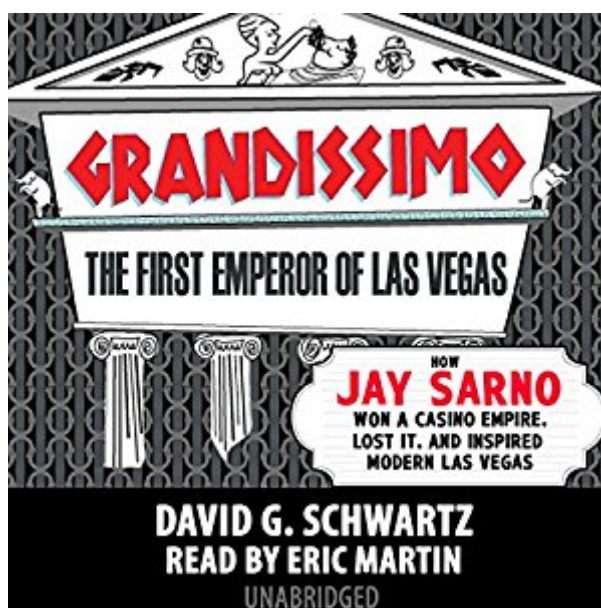


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# Grandissimo: The First Emperor Of Las Vegas: How Jay Sarno Won A Casino Empire, Lost It, And Inspired Modern Las Vegas



## Synopsis

Jay Sarno built two path-breaking Las Vegas casinos, Caesars Palace (1966) and Circus Circus (1968), and planned but did not build a third, the Grandissimo, which would have started the mega-resort era a decade before Steve Wynn built The Mirage. As mobsters and accountants battled for the soul of the last American frontier town, Las Vegas had endless possibilities - if you didn't mind high stakes and stiff odds. Sarno invented the modern Las Vegas casino, but he was part of a dying breed - a back-pocket entrepreneur who'd parlayed a jones for action and a few Teamster loans into a life as a Vegas casino owner. For all of his accomplishments, his empire didn't last. Sarno sold out of Caesars Palace shortly after it opened - partially to get away from the bookies and gangsters who'd taken over the casino - and he was forced to relinquish control of Circus Circus when the federal government indicted him on charges of offering the largest bribe in IRS history - a bribe he freely admitted paying, on the advice of his attorney, Oscar Goodman. Though he ultimately walked out of court a free man, he never got Circus back. And though he guessed the formula that would open up Las Vegas to millions in the 1990s with the design of the Grandissimo, but he wasn't able to secure the financing for the casino, and when he died in 1984, it remained only a frustrating dream. Sarno's casinos - and his ideas about how to build casinos - created the template for Las Vegas today. Before him, Las Vegas meant dealers in string ties and bland, functional architecture. He taught the city how to dress up its hotels in fantasy, putting toga dresses on cocktail waitresses and making sure that even the stationery carried through with the theme. He saw Las Vegas as a place where ordinary people could leave their ordinary lives and have extraordinary adventures. And that remains the template for Las Vegas today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jay (Uncle Jack) J. Sarno was my uncle, the youngest sibling of my father Herman Sarno, his oldest brother by a decade. David Schwartz interviewed me for the book about five years ago. Naturally I was very curious about how it would turn out. IF it would ever turn out?. Although David never met Jay the book is well researched and captures the different sides of this very complicated and larger than life man. When Jay is frequently characterized as larger than life it's true in every way, both girth and character. As a Las Vegas historian David's reason for writing the book was to draw attention to a turning point in the history of Las Vegas. Before Jay came to Vegas the book describes the "desert resort as suffering from a visual drought. All the casinos looked more or less the same, like cheap western knock offs, dressing their dealers in vests and string ties." Jay changed that forever, first with Caesar's Palace in 1966; then in 1968, with Circus Circus. Both had themes that ran through every detail of the casino, such as Caesars with the Roman goddess waitresses in the high end Bacchanal Restaurant to the stationary in the rooms with burnt edges, singed when Rome burned or Circus Circus, with elephant shaped ashtrays in the lobby, a carousel out front as the casino's signage and live circus acts performing right above the gambling pit. He took the experience of gambling to an entirely different level, raising the bar and changing Las Vegas to what it is today. As the other reviews point out Jay's place in the history of the city is as great as other figures such as Bugsy Siegal, Steve Wynn, Kirk Kerkorian and of course Howard Hughes, but that for some reason they have received much greater recognition, at least outside Las Vegas itself. To spend time with Jay in Vegas was truly an experience. Wherever he went people seemed to jump to attention. People scamped around for tips, tables emerged from out of no where to the front rows of packed casino night clubs. A rabbi would sidle up to him, asking him to help get his daughter a job as cocktail waitresses. And when Jay hit the dice tables crowds gathered from thin air to gawk at the vast sums wagered and his frenetic energy. He played like it was his last dying act. But Jay in many ways was a lonely man, something the book also touches on. Maybe to the black jack dealers and valet parking lot attendants may have envied him his exciting life at the pinnacle of the Las Vegas power pyramid but after his divorce he spent most nights in his 5 bedroom house alone or with me when I came to visit from New York for a few weeks. The phone didn't ring. No one came by. He would just sit in front of the television, flipping through the channels. He really didn't have any real friends, only hangers on seeing

what they could get from him. During my Vegas visits I got to see how the real world operates. Police commissioners chased him down in airports asking for introductions to crime organizations, politicians asked for his help with campaign contributions in exchange for offers of some vague political favors. A few even offered me bribes to set up meetings with him, and I was just a sophomore in college from on summer vacation when Caesars opened, finding himself in this world of bookies, casino junket operators, aspiring small time gangsters, even -I later found out - a contract killer. The book is far from a dry account of a business success but an narrative of an self made life. It's an American cliché but Jay did come from a very humble background, the youngest of seven children of a Polish Jewish immigrant family, surviving the depression in St. Joseph, Missouri as best they could, opening a small grocery store, taking in boarders to pay the rent, fighting off bullies after school, living next to the stench of a cattle stockyards and slaughter house. His father was a carpenter who never really learned to speak English, despite living over half a century in America. His children, four brothers and three sisters, stuck together and helped each other out of poverty, putting each other through college, law school and medical school. Through all of hustle they made connections. Jay's big break was in Miami when he met Jimmy Hoffa, who backed him in his first major hotel the Atlanta Cabana, funded mostly by the Teamsters Central State Pension fund, controlled by Alan Dorfman and the Chicago outfit, a crime organization going back to the Al Capone days. But strings were attached. Mobsters backed his casinos only to skim from them and he had to deal with the red ink that came as a result of all the disappearing revenues. Crusaders in the government such as Robert Kenney wanted to bring down the mob's ties to the teamsters and factions within the teamsters wanted to bring down Jimmy Hoffa, to curry favor with the government. Jay was an outsider, trying his best to survive among all these opposing forces. It was a Faustian bargain to get the financing to build his first hotels, the three Cabana hotels, and then the two Las Vegas casinos. It eventually led to what come across in the book as a setup by the IRS to entrap him to offer a very large bribe to an agent, in fact the largest in IRS history and the very real possibility of living the rest of his life in jail. Jay had his own inner demons that David describe well. He was a compulsion to gamble, probably exaggerated by all the tensions in his life and the book does come across in part as a cautionary tale about an addiction. Jay's life really started to unravel when Jimmy Hoffa went to jail in 1967, then lost his position in the teamsters and disappeared. In 1977 Dorfman lost control of the pension to government trustees and that ended any hope of future Teamster pension funding. Dorfman was murdered six years later in a mob hit. His health failing although still in his early sixties Jay had one last idea: Grandissimo, the world's biggest hotel and casino, excessive in

every way, with a dollar coaster in the lobby and a shopping center selling everything at cost but when Jay tried to get what he called "illegitimate" financing, the only financing now available for casinos, he had no other alternative but to go hat in hand to Wall Street. Las Vegas would no longer be the financial paradise of the mob. Although the excess in themed casinos and extravagant design remained - that's what the public now expected after Caesars' and Circus Circus - funding now could only come from bankers and corporations. Jay wasn't the type of person they could deal with and doors on Wall Street were shut in his face. I was with him at the time and it was very sad to see someone so out of his element, so utterly rejected. With links to organized crime, his own bombastic personality (also his ill fitting wig didn't go down well on Wall Street) his rejection was all but inevitable. He passed away in 1984, never having given up on his dream casino. Like any gambler believing the next roll of the dice will change his fortune. He still held on to the hope that somehow someone would come along with the funding. Jay wasn't driven by money although he enjoyed all the things money could buy, particularly since he never had any money growing up. All he wanted to do in his life was to be what he called a hotel man, to create amazing experiences for his guests, the common man he identified with: To make every man a "Caesar" for a few days before they returned to their daily real life. Some people throw around the term genius when it comes to Jay. I wouldn't go as far as that but he definitely had a great deal of experience when it came to developing hotels, particularly after the three Cabana hotels before he came to Vegas. Contractors would come in and out of his office all day and he knew more about their job than they did. He wouldn't like to be considered an artist but he did have a vision. He would doodle on his notepad. He could draw on a professional level, iterating and reiterating a particular design features. Perhaps his greatest talents was as a salesman. He knew how to press all the right buttons, how selling was creating an emotional bond with the buyer. To sell anything you had to really convince yourself that what you were selling was worthwhile. You had to believe totally in what you were selling and that enthusiasm and belief would somehow transfer to the buyer and he could be converted into a buyer, a customer and worked. He was a nobody from nowhere but he got all sorts of different people, from celebrities like Doris Day to small and big time gangsters to believe in what he was doing. He once showed me how he was going to sell some really far out ideas, like drive-in acupuncture clinic to bumper car rides in shopping centers and damn if I didn't end up investing in one of them. A final note: With Jay there were always surreal and really funny moments and they are in the book, like the time he had just come to Las Vegas. He was running late for a very important appointment with a lawyer with all important connection to the gaming commission. Desperate to make the appointment on time he

hitched a ride with a stranger, asking him to hurry up and bragging all the time that he had just gotten millions of dollars from the Teamsters to build the biggest casino in Las Vegas and the casino would be the most profitable in history. He wasn't just hitching a ride. It seemed almost like he got so carried away with the idea that he was selling it to the guy who picked him up. Later he found out that the stranger turned out to be an FBI agent, who filed a report immediately after dropping him off. Things like this happened to Jay all the time. The chapter on his wedding or non-wedding is truly hilarious. I was only ten years old at the time and went with my mother, father and brother to Windsor, Canada, only to be told the wedding was cancelled. I had no idea why until I read the book. Jay's life was one wild ride and the book does a great job capturing all. If Jay was alive now I don't know what he would think about Caesars, Circus Circus and Vegas in general. He was very saddened that my father and his mother, a strong woman who held the family together, were not alive for the opening. As much as a vision he had for his hotels and Vegas as an entertainment destination I doubt even he could comprehend how it has turned out. Both hotels were small then compared to what they are now and now they are in other cities with Caesars World. Buy this book. You won't be able to put it down if you do. Now did I sell you on it? I hope so. re; The audio book. Jay had a very distinctive voice. It was a booming and he pronounced every single word with great clarity. A deaf person probably would have no trouble understanding him. Some day maybe the technology will exist where a voice such as Jay's could be cloned for an audio book but that day is not now. At first I was disappointed in the the audio book. The speaker seemed to me almost robotic Also David imagines conversations in the book. When you are reading the book this is OK. but when you hear it spoken it can be off putting at times. Jay never would have said for example kid or kiddie, etc. He just didn't talk that way But after awhile I got use to the speaker's voice. It's very professional and it worked well for the book.

My first visit to Las Vegas was in 1987 and our first stop was Caesars Palace to take a picture in front of the fountains. I ended up moving to Las Vegas in January 1993. We were driving on the Las Vegas strip during the first month after moving to Las Vegas and my business partner and friend said to me as we were driving by Caesars, "one day we are going to own our own hotel and casino." I laughed because we did not have two nickels to rub together. We would eventually go on to own the Golden Nugget. Las Vegas is a place where dreams come true and anything is possible. Jay Sarno proved that and David Schwartz does an incredible job of telling the story of one of Las Vegas' great pioneers and visionaries. Many say that Las Vegas was an overnight success but the

truth is it took years for the city to evolve into what it is today. It took bold entrepreneurs like Jay Sarno to bring their ideas to the city and have the ability to make their dreams a reality. This book outlines so many of the things that needed to come together. Sarno was a man before his time who inspired so many entrepreneurs in the city. His themed hotels are why people picked up the travel section of the newspaper and desired to come to Las Vegas. Las Vegas became a fantasyland. An escape. And one of the top travel destinations. My business partner worked at the end of the front desk at Circus Circus when the slogan "rooms available, if not we'll place you" was listed on the marquee. It was there that he learned the room reservation business. We would go on to build our own room reservations business and vacation packages business and eventually sell it to Expedia in 2000. Another one of my best friends worked in the carnival games section at the casino. It is where he got his first taste of Las Vegas. Sarno's vision touched the lives of many people that are shaping our world today. This book is a must read if you want to dive into one of the great personalities that shaped the city of Las Vegas and the hospitality and gaming industry. He changed the industry, was an early pioneer, and inspired modern day casino and hospitality moguls like Steve Wynn. Great job to David Schwartz for all the work that he put into this book. Order it today. You will enjoy it.

Grandissimo is a perfectly written biography of the flawed visionary Jay Sarno. David G. Schwartz, Vegas historian extraordinaire, hits the perfect balance between detail and fast pacing in his essential biography of the builder of the iconic Caesars Palace and Circus Circus. Sarno's influence on Las Vegas transcends those two hotels; he single-handedly had the vision that has impacted every single property built since then. Without Sarno, there is no Steve Wynn. There is no Mirage, Bellagio, Excalibur, etc. The pacing of the book is perfect. Schwartz's tale unfolds like a movie as we get to see every aspect of Jay Sarno, a larger than life man of incredible appetites. If you are interested in Las Vegas history, read this book before any others. I have read almost every book on the history of Nevada and it's many colorful characters and this is my favorite. Schwartz did an untold amount of research to get this story right and I thank the Sarno family for cooperating with him. This man's story had to be told, and Schwartz did it perfectly. You will love Sarno, despise him, pity him, and admire him. But you won't forget him!

THIS BOOK TELLS A MESMERIZING STORY IN VERY GREAT DETAIL AND ABOUT MOST OF THE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY CREATED THE VEGAS STRIP AND EXPANSE. THIS IS A STORY OF THE RISE AND FALL, AND RISE AGAIN AND FALL ETC. OF JAY SARNO WHO HAS

TO BE ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING CHARACTERS OF THE ENTIRE MOB/LEGIT VEGAS AND GAMBLING EXPERIENCE, AND HOTELS BEFORE AND VERY MUCH MORE. THIS IS A NON-STOP BEST READ.

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