

YESTERDAY



Top, Twin Palms, as it looks today. Photo by James Haefner, courtesy of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. Left, taken in December 1947, this photo confirms that the house was finished in time for Christmas that year; photo by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle Archive, courtesy of The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn. Right, A rare 1947 image shows Twin Palms under construction; photo by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle Archive, courtesy of The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn.

FRANK SINATRA'S TWIN PALMS

In the summer of 1947, Frank Sinatra became enamored of the desert and strolled into the office of local architect E. Stewart Williams wearing a white sailor suit and enjoying an ice cream cone. He told the architect that he wanted to commission a house to be designed and built in time for Christmas.

The singer had in mind a Georgian-style manse with a brick façade and columns. It was the kind of house that

signaled success back in Hoboken and even in Hollywood.

It is said that Williams dutifully complied and drew the requested design. But he also created a plan for a desert modern house and made his pitch for it. Frank was convinced by Williams' renderings, which featured horizontal lines with big glass expanses. He reportedly promptly paid \$150,000 for what would ultimately become one of the desert's most famous midcentury houses.



Above left, predating "Come Fly with Me," Sinatra is in the cockpit circa 1950; photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society. Above right, Sinatra plays the piano for an unidentified starlet and Palm Springs Police Captain Rolph, who would later be memorialized with a nearby street; photo by Paul Pospesil courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society. Right, Frank and Nancy Barbato Sinatra arrive in the desert with daughter Nancy circa 1948. Photo by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle Archive, courtesy The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn.



"IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR"

Known as "Twin Palms" for the pair of trees in the backyard, Sinatra's new getaway featured large sliding glass doors and clerestory windows. The fireplace lines were low and horizontal, faced with a stacked ledger-stone, a look repeated on the chimney outside.

Both the front and back of the property bordered on quiet streets. The pool was free-form, and yet later visitors would postulate it was designed in the shape of a piano—complete with an overhanging trellis made to cast shadows of "keys" onto the shape.

The living room was appointed with state-of-the-art recording equipment as well as air conditioning, new on the residential scene.

All the materials were cutting edge. In his specifications, Williams employed industrial materials and applied them in clean, utilitarian ways. His signature, sand-blasted Douglas fir, or redwood siding and paneling, with commercial-grade windows and light fixtures, gave a sleek yet comfortable feel. The overall impact was distinctly desert modern.

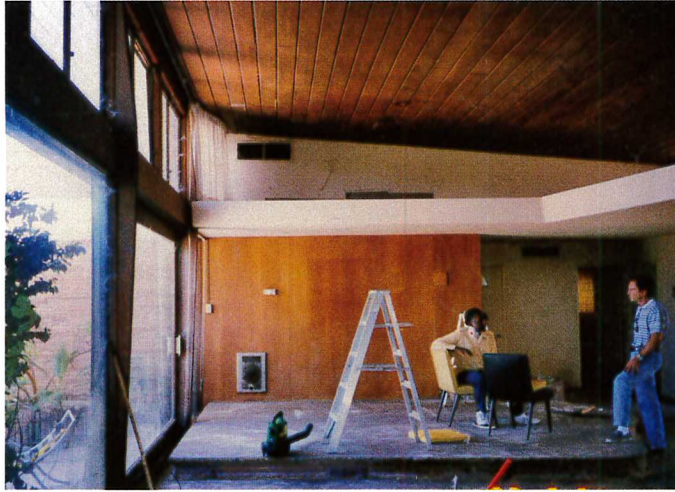
"LOVE AND MARRIAGE"

Frank first lived in the house with his wife, Nancy, and their children, who had their own built-in bunk beds. But he also kept the house during his tempestuous relationship with actress Ava Gardner. Twin Palms was reputedly the scene of many a lover's spat. There is a chip in the master bathroom sink resulting from a tossed

champagne bottle. Lana Turner was supposedly thrown out of the house by an angry Ava. Whatever the antics inside, neighbors and friends were invited to cocktail parties when Frank was in residence, signaled by the lighting of the V-shaped palms or the hoisting of the Jolly Roger up the pole.

Frank was cool, and therefore so was the desert and its burgeoning modern architecture. The whole town was going modern and was overrun with the swanky set. Celebrities were everywhere. But even so, modern architecture was being mass produced for the average guy, too.

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Above left, these asymmetrical gate posts caught Jordan Breer's eye in 1997. Above right, Twin Palms' living room as it looked the day when both Breer and Marc Sanders [pictured] first viewed the house. Below, Twin Palms' original building permit. All courtesy of Jordan Breer. Right, an event at the house today.

APPLICATION FOR PERMIT
BUILDING
 BUILDING DEPARTMENT, CITY OF PALM SPRINGS

11-10 61, Alejo Road
 Lot 18 Block 3776
 Tract Palm Springs
 Owner Frank Sinatra
 Contractor Frank Sinatra

Contractor's License No. _____ Architect _____
 State _____ City _____

Use and Occupancy Dwelling
 Lot Size 2704 132 Side Footage 3776 Height 16'
 Lane R1 Type V
 Front 25 Side 10 Rear 10

Description of Work to Be Done—Remarks and References
 5 room dwelling
 + dressing rooms
 R. W. sliding-Fram. + Stucco
 as per plan

“SOFTLY, AS I LEAVE YOU”

The singer sold Twin Palms in 1957 and moved to a large compound in Rancho Mirage where he continued enjoying life in the desert.

With the passing years, Twin Palms fell into disrepair and neglect. The connection to Sinatra was forgotten, only resurrected by

serendipity 50 years after

the singer had first entered Williams' office.

It began in 1997 when Jordan Breer, a local architectural designer, saw an exhibit of Julius Shulman's photographs at the Palm Springs Art Museum. There, he came across a photo that triggered a memory of a movie he'd seen as a kid, an old Joan Crawford film-noir vehicle titled “The Damned Don't Cry,” partially filmed at the house. Shulman's photo labeled the subject as Frank Sinatra's residence.

Breer had also remembered from Frank Bogert's Palm Springs history that Sinatra's desert home was on Alejo in Palm Springs. “I started down Alejo to see where it was,” he recalls, “and I made it all the way to Sunrise without

seeing it.” He figured it had been torn down. But then, there it was. “I remembered the gates on the house in the movie; they were so weird because one gate post was higher than the other. I knew that was it.” And it was being offered for sale.

The designer called the agent to see it the next day, but in the meantime, stopped by city hall and pulled the records. As he suspected, Sinatra's name was on the permits.

The next morning, the designer arrived just as a truckload of old stuff was being hauled away to the dump—the original Sinatra furnishings, since the house had originally been sold furnished. But there also was an overpowering odor—even with the carpet and furnishings out. “They were handing out dust masks, it was cat-smell central,” says Breer. “The swimming pool was empty. On the ceiling in the master bedroom, the plaster had fallen down,” which made him wonder about the roof. “All the sinks were full,” which raised questions about the plumbing. “It was a mess.” But the in-home recording system was still there.

“About 15 minutes after I got there, the eventual buyer, Marc Sanders, came in, and walked around the place. He didn't know the relation to Sinatra. He'd been living right nearby and had his eye on it.”

Breer also recognized the house reflected a strong design esthetic and turned to the art museum staff to reach out to Mr. Shulman. “We had a nice, hour-long discussion on the phone. He remembered as clear as day that it was by Stewart Williams.”

More of a project than Breer wanted, he was happy to share confirmation of his discoveries with Sanders, “He did a beautiful job.”



“TOO MARVELOUS FOR WORDS”

Now restored, Twin Palms enjoys renown 50 years later when the celebration of all things modern takes place during Modernism Week each year in February. One of the event’s most consistent draws each year is a tour of Twin Palms. The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation is the beneficiary of proceeds from the \$35-per-person tour. This year the house will be open February 23. Peek at the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation website to buy a ticket and come see for yourself the house where Frank lived and where desert modern got its cool. —TRACY CONRAD

DETAILS

Twin Palms House Tour, February 23 Tour Frank Sinatra’s Twin Palms home (1947) designed by modernist architect E. Stewart Williams. The home was designated a Class 1 historic site by the city of Palm Springs in March 2011, and has been described as exhibiting “great mid-century design combined with Hollywood lore.” At ticket purchase, you will be asked to choose one of three tour start times; 10 a.m.–2:30 p.m.; \$35; pspreservationfoundation.org.

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board for the city of Palm Springs and is currently a Palm Springs Planning Commissioner.

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