

BAD GUYS IN GREAT CLOTHES



The author's brother Joe, "Cousy" New York City's unofficial mob greeter and the cousin of godfather Joe Adonis, with Dean Martin and a young Frank Schipani.

According to state, local and federal authorities, anyone who earns money in an illicit manner is considered a "bad" guy. Be that as it may, several of these bad guys are great fashion icons.

Back in the 1930s, when organized crime was nascent, two ambitious tough guys from the Lower East Side of Manhattan started what would become the modern Mafia. They were Charley "Lucky" Luciano and Meyer "The Little Man" Lansky, an Italian and a Jew, who had previously and separately engaged in gambling, bookmaking, looting and other such unsavory activities. Their reputations for success in these enterprises aroused mutual interest and ultimately, the two met and joined forces.

As the story goes, the Mafia at the time was controlled by two old-world bosses from Italy, who operated in a way that Charley perceived as antiquated.

So, in the manner of Marlon Brando's "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse..." Charley and Meyer (along with their newly unified Italian and Jewish gangsters from the tri-state area) formed a plan to take out the bosses and start their own empire.

Upon completing that task, the pair very wisely consulted with a brilliant independent promoter and gambler by the name of Arnold Rothstein (the guy who fixed the 1919 World Series between the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago White Sox). Rothstein had the amazing ability to glide from New York to Palm Beach to Chicago, always warmly accepted by the social and political elite of each city. Naturally, he dressed in a manner befitting a king.

So when they got together for their first meeting, Rothstein took one look at these guys and said: "If you men want to make a real business out of crime, then you must change the way you dress! Get rid of that slick look; you can't do business with magnates or politicians looking like a sharply dressed thug."

He then went on to recommend specific custom tailors, shirt-makers and the like, people who would help the young godfathers dress in understated but elegant attire—in essence, showing them to the world as the prosperous businessmen they were.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, "uomini di rispetto" (men of respect) dressed each day like successful businessmen going to the office. You might say these were the first "metrosexuals" since they, unlike most men, spent a great amount of time and money perfecting their appearances. How well they understood the importance of presenting a professional image!

Why am I telling you this? Because my father was one of these men. He dressed in accordance with Lucky's rules, which were passed along to him by his "Capo" Joe Adonis (Lucky's right hand man). Until I was in my teens, I thought my



At the Latin Quarter Night Club in 1959. Frank Schipani wore his first made-to-measure suit, a wool mohair blend he purchased for \$65, along with a \$2 custom tie.

Standing: Frank Schipani, Manny “the bagel guy” and Joe Schipani Sr., Frank’s father. Seated: Frank’s mother Anne and brother Bob.

dad was in “labor relations,” as he never brought his business home. And because his style of dress was so chic and his demeanor so relaxed, I wanted to dress and move just like him. Once I found out what he really did for a living and learned the power and influence he had, I realized that all my “uncles” were actually “men of respect.” And I now understand that although they were “bad” guys, their style (of dressing and grooming), polite manners and professional smarts certainly served them well in business affairs and in high political circles.

Today, I often ask well-dressed guys in the fashion industry who or what most influenced their style. In almost all cases, it was their fathers who were the dapper guys, role models for dressing well.

In my presentations as a professional sales trainer and in my book, *Frank’s Rules: How to Sell Menswear Extremely Well*, I always reference these bad guys from that great era of style. (We now recall it as the Rat Pack or Kennedy look.) Men in the 1930s to 1960s, whether they made laws or broke them, shared the common sense of representing themselves each and every day by dressing in an appropriate and distinctive manner.

Decades ago, shipping billionaire Aristotle Onassis was asked, “What can a man do to look successful?” His reply: “Dress exquisitely, always be tan and buy drinks for nice people in nice places.”



The author’s father (third from right) with many of his “uncles” at a political fundraiser in 1948.