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Gay Talese Frank Sinatra Has A Cold

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The Masterpiece of Observational Journalism: Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"

In the pantheon of American magazine journalism, few pieces have achieved the legendary status of Gay Talese's 1966 profile, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold." Published in *Esquire*, this landmark article did not merely report on a famous singer—it redefined what a profile could be. Talese, employing techniques that would come to define the New Journalism movement, turned a seemingly mundane obstacle—Sinatra's cold—into a narrative lens through which the complex, mercurial personality of one of the 20th century's most iconic entertainers could be viewed. More than five decades later, "Gay Talese Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" remains a touchstone for writers, editors, and students of nonfiction craft, a testament to the power of observation, patience, and literary artistry.

The genius of the piece lies not in what Sinatra said—because, crucially, Talese never secured a formal interview with the star. Sinatra was battling a cold and was irritable, guarded, and prone to canceling appointments. Rather than abandon the assignment, Talese turned the challenge into an advantage. He immersed himself in Sinatra's orbit, trailing him through recording sessions, parties, and casual encounters, capturing the reactions of those around him—his cronies, his bodyguards, his ex-wife, his fans. The cold became a unifying metaphor for Sinatra's isolation, his power, and his vulnerability. It is a masterclass in showing, not telling.

The Genesis of a Legend: How the Article Came to Be

In 1965, *Esquire*editor Harold Hayes commissioned Talese to write a profile of Frank Sinatra, then at the height of his fame. Sinatra, however, was notorious for disliking interviews and was especially wary of journalists who might pry into his personal life. Talese's initial attempts to set up a formal sit-down were repeatedly thwarted. Sinatra's publicist, Jim Mahoney, would schedule appointments, only to have them canceled at the last minute due to the singer's "cold" or other vagaries.

Talese, a former *New York Times* reporter known for his meticulous reporting, decided to adapt. He would not rely on direct conversation with the subject; instead, he would become a silent observer. Over the course of several months, Talese shadowed Sinatra at recording sessions for the album *Strangers in the Night*, at the Paramount Theatre in New York, and at social events. He interviewed Sinatra's associates, his family members, and even his driver. The story he produced was built on hundreds of hours of observation and dozens of interviews with secondary sources, all woven into a seamless narrative.

The Cold as a Narrative Device

Sinatra's cold—his hoarseness, his fatigue, his irritability—became the central motif. "Frank Sinatra has a cold," the opening line states bluntly. Then Talese launches into a vivid description of the singer's mood and the

atmosphere around him: “The cold was not yet serious, but it was something to be concerned about, and Sinatra was concerned. It was a cold that had been with him for three days, and it was not going away. He was irritable, and his irritability was contagious.”

By focusing on the cold, Talese avoided the trap of writing a standard celebrity profile that would have been forgotten. Instead, he created a character study that felt intimate and urgent. The cold was Sinatra’s excuse for canceling interviews, but it also served as a window into his personality: his control, his impatience, his need for perfection. Every time Sinatra cleared his throat or waved off a question, Talese was there, taking notes. The cold made Sinatra more human, but also more distant. It was a barrier that Talese turned into a bridge.

Gay Talese and the Rise of New Journalism

“Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” is often cited as a quintessential example of New Journalism, a movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that blended the techniques of fiction—scene-setting, dialogue, point of view—with rigorous reporting. Writers like Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Truman Capote, and Norman Mailer were its architects. Talese, though sometimes overlooked in favor of the flashier Wolfe, was a foundational figure. His approach was quieter, more observational. He believed in being invisible, letting the details speak for themselves.

In *Esquire*, Talese had the perfect platform. He could write long-form, non-chronological, deeply immersive pieces. “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” is structured not as a linear timeline but as a series of vignettes: a recording session, a conversation with Sinatra’s valet, a dinner at the home of his then-girlfriend Mia Farrow, a fight with a reporter. Each scene builds on the previous, creating a mosaic of a man who is both adored and feared, charismatic and cruel.

The Technique of Immersion

Talese’s reporting method was painstaking. He later wrote about how he would hang around Sinatra’s hotel rooms, bars, and recording studios, never pushing for a direct interview. He made himself so unobtrusive that Sinatra’s entourage eventually forgot he was there. This allowed Talese to capture candid moments: the way Sinatra’s bodyguards would scan a room for threats, the deference of his band members, the nervous energy of the engineers when Sinatra grew impatient.

One of the most famous sequences describes Sinatra at a recording session, struggling to hit a note. The cold has affected his voice, and he stops, annoyed. “He sings the phrase again, and again, and still it is not right. His voice is raspy, and his intonation is suspect. He does not like the sound of it. He turns to the orchestra and says, ‘What are you looking at?’ It is a rhetorical question, but it is not asked rhetorically.” Talese’s ability to capture tone and body language through precise observation is unmatched.

The Structure and Style of a Classic

The article opens with a striking first sentence: “Frank Sinatra has a cold.” It is short, almost banal, but it hooks the reader immediately. Talese then spends the next several paragraphs describing the symptoms, the waiting room of Sinatra’s world, and the mood of those around him. He does not reveal the subject’s face until later, building suspense.

The piece is written in a mix of third-person omniscient and close third-person, often drifting into Sinatra’s point of view. Talese uses free indirect discourse, where the narrator adopts the language and thoughts of the character. For example: “Sinatra was a man who had to be in control. He could not stand to be sick. It was a weakness, and he hated weakness in others, and he hated it in himself.” This technique gives the reader access to Sinatra’s psyche without needing direct quotes.

The Role of Secondary Characters

Talese populates his story with a vivid cast: Sinatra's valet, George Jacobs; his publicist, Jim Mahoney; his ex-wife, Ava Gardner (quiety observed from a distance); his daughter, Nancy; and his cronies like Jilly Rizzo. Each character adds a layer to the portrait. When Talese self-cribs hosted. For instance, a young singer barely dares to speak to him. A waiter trembles. These micro-interactions speak volumes.

The article also features a famous scene where Sinatra, in a fury, punches a photographer. Talese describes the event clinically, without moralizing: "Sinatra's hand was clenched. The photographer did not see it coming. The punch was not a hard one, but it was enough to send the man stumbling backward. Sinatra's associates stepped in. The photographer left. The party continued." The understatement makes the violence more chilling.

Impact on Journalism and Popular Culture

Upon publication in April 1966, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" was an immediate sensation. Readers and critics alike praised its depth and artistry. It won the Page One Award for magazine journalism and has been reprinted countless times. It is now a staple of journalism and creative nonfiction curricula. The G. B. Harrison collection *The Art of the Personal Essay* includes it, and it is often ranked among the greatest magazine articles of all time.

Beyond its immediate acclaim, the piece influenced a generation of writers. Journalists like David Remnick, John McPhee, and Susan Orlean have cited Talese as an inspiration. The article demonstrated that a feature story did not need direct access to the subject to be revealing. Sometimes, the absence of the subject's voice can be more powerful, because it forces the writer to rely on the context, the physical details, and the reactions of others.

The Legacy of Gay Talese's Approach

Talese went on to write other iconic long-form pieces—such as "The Silent Season of a Hero" (about Joe DiMaggio) and "The Voyeur's Motel" (a controversial later work)—but none have reached the mythic status of the Sinatra profile. The article is a case study in how to turn a limitation into a strength. In an era of celebrity journalism that often relies on puff pieces or scandal, Talese's work remains a benchmark of seriousness and craft.

For writers, the key lesson from "Gay Talese Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" is the value of patience and observation. Talese spent months on a story that ultimately runs about 15,000 words. He did not chase the scoop; he chased the truth embedded in small gestures, offhand remarks, and the texture of a room. His prose is elegant but never overwrought. He trusts the reader to understand the implications.

Why It Still Matters Today

In today's fragmented media landscape, where hot takes and clickbait dominate, Talese's work seems almost antiquated in its depth. Yet it is more relevant than ever. The article reminds us that journalism is not merely about transmitting data or breaking news—it is about telling true stories with lasting emotional and intellectual resonance. The careful construction of a narrative, the restraint in judgment, the willingness to sit and wait—these are skills that transcend any technological shift.

Furthermore, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" offers a time capsule of mid-20th-century America: the swagger of the Rat Pack era, the machismo of Hollywood, the racial tensions (Sinatra was a vocal supporter of civil rights, a point Talese touches on lightly), and the loneliness of fame. The cold is a metaphor not just for Sinatra's physical state but for the isolating nature of celebrity. He is surrounded by people but fundamentally alone.

Students of journalism often analyze the article for its use of scenes, dialogue, and narrative arc. Some argue that it is as close to a short story as nonfiction can get. Others claim it set the template for the modern profile. Regardless, the article remains a vibrant, readable piece that continues to inspire.

Conclusion

Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” is far more than a magazine article about a singer with a stuffy nose. It is a monument to the craft of literary journalism, a demonstration of how to turn the most mundane of circumstances—a cold—into a lens for understanding human complexity. Through meticulous observation, a refusal to take shortcuts, and a deep empathy for his subject, Talese produced a work that has endured for over half a century. Writers who study the piece learn that the best stories often come when the

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