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Original Citation

Calvert, Dave (2016) Jokes as performance text: a close reading of Rat Pack banter. *Comedy Studies*, 7 (1). pp. 38-47. ISSN 2040-610X

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Jokes as performance text: a close reading of Rat Pack banter

In this paper, I would like to discuss a performance of three jokes told, sequentially, by Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr and Dean Martin, and audio recorded over 50 years ago, on 6th September 1963 in the Copa Room in the Sands Hotel, Las Vegas (Martin et al 2008).¹ The three jokes run as follows:

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

Sam: You fellers go ahead. You ain't got many rights left.

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

(Martin et al 2008)

Sinatra's allusion, of course, is to Davis as a black performer in a black dress suit performing in a darkened nightclub, and the subsequent exchange refers to tensions around white and black Americans in a period of advancing civil rights. Taken in this way as flat, dry, linguistic constructs, analysis is made both simplistic and complex. The jokes themselves are pared back, devoid of context, irony, tone, animation and so appear simplistically as absolute and closed statements which declare the position of each joker. Yet the absence of context also opens up tremendous scope for interpretation of the jokes so that analysis becomes highly contestable. In the most straightforward way, for example, without knowing that Davis is a black performer in a nightclub, what sense would the first line make? In more problematic terrain, how would we assess the degree of aggression between the speakers that appears to be implicit in the language?

The documentation of these jokes allows us to excavate and analyse them as theatrically performed in their original context, rather than purely in their linguistic form. This doesn't make understanding of the jokes simpler: instead the complexity of interpretation is matched by an equal complexity in understanding the many layers of the form and content. My

contention here is that such jokes are deceptive, in that while their compact form makes them appear simple enough, they are subject to the same depth, richness, contradictions, ambivalences and subtleties as any other dramatic writing. As such, they should be approached as performance texts, following Eric Exe Christoffersen's model. Christoffersen describes the performance text, which only comes into being when performance happens before spectators, as a 'series of expressive elements which are present at the same time, just as all the expressive elements of a painting are present at the same time' (Christoffersen 1993, 124). In the case of the three jokes, the language in performance cannot be taken separately from – or privileged over – the physical presence, dress and vocal tone of the comedians, the lighting state, the set or any other element of the staging.

Christoffersen also describes this as 'the wave of meaning elements' (124) to note the curious operation of time in performance. The assembly of expressive elements can be isolated and read from moment to moment, which he calls the simultaneous or spatial dimension. In this dimension, each of the jokes above can be isolated and taken as discrete moments controlled by the speaker and experienced as complete by the receiver. At the same time, the linear dimension marks the unfolding logic of the performance over time, as in this instance where each of the jokes forms a response to the previous joke. It is this linear progression that identifies the succession of jokes as banter. By this term, I mean a form of humour in which two or more people are engaged in comic exchanges on a particular topic, which is usually contentious and outside of the polite regulations of social discourse. In the Rat Pack scenario, this revolves around questions of black identity and civil rights in America.

The comic framing of such interactions as banter appears to claim two particular dynamic layers. First, that any comments made under the rubric of banter are driven primarily by comic rather than serious intent, and so are not necessarily ones that the speaker is committed to. The meaning of the joke is consequently claimed to be secondary to its immediate comic

effect. Second, this claim is contingent on the supportive reception of those comments: responding appreciatively or humorously to any initiated banter validates the speaker's right to air questionable opinions in the present company. As such, banter usually operates within an established network of relationships in which the speaker anticipates that the hearers will license the joke. This is a problematic form of licensing, since the degree of the speaker's seriousness remains unquantified (and unquantifiable) even as it can never be wholly neutralised. Furthermore, banter is often (but not always) predicated on an object of ridicule that may or may not be present. If the degree of seriousness attached to the speaker's comment is obscured, the degree that attaches to the target, or butt, of the joke is even more difficult to determine. This raises a dilemma in reading exchanges of comic banter. From one perspective, they appear as good-natured but meaningless ribaldry that produces and strengthens the platonic intimacy or solidarity of those engaged. From another, however, the humour may appear as a masking of coercive or manipulative tactics, in which power relations are asserted and those in weak positions are made complicit in their own diminishment.

In the linear dimension of the performance text, then, the jokes operate as banter owing to the dynamic interaction between the comments and the speakers, while the simultaneous dimension takes each individual joke as a closed and finite statement in its own right. The experience of performance is an ongoing negotiation of these linear and simultaneous poles.

The documentation of this Rat Pack performance allows us to excavate these jokes as performance text and so make a more rounded and specific assessment of how the comedy is operating. I say excavate because the historical context of the exchange is highly significant, as noted, in that it is consciously set against the difficult backdrop of the American civil rights movement. Within the recording, the audience's reactions are quite prominent and themselves form part of the performance text as another expressive element which opens up

further waves of meaning about how the jokes functioned in socio-historical terms. Ken Willis' notion of 'humour networks' (2005) might be valuable here in framing the various shared points and connections that unite performers and audience and so inform the production and reception of comedy. The audience can be understood to form part of a network in its collective appreciation of the Rat Pack, their reason for attending the event. For Willis, the commitment shown in the act of attendance goes beyond a mere appreciation of the act, and moves into an endorsement of, or agreement with, it. Accordingly, any appreciative response to the humour above can be understood to imply approval of the racial positions being performed. This seems to me a particularly vital presumption of banter which, as discussed above, operates through being validated and licensed.

The Rat Pack members themselves might also be understood as belonging to a series of shared networks:² aesthetically, they all share a professional background as singers of the Great American Songbook, film actors and exponents or admirers of vaudeville performance, and their appreciation of these forms may also produce networks and connections with the audience; as professional performers, each member of the trio also has considerable fame, wealth and status in their own right; and personally, they are known to belong to a close social network, also known commonly as the Rat Pack. They also share a level of connection through socio-cultural identity, as all have an immigrant ancestry.³

The composition of the audience's identity on the audio recording is impossible to determine, although from footage of other performances by the Rat Pack it is a reasonable assumption that the majority of spectators are white Americans. From this historical vantage point, their shared nationality in this specific period places them within an extensive humour network that distinguishes them culturally from our own era, and so lends the performance text an inner coherence and a sense of distance. For those present at the historical event, the jokes are wholly bound up with contemporary debates and tensions around civil rights, and these

inform the delivery and reception of the material. A contemporary audience, listening to the audio recording, may be able to sense this coherence through the ambience of the performance. At our remove from the specific historical circumstances, however, the full implications of the jokes are both inaccessible and inarticulable.

The lack of visuals in the documentation give little definite information about the staging. From other records of Rat Pack performances, the performers usually occupy a relatively narrow downstage strip with the orchestra and conductor taking the majority of the upstage space, and filling the full length of the stage. From available video recordings, the staging of the Rat Pack shows is more functional than decorous. A recurring visual motif of Rat Pack performances is the presence of an onstage drinks trolley, known jokingly as the Salad Bar. As Sinatra and Martin have performed some comedy dialogue titled 'At the Salad Bar' earlier on the CD, it is reasonable to assume the drinks trolley is on stage during the sequence of jokes.

Within a Rat Pack concert, the performers appear on stage in various combinations, either with all three appearing together, as duos (most frequently Martin and Sinatra) or in a solo slot. In this fragment, Davis is interrupted by Sinatra while singing *Rock-a-Bye Your Baby* as a vehicle for impersonating other singers, including Nat King Cole and Dean Martin. These interruptions begin when Davis announces his impersonation of Cole, and continue throughout the song. *Rock-a-Bye Your Baby* is performed towards the end of a sequence of individual – and previously uninterrupted – numbers, so my supposition is that Davis is alone on stage at this point and that Sinatra and Martin's contributions to the banter are made as disembodied voices from offstage mics, a common trope of Rat Pack performances. This is also indicated by a difference in the acoustic quality of Sinatra and Martin's microphones compared to Davis's, and further suggested by Dean Martin's response when Davis introduces the impersonation of him:

Davis: Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Dean Martin (*whistles*).
Martin: How can that be me, I'm at the bar?
(Martin et al 2001)

Martin could, here, be referring to the onstage 'Salad Bar', but it seems more likely that he is not present on stage.

Sinatra's first interruption appears to introduce the element of race into the comedy, although as noted this is through a rather crude visual insinuation that Davis's black identity as a mere matter of skin colour, rather than cultural identity, makes him invisible against the nightclub background. Visual records suggest that the lighting in the Copa Room was usually fairly subdued, and during individual sections the singer could be caught in a spotlight leaving the rest of the room dark, and this may well have been the context for Sinatra's reference. The joke itself makes no direct reference to race, expecting the audience to catch the reference immediately, which they do. The insult also belittles Davis as a performer through the additional implication that he lacks a strong stage presence.

The context for the joke has already introduced a complex set of ideas around race in train, however. The song Rock-a-Bye Your Baby was written by Jean Schwartz, Joe Young and Sam M. Lewis for Al Jolson to perform in the 1918 musical *Sinbad*, and Jolson had produced arguably the most popular recording of the song. As was his trademark, Jolson performed the song in blackface, and its lyrics are littered with references to songs from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, citing Dixie melodies and songs such as Swanee River. Though more distant (and objectionable) to contemporary listeners of the documented performance, such allusions to the blackface tradition are likely to have been familiar to the historical audience literate enough in popular culture to appreciate the Rat Pack, and Sinatra, Martin and even Davis had appeared in blackface early in their careers (see Calvert 2015). In the documented performance, the tradition of white performers caricaturing black people was being doubly troubled. At the point of Sinatra's intervention, Davis is impersonating another black

performer, Nat King Cole, but he is also (as his colleagues know well) about to impersonate the white performer Dean Martin. While Sinatra's joke may draw into consciousness a racial stereotype that is implicit in the song being sung, the linear progression of the performance destabilises the easiness of this stereotyping through the complex of impersonations.

This is compounded towards the end of the song when Davis Jr is singing in his own voice, and Sinatra quips 'who are you doing now, Sam?' to which Davis replies 'I don't know, I haven't found out yet' (Martin et al 2001). As a public figure, Davis had also troubled racial convention through his interracial marriage to the Swedish actress May Britt in 1960, as well as controversial rumoured affairs with other white actresses such as Kim Novak and Ava Gardner. These relationships had drawn condemnation from the white community, most infamously in a demonstration staged in London by Oswald Moseley's fascists, and also from the black community through disapproving letters to the press accusing Davis of betraying his own race.

At the same time, Quincy Jones, who often arranged and conducted for Sinatra in this period, viewed Davis's membership of the Rat Pack as a strong political statement in its own right, a defiant act of collaboration at a time when public attempts to enforce integration faced strong resistance. This, for Jones, was consistent with Sinatra's own stance on racial equality.

Sinatra's starring role in the 1945 film short *The House I Live In*, in which he preached racial and religious tolerance to a group of street youths, was far from a cynical or tokenistic exercise in public moralising. Even in the early days of his career, while touring with the Tommy Dorsey band, he would aggressively champion the (legally non-existent) rights of black colleagues to stay in the same hotels and eat in the same restaurants as their white colleagues (see Mustazza 2004). Biographer J. Randall Taraborrelli (1999, 285) has noted that historians of Sinatra's life and work are, accordingly, 'baffled' by jokes such as the

“keep smiling” insult, since they are inconsistent with the singer’s lifelong active campaigning for civil rights.

The joke as delivered by Sinatra does introduce something of an aggressive tone to the routine. Not only does it interrupt Davis’s performance, it does so with a sense of urgency that feels quite vehement. This may be because Sinatra is approaching the joke with the instincts of a musician rather than a comedian, urgently attempting to complete the interruption before the next phrase of the music begins. Yet Sinatra often delivers jokes in a way which heightens their intrinsic aggression, inflecting words with a peculiar heaviness that makes them appear intense and threatening rather than playful and comic. Again, there may be something of Sinatra’s skill as a singer operating here: his sensitivity to lyrics searches for the emotional depth beneath the light surface, and he often phrases the melody in original ways that bring out this intensity. He is, I would argue, doing the same here and accentuating the usually latent aggression of the joke rather than the lightness that would ordinarily characterise it as banter. This is not to suggest that Sinatra necessarily performs the joke badly or gets it wrong: as the aggression that he produces already exists inside the joke, his rendition of it is in some ways a highly faithful interpretation.

Shawn Levy notes a particular distinction between Sinatra, on the one hand, and Davis and Martin on the other, in this respect. Sinatra, he says:

was cool in the sense of remote. Dean and Sammy were warm in the sense of comfortable. When Frank took the stage it was an annunciation; people came to worship, weep, get quivery in the genitals, feel their hearts stop. When Dean and Sammy were with him, it was a party; you went to enjoy yourself.

(Levy 2002, 113)

There is something of this in the audience response to Sinatra’s offensive joke, in which an unforced and sustained laughter picks up and underlines the aggression towards Davis. There is 14 seconds of laughter, seemingly at Davis’s expense, before Davis retaliates. It is difficult

without a visual recording to know for sure what sustains the laughter – it would not be uncommon for Davis to mug the audience in mock affront and so reclaim the high ground.

However, the unbroken consistency of the laughter, augmented by whistles and Davis himself joining in at the end suggests that this is primarily a delighted reaction to Sinatra's joke.

Davis's own laughter here presents a difficulty in reading the joke as performance text. His audible giggles towards the end of the audience laughter signal an appreciation and acceptance of Sinatra's insult, diminishing himself as a person and performer. Ken Willis (2005), drawing on models developed by Hay and Carrell, considers the circumstances under which the appreciation of a joke inevitably contains tacit or overt endorsement of, or agreement with, the speaker's position, a highly relevant theme in relation to this exchange between the Rat Pack. Notwithstanding the veneer of lightheartedness, the dynamics of banter, with their emphasis on interaction and validation, perhaps intensify this sense of endorsement by either presuming or producing that the jokes tap into a shared value system.

Willis observes further that the relationships operating between speakers and receivers are not necessarily equal, and are intimately connected with the power bases of society. In a similar vein, Edmund N. Santurri has commented that the dynamics of the racial banter between Sinatra and Davis echo the power imbalance of the private relationship between the two men, in which Davis is cemented into a subservient role:

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, 206)

Taraborrelli cites Davis' own acknowledgement of his reluctant subservience in his relations with the Rat Pack:

'the jokes were offensive. But, man, look at the company I was keeping. I had to put up with it ... I didn't like it a lot of the time ... I had to bite my tongue a lot.'

(Taraborrelli 1999, 285)

Davis's appreciation of Sinatra's joke in the current instance can be taken to substantiate this impression: the giggling appreciation of the joke implies Davis's complicity in a self-demeaning act if it extends to the endorsement of the racial sentiment motivating Sinatra's interruption.

There are other, or at least additional, possibilities for this power imbalance rather than perceived racial superiority and inferiority. Ten years younger than Sinatra, Davis's apparent subservience, according to Levy, is grounded in youth as much as anything else and so Davis's appreciation could be an acknowledgement of Sinatra's seniority. It could also reflect the power difference in celebrity status between them: Davis was immensely successful, and widely celebrated as a versatile performer. Journalist Evelyn Cunningham, writing in 1963, observed that:

If you have never seen Sammy Davis Jr., perform in a nightclub, it is next to impossible to believe what you hear about him. You don't accept the claims that he is the "greatest entertainer in the world."

(Cunningham 1963, 221)

Sinatra's status as the greatest was less contested. In 1961, Richard Gehmann (1961, 9) remarked that Sinatra, 'unquestionably is the foremost entertainer of his time, perhaps of all time'. Davis's appreciation could simply be deferential in respect to Sinatra's elevated status. And yet, listening to the recording there is something seemingly genuine in Davis's laughter that suggests it is appreciative rather than respectful.

Nevertheless, this could be an appreciation of Sinatra as an entertainer, rather than as a racist. One of the hallmarks of the Rat Pack performances was a sense of spontaneity, heightening the comedy through an impression that the lines were improvised, which they rarely were, while also suggesting that the audience was indeed seeing the natural, unrehearsed banter of close friends. While the lines themselves were usually scripted, however, their freshness came from their placing within the show which was not fixed and so allowed for a degree of flexibility with the timing. Sammy Davis Jr is particularly alert to the cultivation of spontaneity as a performance strategy. In an interview in 1960 he described a repeated joke that he had used regularly in live shows which he would deliver to his bandleader who would laugh and 'pretty soon the audience would laugh too. It wasn't much. It wasn't even funny, but it sounded spontaneous and unrehearsed' (Martin 1960, p.425). His appreciation of Sinatra could, therefore, be a genuine admiration for the timing of the joke in producing this sense of spontaneity and its accompanying laugh. It is also true, of course, that Davis's own generous laughter reinstates the warmth of the performance, maintaining the party atmosphere and taking the sting out of Sinatra's aggression.

Whatever underscores the giggling appreciation, it quickly becomes clear that Davis neither endorses nor agrees with Sinatra's racial insult. His retaliatory response is confident and direct, diminishing Sinatra's power by drawing political power around himself, and also suggesting that within the licensed banter of performance he was not, perhaps, as obliged to bite his tongue as he and Santurri suggest.

In responding to 'You fellers', he allies Martin with Sinatra, implicitly identifying them as Italian-Americans, distinct from his own African-American status. For Sinatra, this is a personal and political point of connection with Davis: Hamill has observed that Sinatra once explained that his fervour for civil rights was born of a recognition that Italian-Americans and African-Americans both suffered racial abuse and violence. Yet it is clear from the above that

Italian-Americans have access to greater power than African-Americans, and on the stage Davis is outnumbered by the Rat Packers of Italian heritage. The increasing momentum of the civil rights movement, however, marks this as a time when traditional power relations are shifting and unstable. Davis as an African-American not only alludes to the solidarity of the burgeoning civil rights movement but also the Government's use of troops to enforce racial integration, as happened at Little Rock in 1957. References to Little Rock, and Sammy Davis's ability to call troops on to the stage form recurring motifs in Rat Pack banter (see Calvert 2015), and they underscore his playful threat here that Martin and Sinatra have not got many rights left.

The audience reaction further reinforces that the political momentum is with Davis. Although Sinatra scored appreciative and sustained laughter, the laughter for Davis's retaliation is more raucous, more celebratory and swiftly spills over into applause. Willis notes that in Hay's analysis of humour, to find amusement in ethnic material is implicitly to agree with the basis of the joke. The banter here, however, complicates that observation. Davis Jr first appreciates Sinatra's racial insult and then cancels any agreement through his own retaliation. More complex, however, is the audience's reactions to both jokes which appreciates, and therefore endorses two irreconcilable positions. From one perspective, it could be argued that the louder, more wholehearted reaction to Davis's joke cancels any agreement implicit in the response to Sinatra's initial quip. From the linear perspective of the performance text, this seems logical enough. Viewed from the spatial or simultaneous dimension, however, the audience's capacity to maintain these two contradictory positions is also feasible at a time when culturally, socially and politically America's consciousness of racial questions is shifting, even if it is not ultimately advancing in material terms.

The linear dimension can add another explanation to Sinatra's own joke, which to read as a purely racist insult is to restrict to its vertical, simultaneous dimension. And yet, since such

spontaneity is only feigned in Rat Pack performances, Sinatra is well aware that such a statement is not closed or final but an open invitation, and challenge, to Davis to retaliate. This is far from Sinatra acting as a political stooge, although it would go some way to explaining the contradiction between such jokes and his public stance on civil rights. As an entertainer, however, the challenge could remain wholly genuine as mutual competition between the performers as artists is a common feature of the performance dynamic, as the audience will know well. The gauntlet to Davis, therefore, is not only to deal with the political, racial matter of the joke but to deal with the comic artistry of it in its presentation as banter. Equally, the audience's response to Davis may signal less a vindication of Davis's political position than a recognition of his superior appeal as a comedian.

Dean Martin's joke in response, which concludes this section of banter, acts primarily on the linear plane, as both its structure and meaning depend on Davis's joke. The reference to 'lefts' is obviously a pun on Davis's reference to (civil) rights, which shifts the meaning into the boxing term 'left hooks' (although there may also be an additional political pun operating here along the lines of right wing / left wing, a potential reference to Sinatra's politics).

Introducing this boxing terminology plays on Martin's public identity. In his youth, he was an amateur boxer known as Kid Crochet (a play on his Italian surname name Crocetti), and his broad physical build accentuates this, especially when contrasted with the diminutive Davis.

Taken in tandem with his stage persona, which was a 'drunk' act influenced by the comedian Phil Harris, Martin also shifts the humour away from the national political context and back to the intimacy of the concert setting. In effect, he evokes the image of race relations as a bar room brawl. Politics here is not a transcendental matter to be settled legislatively or ideologically (as Davis has positioned it) but located in the immediacy of interpersonal dynamics. If, as supposed, Martin's is a disembodied voice, however, the physicality of violence is not itself being invoked here. Rather, the comedy stands in the place of the

violence, and the banter uses humour to play out the same power struggle that brawling pursues. Taken as a whole, the comic banter found in the recording of Rock-a-Bye Your Baby is initiated through Sinatra's ambush of Davis's performance, and pursued through the cut-and-thrust of verbal exchanges, moving between offensive and defensive sallies.

Although (arguably) the most skilled comedian of the three performers, Martin's quip draws the least laughter. If we take the recording as accurately capturing the dynamics of the performance text, in the competitive banter Davis emerges as the clear winner. Yet his is not an outright victory, and the sequence of jokes reveals attitudes and perspectives that are transitional, contradictory and unresolved. Through the documentation of this event, we can access the jokes as energised performance text, rather than dry, purely linguistic constructs, and place them in their historical context to open up much, if not all, of the complexity and contradiction that motivates them.

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¹ The recording is also available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42-NYJkIFRI> [Accessed 12 September 2015]

² By this point in 1963, live performances by the Rat Pack are usually confined to the three performers discussed here, and exclude Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop who appeared in earlier stage shows.

³ In an earlier article (which includes a brief discussion of these three jokes), I have discussed the idea that membership of the Rat Pack is based on a sense of shared or aspirational identity. See Calvert (2015).