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An Interview with Emilio Muscelli

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2007

Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director: Claytee D. White

Editors: Barbara Tabach and Gloria Homol

Transcribers: Kristin Hicks and Laurie Boetcher

Interviewers and Project Assistants: Barbara Tabach and Claytee D. White

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of Dr. Harold Boyer and the Library Advisory Committee. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank the university for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University Nevada, Las Vegas

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Photos from Mr. Muscelli's collection include:

Barbra Streisand, Elvis Presley, Raquel Welch, and a group shot with
Doris Day, Frank Sinatra and Lauren Bacall.

Las Vegas Review Journal articles about Mr. Muscelli:

"Sand maitre d' remembers when mobsters made Las Vegas what it is,"
John L. Smith, March 29, 2009.

"The Good Ol' Days," Norm Clark, September 26, 2008.

Preface

Emilio Muscelli was in his mid-80s when he sat for this oral history interview. With a thick Italian accent he recalled his career as a Las Vegas maitre d' that spanned decades of Strip history. Emilio arrived in America in 1948, landed a job at the Copacabana in New York City. His boss was Jack Entratter, who brought Emilio to Las Vegas when he opened the Sands in 1952.

Over the decades he has witnessed the ups and downs of Las Vegas economy and has befriended many celebrities along the way. He reminisces during this interview about his friendship with singer Bobby Darin, actor Cary Grant and meeting a laundry list of others. He fondly speaks of those he worked for and their contribution to the growth of Las Vegas.

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project



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Emilio Muscelli

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Signature of Interviewer

Claytee D. White

11/25/2008
Date

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This is Claytee White. It is November 25th, 2008. And I'm in the home of Emilio Muscelli.

Would you spell your name for me, please?

M-U-S-C-E-L-L-I.

Thank you. We're in his home here in Las Vegas in the Las Vegas Country Club. So tell me about your early life growing up. Did you grow up in New York?

No. I grew up in Italy.

Wonderful. Tell me about growing up in Italy.

I was in the war in Italy. And I was very fortunate to come out alive. And then I was finishing my studies at Rome University in economic and commerce, in Italian called (Italian). And I was in my fourth year of the university of when an uncle of mine died in New York City. He was 53 years old. He was a single person. He had no relatives in the United States of America. And he had some property over there on Staten Island, two houses with bars and small restaurants over there. So the public administrators of New York State were looking to solve this estate in Italy. So they contact us in Italy. And my family sent me to New York. Well, it was very difficult to resolve this, to finalize this estate, this transition. It was very difficult. So I had to stay in New York for three years before anything happened. In the meantime, I had no means to live. So I had to go to work. My first job in the Bronx was as a dishwasher in a coffee shop. My first week's salary was \$32 a week.

But was that a lot of money back then?

Well, at that time it was money. It was not much money, but it was a job. In the summertime I was fortunate to be introduced to some people and I went to work as a busboy in the Catskill Mountains of New York City, which it was a very, very fine hotel, a summer place for a lot of elite people of New York. I was fortunate that I had been – even if I didn't speak English at that time, I used to present myself well and I learn fast the America type of life, American way of life. But still my savoir-faire was European. And that opened many doors for me in my relation with people.

At this place in the Catskills, I met a very, very fine couple. He was a doctor, Dr. and Mrs. Goodman—they fell in love with me. I fell in love with them. They were nice people. They were Jewish people because the place was an exclusive Jewish hotel. The elite of the New York was

there in that place. So when the summer season was over, he says I will give you a job in a nice place in New York City if you want to go to work in the fall. And he did. He put me to work in a restaurant as waiter across the street from the Copacabana in New York.

And when I was working as a waiter in this place, Jack Entratter (the manager/director of Copacabana) used to come over in this restaurant for lunch. And over time I got friendly with him. And he used to like me, also. And one day I heard that they used to make good money at the Copacabana. The Copacabana at that period was the best nightclub in New York. And everybody used to play over there – Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis and Lena Horne – many, many performers, top performers at that time in the United States. He said, yes, anytime you want to start it. Come over tomorrow. And I went to the Copa. I was a captain of the waiters (there). And I had to work my way through and become food supervisor – one of the food supervisors. I wasn't the only one.

In the meantime, without me knowing this, Jack Entratter got nominated to be the general manager at the new hotel that they were opening, the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. Well, I was Jack's boy, man, you know, in the place. I was his protégé. I owe my life to him. Naturally, I'm very grateful to his memory anyhow.

Well, I ask him -- I want to leave New York. New York was too big for me. It was a big city. So I said to Jack, Can I get a job with you over there at the Sands? I asked him this and he says, sure.

So before we get to the Sands, tell me more about the Copa. What it was like and what an evening at the Copa is like.

At that period in the late 40s and in the 50s, you know, Friday and the weekend, Friday night and Saturday and Sunday night, especially Friday night everybody used to go out. They used to work all week and Friday they would go out; so many used to go out at the Copa. But the Copa wasn't only for the weekend people. It was a hangout of many, many rich American people. That was the Copa. That was nightclub like (indiscernible) in London, one at the Palms with all the stars, something like that. That was the Copa. And the Copa was known all over the world. And I got to be a captain over there. At that time I was introduced to the first guys. They used to play in show business. That's where Peggy Lee used to play over there. I knew her very, very well. Joe

E. Lewis used to be there. He was a comedian. Lena Horne used to work over there. Many, many others. Danny Thomas work over there.

So what was Jack Entratter's role at the Copa?

Jack Entratter started – this is before me – as a bouncer at the Copa. He was promoted to be the general manager after Monte Proser. Now, remember this name Monte Proser because that's the guy that got in the show business at the Tropicana, brought the Folies Bergere at the Tropicana. But he didn't open with Folies Bergere. They opened with all the stars. That's all. But Jack was the general manager at the Copacabana. But without me knowing, I know they used to -- the boys, Italians, Jewish --

Did they own the Copa?

Yes, they did. But I don't know anything. When I went to work over there, I don't know those things. As far as things done, it was none of my business. That's all. And I used to take care of many of them over the months especially when I become food supervisor. I was the guy that used to handle them at the Copa. People like Frank Costello used to come over together with his wife. I see him many times on Sunday night he used to come over there and I used to take care of them.

Explain to me what it means when you take care of those special customers.

Well, see, at the Copacabana they had two shows every night. The first show they served dinner. And I mean very, very good food that they used to have over there. And also see the show, the first show. The second show was after 12 o'clock. It was drinks only. But also they used to serve Chinese food late at night at the Copa. If you have somebody that want something to eat over there, it was only thing they serve for second show.

Did they make the Chinese food there on the premises?

Oh, yeah. Oh, they have a beautiful kitchen over there. The first show was very, very, very popular over there at the Copa. Many people, they used to go over there on Friday night on weekends and used to spend -- a weekend in New York at that time people used to go out.

How did they dress?

Well, always with jacket and tie. Nobody used to go over there at the Copa without any tie. Many restaurants in New York City even after they used to have a tie. It was required for everybody to have a tie on.

And women, how did the women dress?

Elegantly, evening dress. It was elegant.

Wonderful. Did they have dancing?

Yes. Between shows they used to dance.

Sounds like an exciting place.

It was a nightclub. They didn't have that many seating people. I don't think. That picture, it was -- no. I didn't have any pictures of Copa. No.

A few minutes ago you said that Jack Entratter was nominated to come to Las Vegas. What does that mean to be nominated?

They nominated him to be the general manager.

So the boys nominated him?

The general manager. They were all boys. The head of the casino was more powerful than the general manager. The general manager used to handle all the service, the food and beverage operation. That means the cook, the chefs, the dining rooms and the room service. They're all food operations under the general manager.

And the general manager took care of the hotel?

And the hotels, the rooms in the hotel. And the performance. And booking the performance was an important thing. Over there later the Rat Pack came in.

Take your time. It's no problem. [Refers to articles written about him. See Appendix.]

Money magazines said, Emilio Muscelli, 82 years old, was once maître d' at the Sands Hotel, the sin city's first casino. And they're talking about the tips in the United States, the power of taking it. They call it crazy. That's part of it. This is a good size you can see right there. But stuff right now like Norm Clark, the writer, he's nice to me. There's been a couple of articles about me.

There's another one inside. This one over here.

Yes, I have that one. I think I do. Judy Garland.

You imagine some of the things I've seen. Mr. Muscelli arrived in 1952 with Jack Entratter from New York Copacabana, brought him for the opening at the Sands.

Right. I have that one. So --

Well, and then when we came in to Las Vegas, I had to be the one to hire all the waiters and the

busboys, oh, everybody in that period over there for the operation of the Sands Hotel. We had two places, a showroom, which we served dinner.

So was that the Copa Room?

At the Copa Room. I put the first tables over here. I made the menu.

Now, who named it the --

Not me. It was the chef, also. It wasn't me.

Who named it the Copa Room?

The Copa Room was taken because we used to work -- some of the captains -- I used to work over there. And Jack Entratter was in charge of the Copacabana. So we named it the Copa Room. That's why that name come in. Yeah.

And my first lodging in Las Vegas, we used to live across the street from a place called the San Souci, which (indiscernible) become involved with the San Souci, me and Al Freeman. Al Freeman was publicity agent. We used to be roommates. We used to share an apartment, a small apartment at the San Souci. And all the showgirls used to be at our apartment at San Souci. It was a little town at this time. It was a glorious town. And the Sands opened with Danny Thomas was the first and then many -- oh, the main guys over here. I mentioned to you Lena Horne. Oh, she was a top performer.

Do you remember opening night?

Yes. Danny Thomas was there opening night. He played it for opening night.

And who else was there?

Well, you know, Jack Entratter through the William Morris Agency, which William Morris Agency is a company, he was very good friends of the fellow Abe Lastfogel, which is the fellow that used to own that agency. They used to book everything over there. And it was very important, you know, because it also was influenced by the boys from New York City, you know, that thing over there. That's why we used to get the good shows, all the performers, you know, not the movie actor. But on the weekend at the Sands Hotel the elite of Hollywood used to come over and stay and have a good time in Las Vegas on some Friday night where at the Sands Hotel I remember the thing like now.

You know, Sinatra at that period over there, he was done. You know, the Sands made it

back (indiscernible) in a way. And then there was Ray Cohn (Harry Cohn) -- what was the name of that? -- used to have Columbia Pictures. They made that movie "From Here to Eternity." He didn't like Sinatra. But Jack Entratter think (indiscernible). But they get Mr. Cohn -- what was the name? I don't remember. About to get Sinatra to get that part over there, which he the won Best Supporting Actor. And he started a new career as a big -- forever after that he had no more problems until he died.

But Sinatra also later on become one of the owners at the Sands Hotel. But the Sands Hotel was completely owned by the boys. They had a front man called Jackie Freedman. He was the president at that time over there. And Jackie Freedman was a figurehead like Wilbur Clark was at the Desert Inn. There used to be a name of the boys that used to control the place -- own completely the place.

So how did Frank Sinatra become one of the owners?

Well, Sinatra was connected with the boys. The William Morris Agency was owned almost by the -- really was influenced by the boys. You see what I mean?

Because it's out of New York, isn't it?

What?

William Morris.

No. Hollywood. But they still owned it. It still has a big name.

So it didn't start in New York. It started in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles, yeah. But they used to control a lot of the performers. See, the way they used to do it is you used to sign up with the agency. They used to do it. They used to --

Control your career.

They used to control your booking and they used to have, you know, the contract with a starting date. Cosby, he used to go through the William Morris Agency. He used to sign up with International Hotel.

So the Sands Hotel was the most beautiful hotel or the most famous and the most -- it's the place to go at that time in Las Vegas. But Las Vegas -- wasn't that many people coming into Las Vegas at that time. The majority of the people were from California because if they come in from New York with a propeller airplane it would take ten hours. So people didn't come over here to

spend a weekend over here, a Friday night. Ten hours on a plane and ten hours to come back Sunday night. It was a difficult thing to do. Now, from California you come over here with the airplane. By jet it takes 40 minutes to Las Vegas, 40 minutes to go back. You know, it's different. So the attendance wasn't that big.

But I remember people when we opened the Sands. The big guys that I remember Kerkorian at that time. Kerkorian was not the big man at that time when he used to have one airplane. I wasn't friendly with him at that time. I don't know. But, see, their maître d' had a job. He was the public relation man between the client. Many, many of our clients used to come over and they used to call me and say, hey, I'm coming over. Can I get a room? So I used to go to the front desk. Like a concierge used to do. Through the showroom they used to come over to see the show. And the first part of that time -- and I wasn't sitting in the room because I was full from nine o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the morning to run all the rooms, all the services over there in the place, the lounge.

The lounge was a very, very big part of entertainment over there in the hotels. As a matter of fact, later on, late 50s and 60s, that's when -- you know, at the Sahara they used to have -- Don Rickles started over there. Louis Prima work over there at the Sahara. We used to have stars over there at the Sands. Shecky -- no, Shecky Greene don't work over there. The lounge was an important part. When the showroom was not in operation, the lounge used to have some entertainment. They used to have jazz. Sammy Davis, Jr., with his father and uncle, started in the lounge of Las Vegas at the Frontier. Then they went to the showroom. I remember the day when the accident happened to him. He lost his eye.

Oh, you remember the accident?

Well, I remember the accident. Everybody knew Sammy Davis because at that time he was a friend of Sinatra, you know, with that clique. Then after that become the Rat Pack.

Yeah. After the movie.

See, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis used to work at the Sands. But they used to be together at the Sands basically. After that played -- I think that happen in 1956 -- I don't know -- '56 or '57 when the Rat Pack started and they got together. But Jerry Lewis was not there.

That's right.

Dean Martin was by himself. He used to perform at the Sands. And from there -- so nighttime after we closed the showroom, naturally the fun used to come out for the working people, you know, the show girls, all the show people. Dorothy Dandridge -- I told you this -- only then did she ask me to take me over there. She was a beautiful little girl. I never had anything to her personally. Anyway, because she married another maître d' in town over that after that. But Jack Dennison was her husband. But it wasn't me.

What did Las Vegas look like to you that first day getting off that plane?

Get off the plane it was 4:30 in the morning. It was dark. So I had somebody waiting for me. They had a motel next to the Sands Hotel. So I went to the room and went to sleep. About 9:30, 10 o'clock in the morning I wake up and went outside. It was a sunny beautiful day and warm, no jacket. I said, boy, look at the street. It was so clean. There was no pollution in Las Vegas at that time. Clark County had 67,000 people. The Desert Inn opened 1950. Now, the Sahara opened October 1952. Two months after the Sands Hotel opened in December 1952.

So how did you compare it with New York? When you saw this nice sunny day, but this little town of only 67,000 people?

The town was like living with a family in a small town. You just know everybody in town over there. Naturally, the construction of the town was still the Old West. We used to have an apartment there. Now you would not live over there. No human being would like to live over there. But that's the only way -- I remember this place across the street from us, the San Souci. I married the daughter of the owner of this San Souci and we had a son named Perry Muscelli, who now is a businessman in town. They live in town. It's a real estate, very successful.

Kerkorian was there at that time when we were over at the Sands Hotel. But I don't know anybody that's still alive. Maybe -- yes, somebody else. There was -- later was involved with the Riviera Hotel and downtown at one of the hotels downtown is Eddie Torres. I don't know if you know. He was part owner of the Riviera Hotel and the Fremont. He started actually at the Fremont. But he was connected with the Sands Hotel. Then he got in an argument with Jack Entratter. And he lost the argument with Jack Entratter. So he left the Sands Hotel. And then in 1955 -- no -- 1957 when they opened the Fremont, he went to part owner of the Fremont. He used to be connected with the boys -- a bookmaker in New York at the Copa.

But in the 50s, every single hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, was controlled by the boys. They're the ones that built this town over here. Now, the only place honestly that was not was the old El Rancho Vegas in which I worked as a maître d' over there for a short period. And the El Rancho Vegas burned down in June 1960.

Now, before we get there, when you said that all of the hotels, you're talking about those on the Strip?

On the Strip.

Now, downtown was never connected.

Well, at that time they didn't have any hotels downtown.

Well, didn't they have those places like --

The Apache Hotel was owned by a family in town, the Silvani family. Olivia Silvani is still alive. She's quite old. She's still alive. But at that time she used to be one of the chorus girls in town and she married one of the Silvani brothers. And the old man, Pio Silvani, used to own the Apache Hotel. And Benny Binion was the owner of the hotel over there, the Horseshoe. The Horseshoe Club, yes, was the only hotel over there.

Then they come in and Steve Wynn took the Golden Nugget. It wasn't the building it is now with the rooms and everything like that. Steve Wynn got the money through Michael Milken. And Michael Milken was the engine that came up with the junk bonds. That's when Steve Wynn got introduced to Wall Street. And that's the way he got the money to build all the other hotels.

So Steve Wynn's money came from Wall Street rather than --

Wall Street. That's right. Yes.

So tell me about the connection with the Moulin Rouge.

The Moulin Rouge -- well, I know some. I know the guy who used to own the Moulin Rouge. His name was Lou Rubin. I was there the opening night. I went to the opening over there. But I used to be very good friends with some of the performers, the black performers. They used to be over there in town. There was -- I don't remember the name now. But he was a very, very good singer. He was a golfer. Well, it will come over to me. During the conversation I will remember.

Joe Williams?

Yeah. Oh, I know Joe Williams. Joe Williams come in after. He didn't open the place over there. He didn't work over there at the Moulin Rouge.

How did the Moulin Rouge compare -- because you saw it opening night. How did it compare with the hotels on the Strip?

Well, it prominently was in a black section of the town. There were quite a few. It was the accent over there. But many people that weren't staying over there, they used to go over there because it was run -- they used to have their own shows with the showgirls and everything like that. It was built on the Westside.

Right. But what I'm trying to -- when you compare the way it looked and the way it was run, can you compare it to the ones on the Strip?

Well, more or less the same way it was run on the Strip because the man that was the owner or the front man of the place over there name was Lou Rubin. He was connected with the same boys at the Sands Hotel. As a matter of fact, when they closed -- they didn't last too long -- when they closed the Moulin Rouge over there, Lou Rubin come into the Sands Hotel and work over there at the Sands Hotel. Now, I don't know the relation, if he had any money or anything over there. That was not under my knowledge. But I know he was connected.

So how did it work? So you're connected. How does the whole thing operate?

The old town -- I repeat it again -- in everything hotel, the Flamingo Hotel, the Sands Hotel, the Desert Inn Hotel, now, was a group. The group from the Desert Inn, it was the Cleveland boys, Italian and Jewish. At that time the frontmen were all Jewish. The reason why is because it was politically incorrect to go against or to do anything against the Jewish. That's the truth. So every hotel was owned by the boys, but they were all Jewish, the majority. They were gentlemen. They never did -- I never saw them do something improper in those hotels. I never saw. If anybody got caught stealing, a group there, a group here, a dealer stealing over there, they take him in the back, break his arms, get out of town, never come back.

Wow. How were they in the --

But they never used to kill anybody.

What was their role in the Las Vegas community?

It was a long time.

I mean did they give to charities? Did they go to church? Did they give to hospitals?

Yes. It was Catholic and Jewish over there. And the Catholic Church over here on Maryland Parkway, the one over there, on Christmas Eve it was full -- it was more Jewish people inside the church, and Catholic outside the church over there. And so I was invited every single year for the Seder. I was invited. But it was a family. It was a family. That's all it was. That's the feeling you had in town. You knew everybody.

A woman told me at one time that she worked for social services. And she said if a family would come in and they had lost their house in a fire or something like that, she said she could get something for them by calling one of the casinos faster than she could through the bureaucracy. Well, maybe she knew them. Yeah, they were nice people.

But the food was important over there because we used to have -- I told you. We used to have from 12 o'clock to 4 o'clock in the morning, we used to have a buffet dinner. Every hotel had a buffet dinner for a dollar and a half. But they used to have filet mignon. They used to have lobster. They used to have prime rib. Whatever you can think for a dollar and a half, whatever you wanted.

That lobster sounds good.

Now, that lasted until -- the food was an incentive to attract people in the hotel, and drinking. See, many people used to go -- after the hotels used to close over there, all the workers -- because they used to have three shifts. The first shift is from the morning until when the day shift come in. And then they had the graveyard shift over there. It was a 24-hour operation. Every eight hours was one shift. The one in the graveyard, after the show over there, all the show people, all the people I used to work in the dining rooms and everything like that, they used to go relax. They used to live Las Vegas life. It was a family. You used to know everybody.

That's great.

Many of the guys that used to work, we used to go down to see Louis Prima and Keely Smith over there. That was very, very popular in the Sahara lounge and those guys over there. And Don Rickles work over there and Buddy Hackett, Shecky Greene, you know, the comedian. They wound up to work, many of them, in the lounge. At the Silver Slipper -- I don't know if you've ever hear of the Silver Slipper.

Of course.

It was a hangout more than anything else. They used to have a sloppy show, you know, but it was a show. They used to perform and the strip teaser, the comic and skits over there. You used to see it of there and like behind you was Sinatra. Not only that, Nat King Cole was sitting at another table. Everybody was there. One of the waiters was in over there. It was a family that we used to work with at the hotel. You don't have it -- you don't have that feeling anymore about Las Vegas. But in the 50s and the 60s you did over there.

It started to change now in the 70s when, well, the Caesars Palace opened in 1965. They called me. They wanted me to be the maître d' over there. I didn't want to go because I don't like the uniform that they wear over there. But then I already had the job at the Flamingo. Also, my boss was at the Flamingo was Meyer Lansky. There was a connection over there a little bit.

So those days were just completely different from the corporate days once everything became corporate?

Completely, completely different. See, the food and beverage was an attraction to the place. So if somebody didn't have anything to eat -- you never see any homeless and stuff in town. But the eating and everything like that. You see a lot now. They don't -- the food was an incentive to come over. I never paid for any checks or for anything while I was over there. Beside the hotels over there, the restaurants, private restaurants -- like there used to be one or two restaurants. We had one Chinese food. Fu Yung was the name of it? What's the name of it? It was on Charleston -- no. It was by the post office was Chinese food. I don't remember exactly the name now.

Fong?

Fong Garden. Sorry. That was the name, yes. And then they had Luigi's. That was an Italian name. That was the restaurant in town. Everybody would go over there. It was a very, very good restaurant. Steaks and chops and some Italian food they used to serve. Then 1960s they opened the Copa Lounge.

Where was the Copa Lounge?

The Copa Lounge was -- well, that shopping center on the corner of the Strip and Convention Center Drive. It used to be right over there, the Copa Lounge. And The Flame was right next to

the --

What about The Peppermill?

It was there. The Peppermill, they open up when they opened up those motels, the (Domini) Brothers I think. That's the Domini Brothers. They're over there on the right side in the same section over there. (Indiscernible) anymore because it was a big hotel with all the shopping center where the Venetian is and the Palazzo is. In that zone over there, that property.

Also, four o'clock in the morning a lot of the showgirls, a lot of the guys are over there, you know, we used to go to the lake four o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock. I used to have a boat over there. Nobody used to wear clothes. But that was a time. That was unbelievably magnificent. It was a family. I never felt -- you don't feel that thing over there about Las Vegas anymore. And I was very fortunate to be there at that period.

That's right. You were.

I'm extremely lucky. I had lots of luck. The maître d' at that time from the 50s until the end of 1979 was, I think, one of the most prestigious jobs in town. And I never got fired.

That's wonderful. So you started at the Sands.

The Sands.

You went to the Dunes for a little while. And then back to Sands.

Back to the Sands. And then I went in business for myself. That didn't last long.

At the San Souci.

San Souci. That didn't last long. I was the maître d' at the El Rancho Vegas in '58, '59 and part of '60. The El Rancho Vegas burned down June of 1960. So at that time, the summer of 1960, the boys took back the Flamingo. See, after the Flamingo closed, you know, was sent -- one person was sent, put by the boys over there. I don't remember the name it was at that time. Well, Al Parvin took over.

So that was after Bugsy?

After Bugsy. Gus Greenbaum took over the Flamingo. And Gus Greenbaum died. He was killed in Phoenix, Arizona, not in Nevada. After that Al Parvin took over. After Al Parvin, the guys who used to own some of the hotels in Miami Beach -- it was Morris Lansburgh and Sam Cohen. That's when they call. Two months after the El Rancho closed I got the job as the maître d' at the

Flamingo. I was at the Flamingo until '67 when Kerkorian bought the Flamingo from the boys. He paid \$11 million for it. Can you think of that?

I can't even image. And now it's worth how much? Well, I should say last year it was worth how much?

I really don't know. I'm not involved in those things.

So when Kirk Kerkorian took over the Flamingo, did you stay there?

Yes. I worked for Kerkorian. With Kerkorian I was training the crew to open the International Hotel. That was 1967. Now, the opening -- the groundbreaking was 1967 of the International Hotel. And I was involved in the construction of the hotel, but especially at the nightclub and restaurant. That's when Kerkorian send a private jet for me and three other chefs and another man involved with the food operation. Well, right there I got to be -- when they opened the International I was in charge of only the showroom as the maître d'.

But we used to have the opening of the showroom at the International happened 1969, in July 1969. Barbra Streisand opened the place. I was the maître d'. I was the one that put up the first menu in there. Right after Barbra Streisand, Presley performed. He performed over there until 1977 when he died. What is it? Seventy-seven, '78 when he died. August 1977 I think.

I was there about a year, a year and a half after that. Then I quit because I was fortunate -- see, I'm European and I believe in property, to own everything. And in the early 50s and 60s, I bought quite a few little pieces of land, five acres, ten acres. And then when I retire I had about quite a few pieces of land inside the city. Well, that's the way I got fortunate, you know.

Some good investments at the right time.

Yeah. It was good. I knew the town was going to grow because every couple of years they used to open a new place. In 1965, they opened the Caesars Palace. And still now it's a very top place for me there. In 1955, they opened the Dunes and the Riviera Hotel. The Riviera is still open, but they're not doing as well as before, but they're still in the system. And there was another place that was there, a small place called the Thunderbird in that period over there. The casino manager of the Thunderbird was Jake Lansky, Meyer Lansky's brother.

Wow. Who knew?

Well, nobody used to mention those things. So I don't know how people are going to like that.

But that's what it is. And there at that hotel they had a show. And they used to have people performing over there at the Thunderbird. They had a line. One of the girls was called Jeanie, very, very pretty girl. Became the first wife Kerkorian had, Jeanie Kerkorian, beautiful girl, and they had two children Tracy and Linda Kerkorian. She used to model the two girls. And they went to school with my son at the Las Vegas Day School, a private school.

Las Vegas Day School on Jones and --

Yeah. That's the one. I have two grandchildren. They both graduated over there. He started the first year, all straight A's. Terrific education they get over there. They get a good base for life.

Oh, that's a great school.

Very good school, yeah. It is. Both my grandchildren. They have a solid, solid base. They built their own computers. The father built the computer piece by pieces. Before they decide to operate it, they've got to know everything about it. But you see what they do? They're kids. Now, the first one took the last year in the Academy of -- what do they call that school of here? Academy -- it's high school.

Oh, downtown. The Arts Academy?

No, not the Arts Academy.

Oh, this is one for science.

Yes. Technology.

Okay. I've heard of that one as well.

A very tough school. But he didn't like it, the kids, because it's not fun like the other school.

It's a technology school, advanced technology.

Do you remember when Howard Hughes came to town?

I met him. I knew him.

So what do you think of Howard Hughes and what do you see as his influence in Las Vegas?

Well, when we opened the Sands Hotel, Howard Hughes used to live in Las Vegas. He used to live on -- you know Convention Drive over there? When you turn in that shopping center that's on Convention Center Drive, right behind was a group of houses about five or six villas over there, right over there. He used to have one of those villas. He used to have an entourage of people. I used to take care of him. And he used to go out. Every night he used to go out. I was with -- I

remember 1954 at the Sands Hotel used to be Tallulah Bankhead. I don't know if you know the name.

Yes. Tallulah Bankhead. Of course.

She used to perform at the Sands Hotel. And we had a party that night at the San Souci, another place over there. We had three rooms and everything. I remember Marlene Dietrich was over there at the party. And one of the guests was Howard Hughes. And I was there and Howard was there. That's the first time I met him. But I knew he used to come over because his men used to take care -- used to call me to see the shows at the Sands. It was beautiful showgirls. He used to like the showgirls. They used to have the RKO old movie at that time. That was the first introduction was over there.

But he used to be -- he never become private like he did before. That happened I think and then he left town. He got involved somewhere in the Caribbean over there. Well, he had those things in Los Angeles.

But he got back in town in the 60s. That's when he went over to the Desert Inn and he got. [Robert] Maheu was his front man. And after a little while the guy wanted to get rid of him because he used to pick the top floor of the Desert Inn. And they didn't have that many rooms at the hotels over there. So the hotel was more interested about having clients that used to be gamblers, not to have a guy like Howard Hughes occupy the whole floor. So they got in an argument. And after the argument Howard Hughes become the owner of the Desert Inn. And that was the first venture as an owner in town. And then they got the Sands Hotel. They got the Frontier over there. And they got different places in town.

The Silver Slipper.

That's the era of Howard Hughes. But at the same time because when they opened -- in 1954, they owned the land where it's the convention center now and this place over here, Las Vegas Country Club was sold. And then they built some racetrack over here.

Oh, yes. Joe W. Brown.

Joe W. Brown, yeah, the racetrack. Then that was not successful because the people come into Las Vegas, they weren't interested about racetracks. They stay more at the hotel. That's why they don't have any professional teams in Las Vegas because the people, they don't come over to Las

Vegas --

So you don't think we'll ever have a professional team?

Well, but now we have a population of two million in Clark County over the years. So maybe that will support it. But at that time Clark County was 67,000 people. You know, half of the people said they used to work in the hotels. They used to work and go to sleep. And the graveyard we used to go down and have a good time for three or four hours and then that was it. And the showgirls, that was show business. But that was a beautiful, beautiful time. I think the 50s was the most fun.

The 50s was the best time. So when you left the Sands, how did you feel leaving the Sands to go to the San Souci?

Well, the San Souci was owned by my father-in-law, which is the mother of my son at that time. I was married to her. And the father decided to build a small place. And this small place is called the San Souci at that time. I think who got started over there was a standup comedian. It was -- but my memory slips me. He used to have a show like those guys, a late show on television. Johnny Carson, he started over there as a stand-up comedian at the San Souci.

Wow. I had no idea.

Then we put up a show with first nude girls in that show over there. So we had a show with a big tank and a girl used to perform inside the tank over there. But it was a small place. It never succeeded. They closed the place and I lost money over there.

I had to go back to work. So I became a maître d' at the El Rancho Vegas. And I was there until the place burned down. And then I went to the Flamingo. Then from the Flamingo I went to the International. International through '71 and then became the Hilton Las Vegas. And all those guys -- Steve Wynn is a very good friend. He called me after I retire when he got the Golden Nugget. He wanted me to go to work for him. He called me when he got the Mirage. He called me when he got the Bellagio.

Did you ever think about coming out of retirement?

No. I made a mistake because, you know, that was 30 years ago I retire, actually in '79. Steve really, really wanted me to go to work for him over there. And I told him, Steve, I just don't want to take it. He said you have to be in public relation. But those new places, they're not around like

they used to be around before. Now they have a concierge and all—at the Wynn's hotel they have people that greet you, the ladies, and tell you the top customers, you know, they are arriving. Whatever you need, they bring them everything. But I know he wanted me to be because he knows at that time. But I didn't want to do that there. But I made a mistake because even when he opened the Bellagio he wanted me to go over there and I just didn't want to go back over there. And he would have me work four hours a day and come and go whenever, you know.

So is that one --

But I was a friend of him. I was a friend of Kerkorian. I was a friend of Hilton.

Is that one of the regrets that you didn't go back?

No, not really that much. Not really that much because I was involved with -- financially, you know, that little piece of land that I bought in the 50s and 60s, (indiscernible). And that gave me a base. They were all paid. I bought ten acres on Flamingo and Tenaya over there. The guy build 190 apartments. I got a pretty good amount of money. So I'm a single man. And, also, I'm European. This house, I own the house, no mortgage. I will not buy anything unless I own it. Turned out to be terrific.

And this is a great location, wonderful.

Oh, yeah. And it's beautiful, secure. The place is secure. But I know everybody. I've been inside here since '72.

That is great. Who was your favorite Las Vegas entertainer?

One of the most really impressive talent-wise was Bobby Darin. Bobby Darin used to perform. He was in the music every single minute of his life. He had that guitar in his hands over there all the time working on his music. And he was so talented that he used to -- when Wayne Newton started, he used to have a trio at the Fremont. We used to go -- me and Bobby Darin between shows -- we used to have dinner together in the Flamingo over there, you know, between the two shows. There was many times we used to go downtown to the Fremont. He used to coach Wayne Newton. But it was a trio. It was his brother Jerry and father. He used to coach Wayne Newton at that time. Then Wayne Newton become what he was.

So do you think Bobby Darin became as big as he could have?

He died. He had a bad heart. He had a bad heart all the way through, even when he was with me.

Then all of a sudden happened when the Flamingo -- when I was at the Flamingo he went hippie. So he moved on his own from Los Angeles. He used to call me and he used to tell me, Emilio, why they don't call? They don't want to book me? I say -- at that time the hotels, they already sent -- booking people that they were connected with the hippie, with the new people coming in, the rock-and-roll people, that stuff over there.

Did you tell him why?

Yeah, I did. I said, Bobby -- but then he came in. There was a period when he came in and performed at the International. But he was very, very good friend of mine. I liked him. That's why.

But as a human being I just liked Perry Como. Perry Como was very, very soft, personality. I got close to Perry, very close to -- oh, yeah. We used to go out, [he] call me and say, Emilio, go over there. We used to go to disco. Paul Anka used to own a disco over there and we used to go. We used to dance together. I can't even dance. You know what we used to do. You know, Tina Turner was with Ike at the Flamingo the first time.

That's right.

It was horrible. It was tough. He used to kick the hell out of her.

But she has come through it so wonderfully.

Well, she has become a great big star on her own. She's a nice person. He wasn't a nice person. I never was a friend with him when I'm thinking about what he used to do to her. You know, that's not human. He used to beat her up, you know, things like that. You know, that's horrible.

And then last year when he died they tried to say that he really didn't do that.

He did.

So tell me about Cary Grant.

Well, Cary Grant. I used to be the maître d' at the El Rancho. We used to have a show called (La NuVel Eve). La NuVel Eve was a smaller show than the Folies Bergere or the other show, the little show they brought in. But then they had a magnificent girl, good-looking girls they used to have over there, not too many. They used to have a girl over there, the name was (Shaka Mozer). It was a German girl. It was magnificent. She was I think one of the most beautiful girls I've seen. And Cary Grant used to love this girl. So he used to come over on Friday night. Well, he

would come in by himself. So I got friendly with him. He used to come over in the showroom. And I got friendly and we used to go out. After the show we used to go out together with Shaka. And I used to go with another girl. But anyway, we used to go out together. And so he was a friend of one of the bosses over there in Las Vegas. He used to come over, and he always come for a period at that time. But I saw him for the opening when Presley come in to work over there at the International. Then I lost the connection with him.

When I interviewed Corrine Sidney, she compared her life with Jack to Jackie Kennedy's life with John. So could you describe how the Jack Entratters lived.

Let me tell you about Jack Entratter. I knew his first wife. Her name was Dorothy. He had two daughters. One is Michelle and the other one Carol. I got very, very close with the family, with Jack's family. Also, his mother became my mother because I used to help her. You know, the poor woman was stuck by herself, used to stay in a motel room. And Jack used to handle the motel. So I used to help out the old lady, Jack's mother over in this town.

But, see, Jack was an enormous influence in Hollywood because of the Sands Hotel. See, everybody who was at the Sands on Friday night, they used to -- Ray Cohn. Oh, the guy that Columbia Pictures used to own. That's the guy in the movie "The Godfather" show the horse over there. But, actually, it doesn't happen that way. Jack Entratter was influenced -- got together Sinatra with that guy over there. It was the truth, not "The Godfather." I know. I was there with the boys. I used to handle those people.

Kerkorian come in late in the Sands; he owned land where Caesars Palace is and he sold it to them. By that time -- '65 Caesars Palace opened. And Caesars Palace took a lot of glamour away from the Sands Hotel. Still the Desert Inn had the golf courses. The major hotel for a period in the 50s and part of the 60s, the main hotel was the Sands and the Desert Inn. They opened the Royal Nevada in 1954 or '55. See, '55 was a bad year for Las Vegas in that period over there. And the Dunes closed. The Royal Nevada closed. Then the Stardust took over the Royal Nevada and the people at the Desert Inn (Moe Dalitz) because the guy was building the Stardust. Tony Cornero was his name. But he died at the Desert Inn shooting craps over there, heart attack. So the Desert Inn took over the Stardust. And that was what the Stardust was. It used to belong to them, the same thing, the same people.

The same boys.

Boys. Right.

If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently?

Let me tell you. That's the best thing that can happen to any emigrant if they come over to the United States. I've been one of the luckiest one in my life. See, whatever I have I owe it to Las Vegas. I love Las Vegas.

Would you do anything different if you could do it over?

No. No. It happen to me. I was lucky.

It's just perfect. What do you see as the future of Las Vegas?

Well, what's happening right now with the economy, I really don't know. I don't know what to tell do you. Look at this, the stock. The Sands today -- last weekend was \$2.83. The stock was \$150. It is a very, very good share. The Sands goes in Chapter 11. Then what about the Sands? You don't know what's going to happen. What about the City Center? You know, all those apartments, they're all empty. The Trump Tower, all those apartments and they sold only 12. They've got to pay -- they borrowed the money to build that place over there. They've got to pay those mortgages, those bonds or whatever they took, the Trump Tower. He didn't put that much money himself. He put just his name. That's a beautiful building. But what about the one that they're building in City Center, all those apartments? Who's going to buy it?

They're renting a room -- at the Sahara you can have a room for \$31 and \$30 a night. That's going back to the 50s. You know that? That's what they used to charge in the 50s. Then over here the \$40 a night at the Dunes -- at the Las Vegas Hilton. \$119 at the Venetian. You get a suite for \$119 and they give you \$150 credit in the casino to play the machines and whatever you want to and they give \$50 to the food. That's unheard. And that's not going to change overnight. You don't know what's going to happen.

Well, I'm not worried that much myself. But I know it is a lot of, a lot of people that are going to lose their jobs. And that's going to create a lot of bad, bad people. It's going to create a lot of crime because there will be a lot of people over here that won't have the money to feed their families. It's going to be -- we don't know how long it's going to last. I hope and pray that those people in the government including President Obama -- had to go to war with everybody in the

world. The defense money is better for the people of America, for the economy in America. That's where they need to spend instead of going to war with everybody.

Exactly. Well, thank you so much.

We have another person here in the room with us, Josepie. Are there any questions that you'd like to ask?

No. It's amazing just listening all the times it was kind of living history. That's amazing.

Everything I guess I could ask, he just answered it. He went through and was very --

Nobody in Las Vegas has been as lucky as I've been lucky. I'm a very fortunate person. I don't know. That's what I think about it.

That's a wonderful way to think about it.

I'm grateful. I'm grateful to this country. I'm grateful to Las Vegas. Las Vegas for me was everything. All through the years I used to never -- all the politicians that I used to know, everybody, state of Nevada.

Wonderful. Thanks again.

Thank you.

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Raoul



John L. Smith



Sands maitre d' remembers when mobsters made Las Vegas what it is

Posted: Mar. 29, 2009 | 10:00 p.m.

These are hard times for the corporate casino racket, but as I stepped into Emilio Muscelli's home at the Las Vegas Country Club I was reminded of just how far this gambling town has risen from its notorious roots.

Taking a seat in Muscelli's comfortable den, photographs of a long parade of famous Las Vegas entertainers flashed by on a computer screen. From Sinatra and Elvis to Streisand, everyone who was anyone knew Emilio.

Although he was as popular as any mayor the valley has known, Muscelli never ran for office. He was the maitre d' at the Sands, the Dunes, and the International (now the Las Vegas Hilton).

Perhaps Emilio's knowledge of Las Vegas history won't impress the Strip's mega-resort barons as they careen toward bankruptcy and are haunted by their own hubris, but spending a little time with him sure made me feel better. I was reminded, for instance, that Las Vegas has endured plenty of ups and downs in its wild roller coaster existence.

At 86, Muscelli is the Ancient Mariner with an Italian accent. Born in Italy, he came to America in 1948 and landed a job at New York's Copacabana, where Jack Entratter played entertainment director and Murder Inc. owned the store. Although Muscelli attended college in Rome, the Copa provided him an education no university could match.

It was there he met one of the original developers of Las Vegas, an unassuming fellow named Maier Suchowljansky. He was known in the newspapers as Meyer Lansky.

When the Sands opened in 1952, his friends at the Copa played Horace Greeley and sent the trusted Emilio west. Entratter emerged as the 250-room hotel-casino's president. Once ensconced in his position as maitre d', Emilio had a front-row seat to Las Vegas history.

I don't think he's forgotten a thing.

Muscelli's memories of his acquaintances and friends from the entertainment world roll like a newsreel come to life. When you've counted Bobby Darin as a close friend and have partied until dawn with Howard Hughes -- and are still around to tell the tale -- you've officially earned your Strip stripes. From his favorite, Perry Como, to his golfing buddy, Dean Martin, he made the scene with the legends of Las Vegas.

"It was like a family here," he said, his accented English filling the room with warmth. "It was a small town. We didn't have 3,000 rooms. The Sands, it has only 250 rooms. The Sahara, the Desert Inn, the Dunes, they were all very small" by comparison.

"I used to work 24 hours a day. But it was very fun. The girls were very beautiful. I tell you, this town was a lot of fun after 3 o'clock in the morning."

From the way his eyes lighted up, I can only assume there were many a wild night blended into sunrise.

Muscelli remains an encyclopedia of the part of Las Vegas history that was long considered off-the-record and on the q.t. Namely, that "the boys" kept their hands on the casinos many years after Nevada's breathless politicians pronounced the gambling racket free from its shadowed past. He reels off names and dates and places, land deals, stock deals, and the ghosts of Vegas past like the king of the green felt jungle.

If you're looking for Muscelli to downplay the racket bosses' importance, you've read this classy old-schooler all wrong.

"I want to tell the real truth about the history of Las Vegas," he said. "They should be giving credit to those guys, not hiding them. Meyer was at the Flamingo from '46 to '67. ... Meyer's friend was Jimmy Blue Eyes (Alo). When Meyer and his wife would come to town, I used to take them around. I would escort them. ... Meyer Lansky built Las Vegas, Nevada. If it wasn't for Meyer Lansky, Las Vegas would not be much. He is the one responsible."

While I'm guessing the Chamber of Commerce won't be dedicating a statue in Lansky's honor any time soon, his historical importance won't be lost as long as Emilio has anything to say about it.

My gracious host laughed a little, smiled once more.

"I've been a lucky man all my life," he said. "I think I'm the only one still alive."

John L. Smith's column appears Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. E-mail him at Smith@reviewjournal.com or call (702) 383-0295. He also blogs at lvvj.com/blogs/smith/.


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Norm Clarke | **NORM**



The Good Ol' Days

Posted: Sep. 26, 2008 | 10:00 p.m.

An elite maitre d' during the golden era, **Emilio Muscelli** has been in Las Vegas so long he remembers:

- When Sahara Avenue was San Francisco Avenue.
- When Flamingo Road stopped at Industrial Road.
- When Maryland Parkway was a dirt road with no stoplights.
- When the Hilton kids who were painting the town red were named Barron and Nicky, not Paris and Nicky.
- When he went girl-chasing with **Cary Grant**, who was in love with a dancer named Yellow Bird, a star performer at the El Rancho Vegas.
- When he and his best friend, **Bobby Darin**, would dash downtown to the Fremont Hotel between Darin's shows at the Sands so the headliner could give singing tips to a young kid named **Wayne Newton**.

"It was so much fun in those days," says Muscelli, who celebrated his 86th birthday last month.

Fresh from New York hot spot Copacabana, where he worked for **Jack Entratter**, Muscelli arrived in 1952. Entratter had given him the job of food operations director for the 250-room Sands Hotel, which was opening on a patch of sand that now has 7,000 rooms, counting The Venetian and sister property the Palazzo.

Two years before Muscelli got here, Las Vegas had all of 24,624 residents -- Clark County 48,289. A booming decade was under way. The Desert Inn had just opened, followed quickly by the Sahara, the Sands, the Royal Nevada and the Dunes.

Before the decade ended, newcomers to the Strip included the Hacienda, Tropicana Hotel and the Stardust.

By then, the population of Las Vegas and Clark County had almost tripled. Muscelli's career was roaring as well in the superheated competition. He had been hired as maitre d' at the Dunes and later at the Flamingo, then billed as Las Vegas' largest luxury hotel. **Kirk Kerkorian** liked it so much he bought it for \$11 million in 1967.

But Kerkorian was just warming up. He built The International, the world's largest megaresort, and installed Muscelli as maitre d' at the 1,512-room hotel-casino. It was 1969 and the hotel-casino was about to become the launching pad for **Elvis Presley's** comeback.

Elvis' two shows a night drew 4,000 fans over 30 days, an unheard of number in those days.

Muscelli would spent 27 years at the hotel before retiring in 1979. Over the years he saw **Tom Jones** sizzle and occasional mind-boggling flops. French icons such as **Edith Piaf** and **Charles Aznavour** "bombed because people only knew stars they saw on TV."

Not long ago, Muscelli was driving his golf cart toward his home at the Las Vegas Country Club, when he spotted a familiar face out for a walk.

It was Kerkorian, who turned 91 in June. They stopped to chat, two friends who had witnessed explosive growth and another wondrous era.

Kerkorian, one of richest men in the United States, told Muscelli, "Maybe I should buy the Hilton back and put all the old-timers back to work."

The rest of this week's First Glance breakdown:

Best new patio experience on the Strip:

The patio at **Lavo** at the Palazzo can seat about 100 and it's going to be a contender for the Strip's most popular outdoor dining venue, especially at night. It's located across from Treasure Island's "Sirens of T.I." show. Perfect for sharing desserts and exotic hookah flavors after grazing through the tapas-style Mediterranean menu. Managing partner **Jason Strauss** said the inspiration came from Les Bain Douches, a former Turkish bathhouse that was converted into one of the hippest clubs of Paris.

Best bet for a backstage tour?

It's rare, but it happens. Cirque du Soleil's "KA" at the MGM Grand offered it to the public not long ago. The rest of the time it takes some serious juice, as in high-end guests or celebrity. Over at The Mirage, "**Love**," the Cirque

collaboration with the Beatles, has been offering Tapis Rouge, French for red carpet. For \$295, you get one of the best seats in the house, open bar at the Beatles' Revolution Lounge, tray-served appetizers, and gift bag that includes a program, a poster and a signature martini glass. Early-show attendees who buy the package make it a post-show experience. Late-show participants get the pre-show experience.

Best out-of-town steakhouse experience?

On a recent trip to New York to say farewell to Yankees Stadium, we included a trip to **Wolfgang's Steakhouse** at 4 Park Avenue, not far from the Gramercy Park Hotel. Wolfgang Zwiener worked at the original Peter Luger Steak House in Brooklyn for four decades before opening at this midtown location about three years ago. The porterhouse for three was definitely worth a return trip. But for those of us who love a good steak sauce, this was the ultimate. Zwiener borrowed the best from Luger's, Zagat's No. 1 steakhouse for 20-some years, but sweetened this version and added more horseradish.

(Next week: Where and when you can reach out and touch Elvis' celebrity star on Las Vegas Boulevard and five reasons why Lotus of Siam still packs 'em in.)

Norm Clarke can be reached at 702-383-0244 or norm@reviewjournal.com. Find additional sightings and more online at www.normclarke.com. His new book, "Vegas Confidential: Sin-sational Celebrity Tales," comes out in November.

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