It was now 1952 and Joey was wondering if he would ever be more than a pretender to the throne. He was earning a decent living working the clubs, but there had to be more. He was beginning to develop a love-hate relationship with the lifestyle—loving the money he earned (he was now up to $1,000 a week) but hating the travel and loneliness that came with the territory. “There isn’t a lonelier life in the world,” he said later. “I was always a stranger in town.”

Out in Hollywood, Frank Sinatra was in the midst of his spectacular comeback, filming *From Here to Eternity*. The onetime Bobby Soxer idol had seen his career nearly destroyed, first by losing his voice and then by leaving his wife for Hollywood sexpot Ava Gardner. Sinatra’s tempestuous relationship with Gardner had alienated his fans, and a string of forgettable movies hadn’t helped Sinatra’s cause. But his role as the doomed Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* would earn Sinatra an Oscar and single-handedly resuscitate his career. Just a year before he had been performing for half-empty crowds in Vegas and begging for TV work; now, he was selling out the Paramount. It was 1942 all over again. Sinatra was unstoppable.

Joey had always admired Sinatra from afar. Who didn’t? Although they had never worked together on the same bill, Joey and Frank had played some of the same clubs through the years, sometimes missing each other by a matter of days or weeks. By 1952, Joey had spent nearly fifteen years on the club circuit, getting a whiff of the big time but never quite putting it all together for the Big Payoff. The Greenwich Village Inn and Chez Paree had tantalized and
teased, putting Joey on the cusp of big-time stardom only to yank him back down when the engagements ended and the next big thing failed to materialize.

Television, meanwhile, was making huge strides in helping introduce comics to millions of people. Ed Wynn, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, Martin & Lewis, and Red Skelton had all adapted their acts to television. Joey, however, wasn’t big enough to warrant any television exposure or even the occasional radio appearance.

Still, despite the seemingly overwhelming climb, Joey pushed on, always managing to pull himself up, dust himself off, and throw
himself back out there, ready and willing to work anywhere, any-
time. It was the life of a club comic. Still, the disappointments began
to take their toll. Joey’s blunt attitude, honed through the years,
now took on a smattering of cynicism. He wasn’t taking anything
for granted. Ever. And that also applied to Sinatra.

“Once, when I was sharing a bill with Frank at the Copacabana,
the audience kept me going 28 minutes overtime almost every
night,” Joey said. “Frank kept telling me, ‘You’re solid now, you’re
on your way.’ Know what happened? I didn’t work for six weeks!”

But his resilience paid off. In 1952, Joey was booked into
The Latin Quarter, the fabled Manhattan nightclub on 48th and
Broadway run by Lou Walters (father of Barbara Walters). Sinatra,
in town at the time, caught Joey’s act and liked what he saw.
Sinatra appreciated Joey’s no-bullshit attitude, the way he seemed
to shrug off the audience, almost as if he didn’t care what they
thought of his patter. Sinatra was only two years older than Joey
and sensed in the comic the same fierce independence he himself
possessed. It was that hard shell, developed through years of per-
forming on the club circuit. And Sinatra had heard the Joey
Bishop stories making the rounds. The best-known tale concerned
the time in 1946 when Joey followed Danny Thomas at a New
York policemen’s benefit in Madison Square Garden. Thomas, a
master monologist, left the crowd in stitches, and Joey had the
unenviable task of following another comedian—never a good
thing. So what did Joey do? He walked out onto the stage, coat over
his shoulder, and leaned into the microphone. “What Danny
Thomas said, that goes for me, too,” he proclaimed, and sauntered
off the stage. The crowd loved it.

Joey and Sinatra had met, but they hadn’t yet worked together.
That changed when Sinatra asked Joey to open for him at Bill
Miller’s Riviera, a plush club in Fort Lee, New Jersey, that attracted
the smart New York City set—some who might have remembered
Joey from his Greenwich Village Inn stint back in 1946.

“I didn’t know the [Riviera] stage revolved, and on opening
night, Frank pushed me onto the stage,” Joey recalled. “And when
the stage didn’t stop, Frank said to the crowd, ‘Place your bets,
’cause I don’t think he’s gonna stop!’”
“Frank spoke of my talents when you could get a good argument,” Joey said later. “He saw me working in some third-rate joint and he took me into his act at the Riviera in 1952. It was the first time I was in a ‘class’ club and the first time the right people saw me work.

“Frank knows I’m not a fast act. I need time,” he said. “On different occasions, Frank has talked a club manager into giving him less time on the bill and letting me have 25 minutes instead of 18.”

Sinatra urged Joey not to change his act and was impressed enough with the “Frown Prince” that he made sure Joey opened for him whenever he was in New York—and sometimes even on the road at places like Skinny D’Amato’s 500 Club in Atlantic City.

As Sinatra’s star continued to rise, it had a residual effect on Joey. In the incestuous world of show business, Joey was perceived to have Frank’s blessing; he was “Sinatra’s comic,” which was tantamount to writing his own ticket to the top. Doors that were once unapproachable now opened more readily; Joey was booked into the hot Manhattan nightspots including The Copacabana, where he opened for Sinatra and drew big crowds even when Sinatra wasn’t on the bill.

And Frank took care of Joey in other ways.

“Frank made a Western, his first Western and not a very good picture, called Johnny Concho,” recalled Warren Cowan, Sinatra’s longtime publicist, who also handled Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and Peter Lawford.

“I remember calling Frank in Spain, where he was doing another film, and I said why don’t we take Johnny Concho back to the Paramount and have a special premiere? Because that’s where Sinatra became Sinatra.

“Well, Frank called me back a couple of days later and said I’ve topped you—I’m gonna play the Paramount for a week. And he was able to get Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey to join him; they hadn’t talked to each other for years. And he said he’d found this young comic named Joey Bishop to open the show for him.

“I was there for the opening, and Joey became an immediate sensation and got a lot of attention and generated a lot of excitement and a lot of press,” Cowan said. “I remember being in a car with Sinatra and asking him why he didn’t manage Joey. ‘You found
him, you discovered him, shouldn’t you own him or have a piece of his future?’ And he said, ‘No, I don’t want to get into that. But Joey’s on his way and he’s going to make it.’ Which indeed he did.”

Joey always pointed to one particular appearance with Sinatra, at The Copacabana in 1954, as a sign he had “made it,” at least in the tough world of nightclubs.

“Frank asked me to open for him at the Copacabana. He had just won the Oscar for From Here to Eternity and was hot again,” Joey said. “The place was mobbed. I came out, sized up the place, and said, ‘Look at this crowd. Wait till his following shows up.’ In the middle of my act, Marilyn Monroe walks in all by herself, draped in a white ermine coat, and of course, all heads turned toward her.

“I looked at her and said, ‘I told you to sit in the truck.’ That stopped the show. At ringside, sitting together, were Victor Jory and Gabby Hayes. I introduced them and said, ‘For a minute, I thought I was watching the late, late show.’

“Following the first performance, I went over to Lindy’s and when I walked in the whole place went crazy. After that, I was on my way.”

But it wasn’t to be an overnight success story. Joey continued to play the clubs—New York, Chicago, Miami, and elsewhere. He joined a USO bill that entertained troops during the weekend at Travis Air Force Base in northern California, working alongside Debbie Reynolds, Howard Keel, Keenan Wynn, and Arthur Loewe Jr.

Although he was making a name for himself, Joey never believed anything would last. He took whatever jobs he could—no matter what the venue.

“When my husband and I got married, my husband was stationed in Fort Ord,” remembered Joey’s niece, Marlene. “Joey was appearing at a nightclub there called Bimbo’s that featured a naked girl who swam around in a fish tank.”

The New York Post lauded Joey in a May 1954 review, the article highlighted by a caricature of Joey’s hangdog face.

“Lillian Roth is back at La Vie Rose, heading a show that features comedian Joey Bishop, a new foursome called the Footnotes, and the June Taylor dancers,” Martin Burden wrote. “Bishop, a skinny guy with a gentle, low-pressure comedy style, is an ingratiat-
ing entertainer. ‘If you’re not lucky as you go through life,’ he advises, ‘CHEAT.’ He sniffs the cigarette (sic) smoke wafting through the room and announces solemnly, ‘Somebody here is under arrest.’

“Joey considers himself an unlucky comedian. ‘Who else,’ he asks, ‘gets booked into Boston during Holy Week . . . into Las Vegas during the Atom Bomb tests . . . into Miami during August?’

“My agent, he adds, ‘doesn’t want to waste me. He’s saving me for something big—color radio.’”

The good press, and Sinatra’s stamp of approval, was hard to ignore, and now Las Vegas began taking notice. Joey began his lifelong association with Sin City during this period, working the Desert Inn and the Copa Room at the Sands—future home of the Rat Pack.

The bigger venues naturally meant more money. Joey was now pulling in a six-figure salary, and in the mid-fifties he and Sylvia bought their first house, a seven-room white-brick colonial in Englewood, N.J., a stone’s throw from Manhattan.

They enrolled Larry in public school and formed a coterie of Englewood friends including comics Buddy Hackett, Phil Foster, and Dick Shawn. John Griggs, who would later co-star on The Joey Bishop Show, was a neighbor. Joey had always enjoyed golf, and he now began playing in earnest, purchasing a percentage of the Englewood Country Club along with Hackett, Foster, and Shawn. The trio performed frequently at the club, helping to boost its profile by bringing in celebrity friends (Ed Sullivan, Perry Como, Phil Silvers, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett) to shoot a few rounds. Larry excelled in school and played Little League (third base), while Sylvia settled into the suburban routine, beginning a collection of Fabergé eggs.

The club dates were coming fast and furious now. Joey was working regularly at The Copa, where a 1959 review of his show with newcomer Andy Williams labeled Joey “a debonair master of funny lines . . . Bishop has a nonchalance that is a disarming cushion for his comic thrusts. When you least expect it, he’ll throw out a telling line that has the customers fanning the air with delayed-action laughter when they had been looking for a change of pace.”

The proximity to Manhattan also meant less traveling and more work in a medium that had thus far eluded Joey: television. His
association with Sinatra had transformed Joey into one of the country’s “hottest” club comics, but that success had failed to cross over into television. It was a fact that irked Joey to no end, especially after eight appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1956 failed to attract other TV offers.

“Today, the club comics are competing against the greatest, who are seen regularly on television,” he griped to the hometown Philadelphia Inquirer in a 1956 interview (“TV No Laughing Matter to Club Comics Today,” read the headline).

“They are seen for free, too, and then guys like me have to come in to a club and do it for money. The people have to pay to see us. It isn’t that people’s tastes have changed. They haven’t. But look at it this way: When I worked the Latin Casino or the Sands in Las Vegas . . . I had to compete with the guy who worked the spot the week before.

“But today, with television, they see the Berles, the Gobels, and the Gleasons all week. And I’m competing against them. Those guys are free. We have to come in and do it for money!”

But all that was about to change.

In the spring of 1958, Joey was approached to do a guest spot on the new CBS game show Keep Talking, hosted by Monty Hall (later of Let’s Make a Deal fame). Keep Talking would be shot at CBS in New York. Always thinking ahead, always analyzing, Joey figured he would be seen by more people in one night of television than he would through years of club dates. He decided to take a gamble, foregoing nine months of club work—and nearly $200,000 he would have earned—to appear on Keep Talking for only $850 per week.

It turned out to be the shrewdest gamble of his career.

“I’ve turned down $4,000 a week from unimportant clubs for Keep Talking,” he said at that time. “Money is not the important thing to me, thank God. I’m thinking about a career now and I think being exposed on TV is the most important thing.”

Keep Talking divided its weekly collection of six celebrities into two teams. One player on each team was given a secret word and had to tell an improvised story using that word—with the other team trying to guess which word it was. The show relied, naturally,
on verbal acuity—Joey’s forte. He shined on *Keep Talking* from Day One, overjoyed (even for the “Frown Prince”) to be departing from the hoary riffs and impersonations of his nightclub routine to a fresh, anything-goes approach each week. And he was finally introduced into America’s living rooms—legitimized, if you will, by his stellar *Keep Talking* colleagues Orson Bean, Morey Amsterdam, Paul Winchell, Danny Dayton, Ilka Chase, Pat Carroll, Peggy Cass, Elaine May, and Audrey Meadows.
More importantly, Joey felt that *Keep Talking* underscored his “everyman” appeal as the dour schlub. And it gave him the opportunity to perpetuate two of his cardinal show-biz rules: Have an identity and have attitude. If he came across on *Keep Talking* as a mournful wise ass—“overheard rather than heard”—so be it. By Joey’s estimation, a comic pushing for laughs “destroys the very attitude he’s worked so hard to create. He’s not a genuine comic then.
A genuine comic is a guy who’s told by the audience that he’s funny. The other kind is the guy who tells the audience that he’s funny.

“My cynicism is based upon myself,” he said. “I don’t tell audiences to be cynical. I just bring them down to reality. On Keep Talking, they wanted me to smile at the signoff. I refused. I wouldn’t stand in their way if they’d wanted to change the format, but don’t change me.”

Joey figured his “what me, worry?” shtick was an attitude with which most of America could identify. He was the bike-shop-owner’s son from South Philly who somehow found himself on national TV, wearing a tux and playing a silly game.

“Viewers are getting a lot sharper, and demanding more subtle material,” he said. “What they accepted some years ago is old hat now. Look what happened to a lot of comics that were on TV a while back—gone, that’s what. And why? They were never developed into personalities, human beings. The performer who wants to get anywhere in TV has to be down-to-earth and real to viewers, like Jack Benny . . . overpowering nightclub comedy won’t stand up on TV because you run out of material too fast. On television you can’t keep topping yourself.”

He was right, of course. And even if he was wrong, who was going to tell him? Nearly twenty years of working the club circuit had hardened the “Frown Prince,” who added to the hardscrabble image by cropping his once-wavy hair into a buzzcut (“It just looked funnier,” he said by way of explanation).

Joey had always been opinionated, but he took on an almost defensive posture now that he was finally being recognized after working his ass off in every two-bit joint from Miami to Pittsburgh. Journalists who interviewed Joey once he hit it big on Keep Talking often couched their feelings about him in descriptive terms (“abrupt,” “direct,” “challenging”). But at least he was honest and practiced what he preached. If you didn’t agree with Joey, then fuck you. He knew what was best for his career. And no one was going to tell him otherwise.

“How do people feel about me? I’m not concerned about that,” he said. “It’s how I feel about them. To thine own self be true, right? To be accepted because of this, and not in spite of it . . . this is what I want.”
Joey’s exposure on *Keep Talking* generated reams of news clippings on this “overnight” discovery, but the show itself was by no means a ratings success. Its low viewership numbers were compounded by a change of hosts—Carl Reiner replaced Monty Hall shortly after the show’s debut—but that didn’t seem to make any difference. *Keep Talking* was nominated for an Emmy, which saved it from extinction, but then it moved with its third host, Merv Griffin, from powerhouse CBS to weakling ABC—still in its infancy and without the affiliate muscle of CBS or NBC.

But if Joey’s club work had caught the eye of his first big benefactor, Frank Sinatra, his weekly appearances on *Keep Talking* caught the attention of the next man who would further his career: Jack Paar.