

Ava Gardner Can't Forge



For years, she's been running away from Hollywood and everything it stands for, but she still can't escape the memories of "my old man."

Frank Sinatra



by Peer J. Oppenheimer

To talk to Ava Gardner, one of screenland's most beautiful and controversial stars, you have to be a globetrotter. Ava's likely to be in Madrid, Mombasa, or Melbourne at any given time—any place but Hollywood. So when our Hollywood correspondent, Peer J. Oppenheimer, wanted to get this exclusive story about Ava, he had to travel more than 7,000 miles to Australia. He found distance hasn't changed the glamorous woman he knew back home: in the land down under, she was still turning things upside down.

AVA GARDNER is as much in love with Frank Sinatra as ever.

That's the opinion of one of her closest friends. It's also the opinion of this reporter after flying all the way to Melbourne, Australia, where Ava is co-starring with Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire, and Tony Perkins in Nevil Shute's "On the Beach."

Ava won't even discuss Frank if questioned directly. But when she talks to you in private, when she lets her hair down and for a few brief moments becomes Ava, the lonely girl from Smithfield, N. C., and forgets about being Ava, the movie star, she still refers to Frank as "my old man." And her tone of voice leaves no doubt in anyone's mind that she's as deeply in love with him as ever. It is even more apparent in her romances.

Ever since Ava moved to Spain, she has been shopping openly for a man to take Frank's place. Those who came closest were Spanish bullfighter Luis Dominguin and Italian comedian Walter Chiari, who followed her to Australia—ostensibly for an entertainment tour, which proved as much a flop as his romance with Ava.

I had lunch with Walter in Melbourne, just before he returned to Italy. Despite his disappointment about Ava, he remained cheerful. Yet he was obviously confused by her changing moods. Ava wanted him to go home one minute, stay the next. Unable to make up her mind, she finally sent him away three weeks after he arrived.

Like his predecessor Dominguin, Chiari is a pleasant, entertaining, tense young man who is good for a lot of laughs. But he doesn't have the strength, the manliness, the temper and temperament Ava needs in a man.

At the same time, it doesn't really matter to Ava whether her present boy friend's name is Luis or Walter or anything else, as long as he can make her forget Sinatra, at least for a while.



Ava has no illusions that her relationship with Sinatra could work out today any more than it did during their hectic courtship and marriage, although their arguments were generally the result of silly little disagreements that any ordinary couple could have solved without any trouble.

But even thinking about what might have been is painful to Ava.

Is that why she has shunned Hollywood since she left him in 1952?

At least partly—but not entirely.

YOU WANT TO KNOW why I've stayed away from Hollywood? She repeated my question as just the two of us settled down in her dressing room at Ascot Vale, Melbourne's Fair Grounds, which producer-director Stanley Kramer had taken over for "On the Beach." The answer is simple. I don't like the place. I never did. The town is dull and small-minded. It bores me. Besides, a girl can't have any privacy there.

Then Ava promptly contradicted herself by admitting she had even less privacy in Australia!

It started the moment she stepped off the plane in Melbourne to be welcomed by a bigger crowd than had greeted Queen Elizabeth, and with virtually the entire press corps on hand.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon didn't last. Next day, one newspaper reported Ava as saying, "I came to Melbourne to do a picture about the end of the world, and this is a fine location for it."

"It was a lie," Ava insisted. "I would never say anything like it!" Nevertheless the news spread all over the continent.

A previously arranged press conference didn't improve matters, either. The first three questions put to her were, "Do you still love Frank Sinatra?" "Is it true that he is coming here to see you?" and "How soon will you reconcile?"

After that she had little to say to any member of the press until I arrived. And then I wasn't sure whether it was her able publicist's persuasion or memories of the days when we worked together at MGM that made Ava talk freely to me. Curiously enough, although she antagonized many newsmen, only one paper was outspokenly against her; but all reported her actions in embarrassing detail.

Insisted Ava, "I couldn't step out of the house without people rushing up to me. I don't mind that. I don't mind signing autographs. But I don't like having every move I make reported in the paper. It got to the point where I took all my meals at home. I wouldn't go out except to the studio."

Home, to Ava in Australia, was a "dependence" of the St. James Hotel, fairly well isolated from the other hotel guests.

"There's one important difference between Melbourne and Hollywood," she insisted. "I'm only here to make one film. I would go to Hollywood to make a picture, if the script were good enough, but I couldn't take Hollywood as a steady diet. It's different in Spain. An actress can have privacy there. I can drive from Madrid to Seville without being bothered. I can go to any night club or restaurant, and be left alone. The press is friendly. They don't speculate. They don't fabricate. They love me in Spain, and I love the Spanish people. I may live there the rest of my life."

An almost complete lack of friends is another reason Ava has stayed away from Hollywood. Although she has no vast circle of friends in Spain, she does have some who take her as she is, without criticism, without wanting to change her. Among them are Betty and Ricardo Secre, a Spanish importer and his American-born wife, whom Ava sees almost every day. She is also on close terms with author Robert Ruark and his wife. Many visitors to her home outside Madrid are American officers stationed at a nearby air base.

WHILE AVA insists Hollywood life is dull, according to what she told me, life in Spain isn't much more exciting.

Ava lives in a newly built one-story house, complete with pool, about eight miles from Madrid. She isn't happy with it any more, because the housing development for the nearby American Air Force base is closing in on her.

"I just put my house on the market. As soon as it's sold," she told me, "I am going to get an apartment in Madrid and a house at Costa Brava, a beach near Barcelona. It's beautiful there and completely isolated."

Ava has a maid, a houseboy, and a cleaning

(Continued on page 16)