

By Norm Clarke  
Las Vegas Review-Journal  
Posted date: Sunday, December 12,  
2015



LAS VEGAS  
REVIEW-JOURNAL®

## Sinatra's influence aided careers of Dennis Bono, Larry Ruvo

Lives changed and doors opened when **Frank Sinatra** gave his blessing. It might explain his nickname: "The Pope." Ask singer **Dennis Bono** or Southern Wines mogul **Larry Ruvo**.

Sinatra had helped boost Bono's career, but Bono didn't know the full story until eight years ago. Bono told the story to his audience Thursday during his weekly radio show at the South Point.

It was the late 80s. Bono was entertainment director at the Sonesta Hotel in Hartford, Conn. He had an album out called "By Myself" that was getting airplay on KMPC in Los Angeles. Sinatra's longtime right-hand man, **Jilly Rizzo**, calls out of the blue and said he and Sinatra heard the song and would like to meet Bono in New York. After a meeting with Rizzo, calls were made "and a week later I was in L.A. sitting at a piano with **Sammy Cahn**," the four-time Oscar-winning songwriter who collaborated with Sinatra. With Rizzo as his manager, Bono soon was opening for comedy legend **Don Rickles**.

One day Bono was summoned to Las Vegas. Sinatra wanted him performing in the lounge during Sinatra's New Year's engagement.

About eight years ago, Bono was reminiscing with **Sam Distefano**, former entertainment director at the Riviera. Distefano filled Bono in on some drama. Riviera president **Arthur Waltzman** had balked at hiring Bono "because he didn't know who I was." When Sinatra found out, he requested that Waltzman and Distefano come up to his suite. When Waltzman stuck to his guns about not booking Bono, Sinatra threatened to cancel his New Year's Eve dinner show for 3,000 guests in the Riviera convention center. Bono worked the lounge. "He stood up for me," Bono said. "A lot of doors opened up because of that."

Ruvo had a similar experience. He got call in the early 1970s to meet with **Billy Weinberger**, president of Caesars Palace. Weinberg, aware of Ruvo's relationship with Sinatra, wanted a problem fixed. Caesars had opened a new Italian restaurant called The Piazza, and Sinatra wasn't dining there. Weinberger added that bellmen were being asked to deliver takeout to Sinatra from The Venetian Ristorante. Ruvo's parents, **Angie and Lou Ruvo**, owned and operated the restaurant.

Larry Ruvo went to Caesars' Circus Maximus showroom, where Sinatra was rehearsing, and prefaced the conversation with, "Promise me you won't shoot the messenger." Ruvo explained the predicament to Sinatra, who responded by getting on the telephone to Weinberger. Sinatra asked Ruvo, part-owner of a small distributing company called Best Brands, for the name of his most expensive champagne. "Mumm Rene Lalou," Ruvo said. Sinatra informed Weinberger he wanted a bottle of the champagne handed out for every two people who come into the showroom for the rest of his engagement. As a result, Weinberger had to raise the minimum from \$35 or \$40 a couple to \$50. Sinatra was sending a signal: don't tell me where to eat.

It put Best Brands on the map, said Ruvo, "and I became the largest Rene Lalou distributor in the world." His success led to the establishment of Southern Wines & Spirits of Nevada, Nevada's largest wine, spirits, beer and beverage distribution company.

And Sinatra continued to dine at The Venetian and order takeout, said Ruvo.

Sinatra's 100th birthday would have been Saturday.



Singer Dennis Bono holds his dog Jilly, named after Jilly Rizzo, Frank Sinatra's longtime right-hand man.