

TALE OF A Teen Idol

Bobby Rydell leaves no stone unturned in autobiography. By Chris M. Junior

EVERYTHING INSIDE Bobby Rydell's room at the Golden Nugget in Atlantic City, N.J., is what you'd expect to find in a typical casino hotel — with one exception.

Stacked against a wall directly across from where Rydell is seated are seven light-brown shipping boxes. And while they are clearly out of place among the room's amenities and Rydell's items, the boxes are way more important than the flat-screen TV or even his luggage and personal effects.

They contain copies of Rydell's new autobiography, "Teen Idol on the Rocks: A Tale of Second Chances" (Doctor Licks Publishing). And on this Saturday in mid-April, the books will be a featured item on sale during the singer's concert at The Grand, the Golden Nugget's big ballroom.

"I signed all of those last night," says Rydell, glancing over at the boxes from his room's dark brown leather couch. "I would do 60, then take a break. That's 210 right there."

In the confines of his rather modest-size hotel room, that's a lot of books. But in terms of The Grand's seating capacity, though, it's merely a drop in the bucket. To have enough copies to match every available ticket for his show, he would need nearly eight times that amount. But with roughly three weeks to go before the book's official release in stores and through online retailers, the limited supply just might create a little fan fervor.

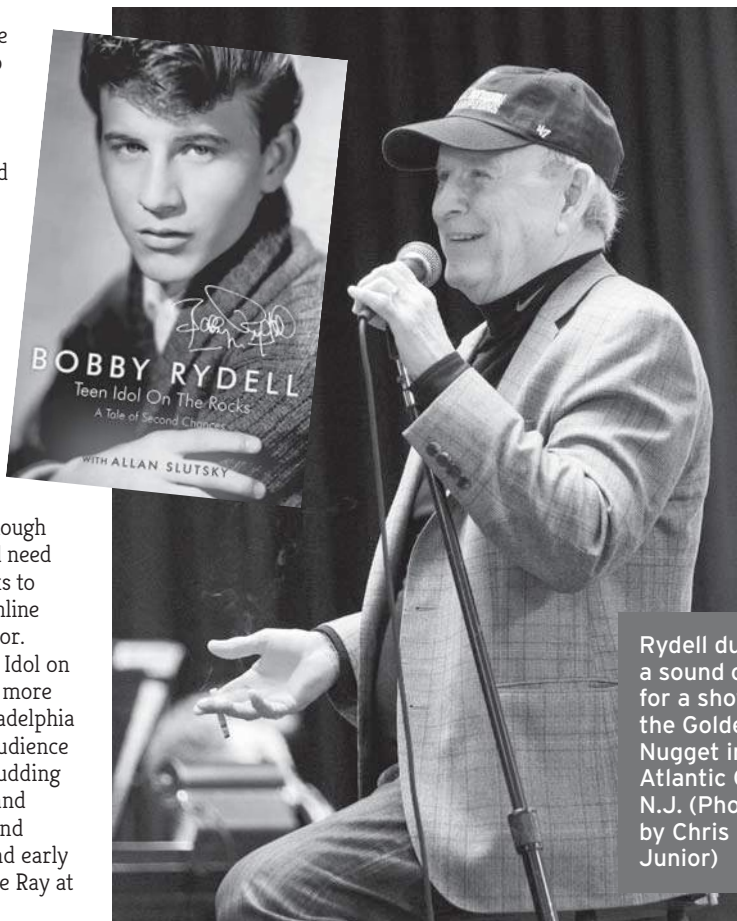
That's actually familiar territory for Rydell, and in "Teen Idol on the Rocks," he recalls those types of experiences and much more in candid and colorful fashion. Born April 26, 1942, in Philadelphia and raised there as Robert Louis Ridarelli, he first tasted audience adulation around age 6, when his father would bring the budding singer to city clubs and bars so he could sit in with bands and also do skits. Adrio "Al" Ridarelli was musically nurturing and supportive in other ways, too. He played big band music and early rock 'n' roll around the house; he took Bobby to see Johnnie Ray at Philadelphia's Earle Theater.

Two of Al's biggest career-shaping assists took place between 1952-54. First, he brought Bobby to an audition for "Paul Whiteman's TV Teen Club," which was successful. Then, at some point during his son's tenure on the talent show, he came up with the Rydell stage name.

Following stints as a drummer in various Philadelphia-area bands, 16-year-old Bobby Rydell signed a recording contract with the Cameo label in January 1959. Five months later, he had his first entry on the Billboard Hot 100 chart: "Kissin' Time." Featuring a joyous Rydell vocal and punctuating hand claps, that song would eventually peak at No. 11. He continued scoring Top 40 hits into 1964, among them "Wild One," "Swingin' School," "Volare" and "Wildwood Days."

During that time, he met Frank Sinatra (at the Copacabana in New York), appeared in his first movie ("Bye Bye Birdie," also starring Janet Leigh and Dick Van Dyke) and had a brief encounter with the pre-fame Beatles (during his European tour with Helen Shapiro). Marriage, children and the deaths of loved ones, as well as concert runs with fellow Philadelphians Fabian and Frankie Avalon, took place in the ensuing years.

So did some major health issues. After decades of drinking, Rydell had double organ transplant surgery in July 2012, and that's where he begins "Teen Idol on the Rocks" — on a gurney inside Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, rolling toward an operation room, where a liver and kidney waited for him.



Rydell during a sound check for a show at the Golden Nugget in Atlantic City, N.J. (Photo by Chris M. Junior)

Inside his room at the Golden Nugget, a fully recovered and relaxed Rydell waits to be escorted downstairs for an afternoon sound check. He's wearing dark blue jeans, a black long-sleeve Nike shirt and a cap commemorating the Villanova men's basketball 2016 NCAA championship. Asked whether the transplant surgery sparked him to start writing his autobiography, Rydell says no and explains the genesis in a way that mirrors his book's pull-no-punches prose.

"Being on the road for so many years," he says, "you're sitting down with people, and you're relating and telling stories — things that happened a couple of years back; things that happened that afternoon. And everybody was telling me, 'Bobby, you have so many great stories. Why don't you write a book?' And this happened an awful lot."

His wife, Linda, also thought he should write his life story, and so he reached out to writer and musician Allan "Dr. Licks" Slutsky. His credits include producing the documentary "Standing in the Shadows of Motown," which tells the story of the revered Motown Records house band; he also wrote the acclaimed book of the same name, which focuses on Motown bassist James Jamerson.

Rydell recalls, "I said to Allan, 'Linda's been bugging me; a lot of people want me to write a book. If you have the chance, I'd like to sit down and talk with you.' And boom" — he claps his hands for emphasis — "that was it."

Over a period of about 18 months, they would meet five days a week for a few hours a day. Slutsky "would fire some things at me," says Rydell, who would start talking "off the top of my head, just relating stories going back to when I was 3 years old."

He was reluctant at first to include some of the stories that are in the book. Before revealing which stories he's referring to, Rydell laughs to himself and gazes to his left, in the direction of the window overlooking Atlantic City's Farley State Marina.

"Like when I talk about a gentleman who was involved with" — he presses a finger against the right side of his nose to indicate the person was with the mafia — "but he has since passed away," Rydell says.

Then there's his late mother, Jennie. Early in "Teen Idol on the Rocks," Rydell writes that she showed no support for his early music activities. Later, in the chapter titled "The Bridge," he says she could go "from a nurturing, loving mother one moment, and in the blink of an eye, be transferred into an incoherent, enraged Mommy Dearest." But while attending his shows, she was a pleasant person, enjoying "the reflected glory of being the mother of an international teen idol."

"Everybody loved my mother," he says, "but they never knew the real Jennie. And that was tough, but if I was going to be honest, I had to put (both sides) in. I had to be honest and get down and dirty. She was my mom, but she was evil."

Rydell is also honest in the book about how his alcohol intake increased over time and negatively affected his health and career.

"I was a social drinker," Rydell says. "But when my first wife (Camille) passed away with breast cancer in 2003, I lost..." He begins to choke up, then looks toward the window for a few seconds before continuing. "I had nowhere to turn, and vodka became a very dear friend. My God, when I drank, I was drinking eight to 10 doubles of vodka a day, with no problem. I was hiding bottles in my golf bag, in the trunk of my car. If half of the bottle was gone in the refrigerator, I'd have to go to the liquor store."

Rydell, who no longer drinks alcohol, faced another major health scare just eight months after his double organ transplant surgery. Days after failing a stress test in March 2013, he underwent double heart bypass surgery. Near the end of "Teen Idol on the Rocks," Rydell writes that he'd "evolved into the bionic man of the showroom circuit."

As for his health today, he says without hesitation, "I feel great, and I'm singing wonderful." He's not so quick to answer when asked whether he and his Philadelphia contemporaries have been overshadowed in the rock 'n' roll timeline.

"Well, if you're specifically talking about Cleveland and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, none of those guys are there," Rydell says. "I think the only Philadelphia people who are there are Hall and Oates, and they're marvelous. But myself, Chubby Checker, Frankie Avalon, Fabian, even James Darren — are we slighted? I would think so. There's a part of the music that meant an awful lot to a lot of people, and that's why that music is still around today. If they (were ever to) induct me, fine, but (in the meantime), I ain't going to lose any sleep over it."

Around 2:30 p.m., there's a knock at the door. A Golden Nugget employee is there to guide Rydell and his wife downstairs to The Grand for his sound check. Rydell slips on a sport coat, and they make their way toward the elevator.

Inside The Grand, show personnel are adjusting lights, setting up rows of high-back cushioned chairs and securing the stage drapery. Most of the backing musicians — some of whom have not performed with Rydell before — are already in their places, tuning and testing their instruments.

Rydell soon joins them onstage and makes small talk with the drummer and one of the horn players. He cracks open a bottle of water, takes a swig and places the bottle on a small table that's close to his stool and microphone. This visual is a stark contrast to the one depicted on the back cover of his book, which shows a

bottle of vodka and a tumbler on a stool.

"Teen Idol on the Rocks" co-writer Slutsky is the guitarist for tonight's show, and he's also in charge of handling charts for the band. Slutsky walks over to Rydell and asks if he'd like to go over the new ones first.

"Absolutely," Rydell says.

And with that, the sound check officially begins. The first new chart is for "You and the Night and the Music," and after a few measures, Rydell waves his hands to stop the band, saying the tempo is too slow. The second attempt is completed without any interruption.

The other new chart is for "I've Got the World on a String," and in his third try at the standard from the Great American Songbook, Rydell finds his vocal sweet spot and sinks himself into the lyrics. (No wonder Sinatra, as noted in "Teen Idol on the Rocks," once referred to Rydell as "an old-fashioned saloon singer like me.") The band also runs through full or partial versions of Rydell's "Forget Him," "Wild One," "Wildwood Days" and "Volare" — and 50-plus years after he recorded those career-defining hits, Rydell still injects them with the same youthful exuberance that made him a star.

Following a short break, they play some more tunes, among them "The Lady Is a Tramp" and "I've Got You Under My Skin." By the time they finish, it's close to 5 p.m., just a few hours before doors will open to ticketholders. For a concert that's scheduled to run about 75 minutes, Rydell and his band have put in more than two hours of same-day prep work.

Rydell descends the stage to meet up with his wife, one of the few people present for all or most of the sound check. Another is a man who appears to be close in age to Rydell, telling the singer he sounded good, and so did the musicians behind him.

"Wait until the show band comes in," Rydell jokes with a smile, getting a laugh in return. Even when he's not holding a microphone, the bionic man of the showroom circuit keeps on entertaining. **GM**

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