

It had begun like the World Soft Championships. The songs, mostly by Antonio Carlos Jobim. Tender melodies. Tender like a two-day, lobster-red Rio sunburn, so tender they'd scream agony if handled rough. Slap one of his fragile songs on the back with a couple of trumpets? Like washing crystal in a cement mixer.

Seemed like the whole idea was to out-hush each other. Decibels treated like daggers. The arranger tiptoeing about, eliminating some percussion here, ticks there, ridding every song of clicks, bings, bips, all things sharp. Doing it with fervor matched only by Her Majesty's Silkworms.

And Sinatra makes a joke about all this. "I haven't sung so soft since I had the laryngitis."

Singing so soft, if he sang any softer he'd have to be lying on his back.

Hours earlier, Sinatra & Co. moved into Studio One. Nobody much around except a couple of Rent-a-Cops. Sinatra there half an hour early, as never before. He begins running down the melody of the new songs. Softly whistling, smoothing away wrinkles.

The booth begins to fill up with gold cuff-links, Revlon red fake nails, Countess Mara ties.

Outside, through double-glass windows, musicians with black fiddle cases wander warily in, chatting about the weather in Boston, the governor in Berkeley, anything but pizzicato.

Along the studio walls, the wanderings of miscellaneous Brazilians in yachting caps and silver mustaches.

And then, casually, at eight, exactly eight, Sinatra looks over at the conductor and "Well let's try one, huh?"

At first, it does not groove right. This is not ring-a-ding-ding. Sinatra mother-hens the session closely: "Let's have an 'A,' huh?" as he snaps the orchestra.

The "A" passes quickly around the infield: piano to strings to reeds.

They run through the song once. Then . . . pause. Long.

Long. Like standing there while the Judge opens up the verdict envelope. The arranger-conductor, not made of asbestos, sensitive in his position, there between Jobim and Sinatra, looking over at Sinatra, worrying “Tempo?”

“No, it’s a good tempo. It’s the only way you can do it. You have to hang *with* it.” Sinatra’s assurance: there is only one tempo for this song; any other tempo would be wrong. Have been, are, and forever shall be wrong.

One more exploration of the song, to catch more wrinkles. Sinatra himself, at a rough spot in the bridge, stops cold. Long. Long. He points to himself as the culprit. “That was an *old* Chesterfield that just came up on me. Around 1947, it felt like.”

You feel for anybody who will blow it on the next take. It begins. The long, long. About a minute and a half in, then the trombonist braaacks a note. Braaack. That obvious. He can’t look over at some other trombonist; he’s the *only* trombonist. So he sits there, a blutch-colored felt hat sagged across the bell of his horn, hung there to keep it Soft. Poor Trombone Player knows: his music said B and it came out F and Jesus was it wrong.

Sinatra looks over. “Don’t sweat it,” he says.

The trombonist tries a joke back: “If I blow any softer, it’ll hafta come out the back of my neck.”

Next to Jobim perches Jobim’s personal drummer, a Brazilian who can look simultaneously alert and stoned. Flew in to Hollywood specially for this, but not from Rio. From Chicago, figure that out. “Soft, son, hold it down.” A bronze-colored sofa pillow slumps back against his bass drum.

This drummer, named Dom-Um Romao, looking like he should be selling weird rugs and Arab doorways. Looking like a tricky one, Martha. Between takes, the way he keeps the tips of his fingers warm under his armpits. His arms crossed that way, the fuzzy goatee, looking like a road company Buddhist.

In contrast, the Conductor, a German. Claus Ogerman, speaking always Germanic phrasing. “Yes the introduction, I

will slow down each time the fourth beat.” There in his blue cardigan sweater, fully buttoned. So starched even his sweaters have creases.

The buzzing continues, with grey-templed producer Sonny Burke conferring on last-minute scoring changes, standing by with vats of oil lest troubled waters rise. To the side, Jobim’s goateed producer, Ray Gilbert, soothing softly in Portuguese.

On the next number, Jobim will sing duet with Sinatra. “Tone,” as Sinatra calls him, bends in close to his microphone. His hair undressed, finger combed. His jaw moving with precision, moving to each new vowel, his lips moving like yours do when you write a check for over \$1000.

The slight and tousled boy-man, speaking softly while about him rushes a world too fast. Antonio, troubled not by the clamour in the world. Troubled more by the whisperings from his heart.

The song’s last note. Keep quiet until the cymbal stops ringing. Dead quiet. Only Sinatra, a born peeker, can’t wait. He liked that take. He bends over, peeking into the control booth, unwilling to wait for the endless cymbal overhang to end. Peeking in at the engineers, as if daring them to reveal any Electronic Irreverences.

They reveal none.

“That,” says Sinatra, “*should* be the record.”

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During playback, Sinatra leans on the conductor’s vacant podium. The only parts of him you see just popped white cuffs and worry lines in his brow. He’s Worry personified, like he’s in the last reel of “The Greatest Birth Ever Given.”

Around him circle the rest. The circle, too, listens to the playback.

Grown men do not cry. They instead put on faces gauged to be intent. They too listen hard, as if half way through someone whispers buried treasure clues.

It’s over. Sinatra walks away. “Next tune,” he says.

Around him, the circle. Half-stammering, half-silent,  
because they can't think up a phrase of praise that's truly the  
topper.

Except for Jobim.

He walks up to Sinatra. A peculiar walk, like he's got gum  
on one sole. He puts his arm around Sinatra. He hugs Sinatra.  
Both men smile. Jobim turns out to look at the circle around  
them. His face alight, proud of his singer. His face triumphant.  
As if to say, and all along, you thought he was Italian.

--STAN CORNYN