, with gales of laughter running into applause. In comic terms, it is a victorious retaliation from Davis that gathers the audience to his corner, exploiting the trend for integration to his own advantage.

Later in the same performance, Martin rolls out another racially-allusive gag which, through its inconsistency with Martin's onstage relationship to Davis, ironises a white distaste for integration:

Dean: [to Sammy, who has placed a hand on his shoulder] Hey, hey, hey,  
hey! I'll sing with ya, I'll dance with ya, I'll go to parties with ya,  
I'll play on the lawn with ya, but don't touch me!

(Dean Martin et al., [1963] 2008)

When Martin clarifies that he is 'only kidding', Davis's response – which again draws applause – refers back to the military interventions of the Little Rock crisis:

Sammy: You'd better be kidding or you'd see some troops on this stage.

(Dean Martin et al., [1963] 2008)

In both of the above responses, Davis redresses the balance of power by evoking audience, military and presidential support for his cause and consequently weakening and outnumbering his assailants. The banter here does not subscribe to the oppressive power balance that maintains in the real world: at an imaginative and performative level, it

acknowledges and then exceeds the shifts in civil rights that are advancing in legislative and political fields by playing out the same intense battle in a comic register.

The jokes also approach a more radical politics than a fashionably liberal endorsement of integration might support. Davis's reference to the erosion of white rights, rather than white privilege, plays less with a drive towards racial equality than a combat for racial dominance in which white people are constrained, especially once military support is factored in. As such, it simultaneously toys with white fears that the advancement of a black cause equates to the destruction of white culture. Martin's reference to 'a couple of lefts' also opens up a space beyond the liberal push for tolerance to a more radical leftist politics with which Sinatra had previously been associated. Such possible undertones may not be consciously invoked, and are certainly unresolved in the exchange while hinting at the difficult layers of civil rights discourse at the time.

Even so, while the historical context makes the jokes about black civil rights the most potent and visible theme of later Rat Pack performances, questions of racial and national identity are still not reduced to this single issue. Davis also mocks the Italian-American identities of Martin and Sinatra, as he had done with Lawford's Englishness at The Summit. At a 1963 Sands Hotel performance, Martin modifies the words of 'Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?' to 'Did you ever see a Jew-jitsu?' Davis immediately assumes outrage and interrupts:

Sammy: Would you like it if I came out here and sang 'Did you ever see a wop-sicle'?

Dean: Hold it! Hold it! You... you hold it!

Sammy: I ain't gonna hold it, whitey...



(Dean Martin et al., [1963] 2008)

The mutual (in)tolerance of this exchange reiterates that the racial banter of the Rat Pack is not solely directed at Sammy Davis Jr. In these later performances this may appear the case, since it positions Davis in a minority relation to his dominant colleagues, accentuated against the contentious political background of civil rights debates and battles. At the same time, the cut and thrust of the banter is a residue of the earlier, more complex national, racial and religious interactions of The Summit. In other words, the need to negotiate and defend one's national, racial and religious identity, by virtue of an immigrant ancestry, remains one of the consistent criteria for inclusion in the troupe that transcends the shifting membership across this entire period.

Pugliese notes 'the double bind confronted by all immigrants to America: The necessity of assimilating into American culture while retaining a distinct ancestral identity' (Pugliese 2004, p.7). The Rat Pack performances exist in the space between these aspirational and historical identities, neither one nor the other but as the ongoing, and ultimately irresolvable negotiation of both. Lawford's integral position, as the understudy whose contribution involves the failed construction of an idealised persona through emulation of the other performers, is motivated and thwarted by this double bind. The same tension operates in the other members.

Brinkley has described Sinatra as 'the little guy who bucked the establishment and a charter member of that same prevailing culture' (Brinkley 2004, p.18); he is also 'so powerful and yet somehow always the underdog at the prize fight' (Brinkley 2004, p.20). The gap between these contradictory positions is the gap that allows him to stake a claim as The Leader and to have this claim both honoured and roundly rebutted in every Rat Pack performance. Davis is

acclaimed as the most fully-realised nightclub performer of the quintet; yet he is diminished by race and youth, performing his own junior status through the same comic mannerisms that Lewis employed in relation to Martin. Bishop, with a public image as an abstinent, worldweary grafter, appears at odds with Rojek's perception of the Rat Pack as 'an extended tribute to the values of hedonism, optimism and easy-living' (Rojek 2004, p.26). It is in this sense, perhaps, that while Bishop 'holds the other members together – especially when they are performing', he himself remains 'in it, but not quite of it' (Gehman 1961, p.72).

Martin, in many ways, is the most complete member of the Rat Pack: a skilled vaudevillian of hyphenated-American origin who carries himself with assurance and convincingly performs the hedonistic attitude. This is completed by his cultivated aura as a '*menefreghista* – one who simply did not give a fuck' (Tosches 1999, p.52). Such apparent success in breaching the hyphenated divide – by virtue of not caring about reconciling the opposites – positions Martin as the polar extreme to Lawford within the act as the realisation of the Rat Pack ideal. The critical distinction between Martin and Lawford is that the former entertainer is successful in constructing this onstage persona; nevertheless, it is still a carefully cultivated act.

Martin's drunken persona at this time not only emulated Phil Harris artistically but extended into a contrived offstage illusion, as Gehman recounts: 'At parties he seldom has more than two shots of Scotch or vodka; but when photographers arrive and other celebrities begin concealing their glasses, he keeps his in his hand' (Gehman 1961, p.63). He cites an anonymous but longstanding colleague of Martin's who theorises that the drunken persona is not only an effective comic framework but also alleviates Martin's 'terrific inferiority complex' about his abilities as a performer: 'He figures that if he's about half-swacked, or looks like it, people will excuse him if he isn't good or funny' (Gehman 1961, p.63).

Through this emulation and contrivance, Martin masks rather than reconciles the discrepancies of hyphenated identity. Nonetheless, it is this image of reconciliation that the Rat Pack sets out to emulate. Martin was, according to Zehme, 'the man [Sinatra] could not be, but wished he was' (Zehme 1997, p.54). It is in this sense that the Rat Pack only exists in the imaginations of those not in it; what is significant is that those who are in it are also not in it. The nightclub performances at The Summit are the space of the hyphen itself, the gap between historical and aspirational identities where belonging is not an option since the fundamental criterion for membership is the paradoxical desire to belong.

This act of emulation is also at the root of the Rat Pack's descent from the blackface tradition. Toll (1977) notes that blackface performance was originally driven by a desire to define an American popular culture distinct from European models. It did so partly through the authenticating claims that it emulated African-American performance. Cultural identification with the influential form, which already proposed a representational image suspended between two distinct identities, became a mechanism for national assimilation. Lott (2013, p.94) notes that this reflects 'a jostle of cultures [which] opened a national-popular space that was to be vigorously contested in the 1840s, quite fiercely as it turned out, and often in the arena of blackface minstrelsy'. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, blackface increasingly concerned itself with a wider range of immigrant caricatures, developing Japanese, German and Irish stereotypes. It also became an opportunistic space for members of these stereotyped communities to engage as professional entertainers, with Irish-American and African-American performers being particularly successful. The basis in impersonation, commitment to variety entertainment and exploration of assumed identities established a comedic template for the Rat Pack as a later generation of hyphenated-Americans, irreconcilably situated between the old and new countries.

## Conclusion

Increasing documentation of the Rat Pack in live performance, especially The Summit appearances of the quintessential membership, allow for greater assessment of the unifying features of the troupe. Against the perception that this is primarily a social gathering, the apparent chaos of these performances belies a consistent level of skill, structure and craft that lends coherence to the performance. This is grounded in the entertainers' own experiences of vaudevillian performance, and locates them in a tradition of popular entertainment that stretches further back to the blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth century.

This common background has a particular shared focus in impersonation. This constitutes more than an extra dimension to the variety programme of the troupe's performances. In the form of emulation, it is a motivating force in the individual performers' development of their professional persona and abilities; and it is the driving force of the performances themselves. The Rat Pack is an imaginary, rather than ontological, collective and the members themselves are engaged in trying to become this mythical troupe. In pursuit of this, they rely on impersonation, while testing, undercutting and strengthening aspects of each other's identities.

This is most emphatically a treatment of male ethnic identities, explored in comic, stereotypical, political, powerful, weak and aggressive modes, which points to the shared identities of the performers as hyphenated-Americans with distinct ancestral heritages. What are ultimately performed by the troupe are the limits of belonging: the performances cannot abolish the hyphen between ancestry and aspiration, and must constantly circulate in the space where membership, or assimilation, remains out of reach. The Rat Pack imaginary is, in the end, the illusory character who performs reconciliation of the hyphenated divide.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Shawn Levy's book *Rat Pack Confidential* (2002) focuses on the same men, as does Lawrence J. Quirk's and William Schoell's *The Rat Pack* (1999).
- <sup>2</sup> The title contains a topical reference is to the summit conference of Eisenhower, de Gaulle and Kruschev, held in Paris in 1960.
- <sup>3</sup> Excerpts from these recordings re available online at YouTube. Links include:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgiLmj56zKI> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN7kswMmC4M>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GVDA34frwQ>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LHiE-IgkkM>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI1d34XtODs>  
The recordings are also available as a 3-disc DVD volume published by Prases Productions. Some excerpts on the site, and the recordings – those that do not feature either Peter Lawford or Joey Bishop – are seemingly incorrectly attributed to 1960, however, and probably date from 1963.
- <sup>4</sup> Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot8MXNW0ur0> [Accessed 8 December 2012].
- <sup>5</sup> *Ocean's 11* does contain a scene in which Lawford, Martin and Sinatra are smearing their faces with grease for the purposes of disguise as Davis drives them to the heist. The jokes of this scene revolve around references to Davis's blackness. In the film, Davis is already in the junior role of the driver excluded from the central action of the heist itself, and the character's civilian occupation is the deliberately unglamorous one of a garbage-truck driver.
- <sup>6</sup> Kingfish was a popular character in the sitcom *Amos 'n' Andy*, featuring a predominantly black cast of characters.
- <sup>7</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

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