

The Paramount Theatre: That Was Entertainment

BY RICHARD RIDGE

The Paramount Theatre was one of the first and grandest show palaces in the world to give audiences the irresistible combination of enormous stage shows and first-run movies. The Paramount Building, located at 1501 Broadway, housed both the theatre and Paramount Pictures' headquarters. All of this was the brainchild of Adolph Zukor, who saw it as "a fitting home for Paramount Pictures on Broadway."

The \$17 million dollar, 33-story building (which took only one year to erect) was designed by architects C. W. and George L. Rapp in the style of the French Renaissance period. To this day, it occupies the entire Broadway block between 43rd and 44th Streets — one of the few buildings of its era still extant in the Times Square area.

The eight-story Paramount Theatre had its formal opening on November 19, 1926, with an elaborate stage show by John Murray Anderson and the movie *God Gave Me Twenty Cents*, starring Lya de Putti. But it was the architecture and design of the theatre, the gold and glitter of its lobby, its grand staircase, and its extravagant décor that drew gasps of astonishment and admiration from customers.

In its glory days, anything could happen at the Paramount Theatre — and usually did. Everyone in the world of entertainment appeared there, literally from A to Z (Amos and Andy to Zukor). The list reads like a Who's Who in show business: Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra began their careers at the Paramount. Other big-name attractions were Ginger Rogers and Rudy Vallee, Mary Pickford and Buddy Rogers, Gertrude Lawrence and Bea Lillie, Maurice Chevalier and Gary Cooper, Eddie Cantor and Fred Astaire, not to mention Gloria Swanson, Dorothy

Lamour, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, George Jessel, Ethel Merman, Dinah Shore, and Betty Hutton. Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis appeared at the Paramount throughout their partnership, doing turn-away business. Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey,

Love." (Her mood might have changed for the worse when she found that, due to having installed a back-stage bar for her manager — during Prohibition, mind — she wound up her engagement in the red.) Bing Crosby actually began his career playing cymbals in the lobby

of the Paramount, having been discovered by Bob Weitman, managing director of the theater. Crosby appeared as one of Paul Whiteman's Rhythm Boys, but Weitman brought him back as a soloist and made him a star. Much later, Crosby was to have made a sensational entrance onto the Paramount stage, swinging out on a giant boom and singing all the while; but the machine jammed, and the unfazed Crosby ended up singing every song in his repertoire while stage hands frantically tried to free him. Red Skelton passed out cold in the midst of a drunk routine at the Paramount when the water he swigged as pretend liquor was replaced with gin by a practical joker; Zukor, who caught the act, called it the best drunk bit he had ever seen. One of the high points in the Paramount's history came in 1937, when "King of Swing" Benny Goodman appeared and thousands of youngsters started dancing in the aisles — the first manifestation of jitterbugging.

In 1943, for Sinatra's opening, the theater was packed with thousands of females, some so young they were in school uniforms; thus was the phrase "bobby-soxers" coined. They wept, screamed, and fell to their knees for as many as 11 shows on Saturdays. Jack Benny, who had introduced Sinatra onstage, recalled later: "It was the biggest thing I knew since Jolson. When you get an entertainer who can hold an audience in the palm of (his) hand, (it's) sensational." *Life* magazine pronounced the coming of Sinatra "the proclama-



Glenn Miller, Guy Lombardo, and Paul Whiteman all led their bands there. After Florenz Ziegfeld saw Ruth Etting featured as a singer at the Paramount, he stole her away for his own extravaganzas. And Vincente Minnelli was, for a time, the theater's resident ballet master.

Mae West, having just saved Paramount Pictures from bankruptcy, played the Paramount in 1933. She made her entrance in a blinding collage of diamonds, feathers, and white fox furs, singing "I'm an Occidental Woman in an Oriental Mood for

tion of a new era." Hysteria was so intense that the theater, on police advice, had to blacken the windows of the star's dressing room to prevent his teenaged fans from gathering on 43rd Street and blocking traffic for miles. When Sinatra returned to the Paramount in 1944, things got so unruly that what became known as "the Columbus Day Riots" occurred.

Flora Roberts, a longtime theatrical agent, had her offices in the Paramount Building. When Sinatra was besieged by his rabid fans, he couldn't so much as leave the theater for lunch; Roberts befriended him, and brought him lunch daily. They became great friends and, years later (in the early '70s), she introduced Sinatra to her client Stephen Sondheim and his song "Send in the Clowns." Sinatra loved it so much, he cried — and promptly made a recording of the ballad which became one of his (and Sondheim's) all-time best sellers.

In 1957, Alan Freed practically invented rock-and-roll at the Paramount, shattering box office records. But perhaps the theater's most

famous attraction was its twin Wurlitzer organ console, played for years by Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Crawford. Mrs. C. was the only woman in show biz who had all her gowns made backward: The decoration was on the rear, because that was what her audiences saw.

On August 4, 1964, the film *The Carpetbaggers* ended its run as the final attraction of the Paramount Theatre. Movie palaces were closing everywhere, but the passing of the Paramount — according to a news article of the time — "mean(t) more than the shuttering of just another movie house. It mark(ed) the end of the road for Broadway as a midway of movie glamour." Everything in the theater was sold off or destroyed. Ultimately, this palace of dreams was turned into office space. So much for progress!

Although the theater itself is long



Frank Sinatra performs for hysterical fans at the Paramount Theatre, October 1944

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gone, the Paramount building lives on. In fact, it is a hub of theatrical activity: Producers, directors, agents, press reps, even the offices of *In Theater*, are located at 1501 Broadway. And now, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) is poised to fill a portion of what was once the Paramount Theatre. It may not be Sinatra, Crosby, Benny, or West, but hey — as the song goes, "That's entertainment." ■

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