

Larry, Moe and Curly Kidnap a Megastar's Son

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) December 10, 2020

Dean Torrence, half of the famous Jan and Dean rock duo, could barely believe the babblings of his friend Barry Keenan. They had gone to high school together, along with Nancy Sinatra and Dean's future partner, Jan Berry, with whom Dean helped usher in California's rock and roll scene. Dean knew Keenan was a little different — smart, wildly ambitious and a partier, but also a tad odd.

It came as little surprise that Keenan's early career skyrocketed. By 21, he was ensconced in the real estate market and the youngest member of the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange, earning the then-exorbitant sum of more than \$100,000 a year. He was married and living the good life — until tragedy struck in the form of a serious car accident. Soon he was drug addicted, having run-ins with the law, bankrupt and separated. Needing money, he approached Dean Torrence, who having benefited financially from Keenan's financial advice, provided it.

Despite the financial assistance, Keenan's plight continued to spiral downward. Desperate, he again sought out Torrence and shared with him a highly detailed and documented business plan — this one, however, going far over the line. Exploring various criminal possibilities, Keenan determined that the one carrying the least risk and the highest return entailed kidnapping the child of a well-known and well-heeled entertainer.

Despite being named Francis Wayne Sinatra, the son of superstar Francis Albert Sinatra came to be known as Frank Sinatra Jr. Born in 1944, Frank Jr. rarely saw his famous father, who traveled the world singing and entertaining. With strong genes and good connections, the shy and friendly Frank Jr. sought to follow in his father's giant footsteps, which is what he was doing on Dec. 8, 1963, at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe.



Frank Sinatra Jr.'s kidnapers: Barry Keenan, Joe Amsler and Johnny Irwin

The times were difficult and the country was in mourning, grieving the November assassination of its young and vibrant president, John F. Kennedy. Frank Sr., greatly saddened by the death of his good friend, was off filming his latest movie, "Robin and the 7 Hoods." Little did anyone realize that another megaton jolt of bad news awaited.

In his suite between shows, 19-year-old Frank Jr. and one of the band's musicians, John Foss, sat, relaxing and munching on some chicken. There was a knock at the door and a voice that called out: "Room service. I've got a package for you." The door opened and an armed 42-year-old Johnny Irwin, a house painter who had dated Keenan's mother, entered, followed by Keenan and his 23-year-old high school classmate Joe Amsler, who thought that he and Keenan were in Tahoe on a construction job.

Foss was tied up as Frank Jr. was hustled away. Keenan forgetfully left his gun behind. Amsler, in his haste to get away, ran into a tree branch and knocked himself out.

The news ricocheted around the nation, sharing the front page with that of Pan Am flight 707 blowing up in a spectacular fireball in Maryland, killing all 81 passengers aboard. Frank Sr. chartered a plane to Nevada, where he spoke with FBI Director J.

Edgar Hoover, California Gov. Pat Brown, and the president's press secretary, Pierre Salinger.

Frank Sr. understandably was terrified. He didn't need to be, though, as Keenan later revealed that God had told him not to harm Frank Jr., to tithe 10 percent of the ransom to the church, and, after five years, to return the ransom — which, after all, was a loan — along with interest.

Keenan and Amsler brought Frank Jr. to a rented house in San Fernando Valley, borrowing money for gas from Frank Jr. They hesitated in making the ransom call, too nervous to talk to the other worldly Frank Sr. Finally, they worked up the courage and called, after which more calls followed.

When Frank Sr. asked how much money they wanted, no firm answer was given. Instead, he was directed to a pay phone by a gas station 30 miles from Reno.



Frank Sinatra with his son, Frank Jr.

An anxious Johnny Irwin started calling the pay phone. As Sinatra had not gotten there yet, the gas station attendant answered. Asked if Frank Sinatra, the most famous entertainer in America, was there, the attendant hung up. Irwin kept calling, with the attendant growing more and more frustrated and angry. Sinatra finally showed up and asked the now flustered and confused attendant whether anyone had been calling for him.

When Sinatra finally spoke with Irwin, the kidnapper made the odd demand of \$240,000. Perhaps insulted at the lowball request, Sinatra snapped and offered a million dollars. Irwin responded, "We don't need that much. We're not gonna take advantage of you, Mr. Sinatra. We need \$240,000." With that, Sinatra was directed to another location and then another and another, gathering the ransom as he went along.

Frank Jr. meanwhile was growing comfortable with the three stooges, at one point laughing and joking with them. With the drop of the money imminent, the kidnappers split up: Keenan and Amsler setting off to pick up the money, and Irwin staying behind with his new friend, Frank Jr., with whom he had bonded.

In picking up the money, Amsler got spooked, thinking cops were all around, and took off. Keenan, with the cash now in hand, called Irwin with the news. When informed that Amsler ran off, Irwin jumped to the conclusion that Keenan knocked off Amsler to get rid of a witness and steal his share of the loot.

Irwin shared his concerns with Frank Jr., who suggested that perhaps Keenan was keeping all the money and leaving Irwin to take the rap. Tired and confused, Irwin released Frank Jr. and then called Frank Sr., chillingly and unintentionally telling him, "Something has gone wrong." Frank Sr., thinking the worst, was quickly told that the problem was at the kidnappers' end and where he could find Frank Jr. Unfortunately, he was given the wrong location.

As Frank Sr. searched for his son, Keenan, who had returned to the now-empty hideout, also set out to find Frank Jr., as he wanted to be the one to release him. While driving and looking for Frank Jr., Keenan passed Frank Sr. doing the same.

Ransom in hand, Keenan drove around, repaying all those who had lent him money: his parents, his ex-wife, Dean Torrence and other friends. He was arrested that evening after Joe Amsler's brother called the FBI.

The trial of the three defendants started in early February. Their lawyers, who apparently missed their Ethics 101 class when attending law school, suggested that the best defense involved the claim that Frank Jr. staged his own kidnapping. Keenan, recognizing his dire legal predicament, acquiesced. And off they went, hammering home the point inside court and out that Frank Jr. had staged his own kidnapping to enhance his career.

The jury didn't buy it. But the public did.

Epilogue

Keenan and Amsler were given the maximum sentence of life plus 75 years. Irwin received 16 years and eight months.

This being California perhaps, Amsler and Irwin spent a little over three years in prison, while the mastermind Keenan served a little over four.

A review of Keenan's original business plan, which included the kidnapping and his designs for investing the ransom after he paid off his debts, revealed what would have been a significant profit. In the end, though, he made millions in real estate development.

Frank Jr. had a nice career, but along with nearly everyone else, he wasn't in the same solar system as his father. He died in 2016 at 72.

Shortly after the trial, he observed after a Paris engagement was canceled — due to the erroneous belief that he had staged his own kidnapping — that “the seeds of doubt have been sown on my integrity and guts and will stay with me for the rest of my life.” They did. Even his kidnapper Barry Keenan sympathized. “I do wish for the sake of Frank [Jr.'s] legacy that it would go away. It was very unfair and untrue,” he said. Unfortunately, of all that Frank Sinatra Jr did with his life, he is best remembered for a kidnapping in which he played no role other than that of an innocent victim.