

The Legend Continues

Biography of Connie Francis

“The orchestra’s overture swells and the spotlight captures the Legend. She is draped in ermine and begowned in white sequins. As she sweeps through the crowd towards the stage the audience erupts in applause. The voice at once puts a smile on their faces and sends tingles down their spines. It is unmistakable – like a musical instrument they haven’t heard in years but which now, once re-found, sounds better than ever. This is Connie Francis.”

Concetta Rosemarie Franconero was born on December 12, 1937 in an Italian neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. Encouraged by her laborer father, she was musical from the start and at age four gave her first “concert” at the Olympic Amusement Park, where she played the accordion and sang *Anchors Aweigh*. She then appeared on TV for one year on *Marie Moser’s Starlets* broadcast from Newark, New Jersey. At age ten she was playing the accordion and singing *St. Louis Blues* on the *Ted Mack Amateur Hour Show* held at the Mosque Theater in Newark. Soon she landed an appearance on *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*, and it was there that Godfrey suggested she change her last name to a “good ole easy-to-pronounce Irish name like – let’s see – Francis.”

She then auditioned for *The Startime Kids*, a weekly NBC-TV show produced by George Scheck who would later become her life-long manager. She would continue to appear as a regular on *Startime* for four years. As a fourteen-year-old she began recording demonstration records (demos) for publishers. She received the princely sum of \$10 for four songs, which she said “went a long way.” At that time, the Mob offered to sign her, but her father wisely chose to build Connie’s career without such assistance. “If Connie makes it she’s gonna make it on her own – with no bosses,” he told them.

At the age of 17, when *Startime* left the air, George Scheck and a music publisher, Lou Levy, put up \$6,000 for her first very own recording session. Every label turned them down. Mitch Miller, then top A&R man at Columbia, told them both: “Save your money, boys. She sounds like fifty-thousand other girl singers.”

But the last company to which Scheck peddled her new recordings, MGM, was headed by Harry Meyerson, and he signed Connie to a two year, 20-side contract – because he had a nephew named Freddy and she had a song of the same name. He thought it would be a cute present for his nephew.

In high school, Connie was a high achiever – an “A” student, National Honor Society, co-editor of her high school newspaper, and, at fifteen, was the New Jersey State Typing Champion. However, physical education was never her strong suit, which is the source of good-natured self-deprecating humor to this day. “I was athletically declined,” she says. “If it weren’t for my mood swings I’d get no exercise at all.”

She attended Arts High in Newark for two years and then graduated from Belleville High. She was granted a four-year scholarship to NYU where she eventually wanted to become a doctor.

In 1956 Connie met a poverty-stricken kid from the Bronx – Bobby Darin. He brought her a song to record, *My First Real Love*. That very week, George Scheck got Bobby a recording contract with Decca Records. After an inauspicious start, Connie and Bobby soon became inseparable. Connie’s father vehemently opposed the relationship from the start. George Franconero was strict with his daughter, pre-empting any high school dating and even her senior prom. “My father wasn’t strict,” she says. “He was a vigilante.” Franconero said about Darin, “He’s in show business; he’s a bum; and, he ain’t goin’ nowhere.” George even took off after Bobby with a pistol in his pocket during a rehearsal before a scheduled appearance on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. This effectively ended Connie’s and Bobby’s relationship forever. Bobby was the true love of Connie’s young life.

Although Connie’s stardom and international fame are taken for granted today, her early journey in show business was arduous and filled with many disappointments. Her first eighteen sides (nine records) under her contract with MGM went nowhere. At the time, the music scene was a totally male-dominated

market. There hadn't been a female hit in years.

Connie treated her last recording session in late 1957 as her "swan song" from the music industry. However, her father, George Franconero, had other ideas. He recommended that she record an old standard from 1923, *Who's Sorry Now?*, with a new beat "the kids can dance to." Both Connie and MGM balked. MGM advised her, "Tell your 'ol man to stick to his roofing business." Connie thought the song was "too square" and that "the kids on *American Bandstand* would laugh me right off the show." Her dad's wry retort, "If you don't record this song, honey, the only way you'll ever get on *American Bandstand* is if you sit on top of the TV set."

Connie finally acquiesced to her dad and used the last sixteen minutes of this last recording session to cut the song. *Who's Sorry Now?* was released in October 1957 and, like all her previous records, it went nowhere. Connie thought she would turn to secretarial work and utilize the highly-prized Gregg shorthand she had mastered at age thirteen to prevent her mother from snooping in her diary.

But, on January 1, 1958, Dick Clark played the song – over and over – until it had sold almost one million copies, and in five seconds flat she knew her life would never be the same. She embarked on a non-stop mission to embrace and conquer the world. Connie maintained a frenetic pace filled with recording albums, appearances on every prestigious TV and variety show, filming movies, and made concert appearances in all major capitals of the world on five continents. Her concerts drew record-breaking audiences. Connie was named *The Most Popular Female Vocalist* by a write-in vote on *American Bandstand* for each of the five years of the poll's existence.

Further hits such as *Stupid Cupid* (the first female rock 'n' roll hit), *Lipstick On Your Collar*, *Frankie, My Happiness* and *Among My Souvenirs* cemented her status as the first princess of rock 'n' roll. However, she was legitimized with the adults the night she appeared on *The Perry Como Show*. Again, her father intervened. He recommended an Italian-language number, *Mama*, from her first Italian-language LP (another George Franconero suggestion), but she doubted the song's appeal in America. Once again, the reception to her appearance on *The Perry Como Show* catapulted Connie into the realm of a genuine American adult star, and days after that show people were scalping tickets to see her at Carnegie Hall.

Building on the momentum of *Mama*, Connie had always possessed a desire to internationalize American music, again, her dad's idea. She was not only the first female rock 'n' roll singer but the first American artist to record in no less than thirteen different languages. She reveled in bringing a song to a country in its native language. Not even the Iron Curtain could stop Connie. She appeared in an hour-long TV special in Romania and went behind the Berlin Wall. She was an unofficial American goodwill ambassador.

In 1958 Connie was introduced by struggling publisher Donnie Kirshner to two fledgling songwriters – Neil Sedaka and Howie Greenfield; both of whom would go on to pen some of Connie's most successful tunes.

In 1958, Connie was named by Cashbox, Billboard and the Jukebox Operators of America as the *#1 Female Vocalist*. She was named *Top Female Vocalist* by all the trades for six consecutive years – a record never surpassed. As well, England's prestigious New Musical Express also named her the *World's #1 Female Vocalist*. She earned two gold records for *Who's Sorry Now?* and *Stupid Cupid*.

In 1959 Connie garnered three more gold records, and an onslaught of Connie Francis products flooded the market – diaries, charm bracelets, cut out dolls, bobby socks, clothing and more.

In the beginning of 1960, Connie had the good fortune of meeting legendary movie producer Joe Pasternak. Pasternak was responsible for discovering Deanna Durbin, Elizabeth Taylor, Jane Powell, Judy Garland and Kathryn Grayson. He asked Connie to be in his forthcoming movie, *Where The Boys Are*, based on a then-considered "risqué" novel by Glendon Swarthout. Her father was opposed to it; he thought it was a "dirty" movie, but Connie defied him and indeed appeared in the movie and sang the title

song. At first, Connie was skeptical about Fort Lauderdale, “This place is a morgue,” she told Pasternak. “I thought there’d be boys growing on palm trees. I’d rather go to the Jersey shore.”

That little movie opened on January 21, 1960 at the Gateway Theater in Fort Lauderdale and simultaneously at Radio City Music Hall in New York City, and was the biggest-grossing MGM picture to that date at Radio City and the most successful low-budget film in MGM history. Within a few months of the film’s release it was bedlam, as thousands of kids headed for Fort Lauderdale, and the city became the “spring break” capitol of the world. So popular was the title song, that Connie ultimately recorded it in five other languages – Italian, Spanish, French, German and Japanese. The song climbed to #1 in fifteen countries – before the movie was ever released! This also marked the first time an American singer had ever sung a title song in Japanese in an American film.

In 1960 Connie was named the *#1 Female Recording Artist* in Germany, Japan, England, Italy, Australia and in every other area of the world where records were bought. Connie did indeed internationalize American music.

Her first German language song was *Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool*, the biggest-selling record in German history. She was awarded Radio Luxembourg’s prestigious *Golden Lion Award*, and was recognized as the most successful artist on the European Continent – the first time the award was ever won by a non-European.

Further in 1960, Connie appeared for the first time at New York’s Copacabana and became the youngest female to star there when it wasn’t prom time, and the biggest female draw in Copa history. She was also the youngest star to appear in a main room in Las Vegas at the Sahara Hotel and broke records previously held by Johnny Carson. Her appearances in Vegas would continue for ten years and at the Copa through 1972.

In 1962 she signed a new contract with MGM, combining movie deals with recording. Connie became the 50% producer of her next three films. Connie was given unprecedented perks by MGM including the fact that MGM paid for all her recording sessions, without recouping session costs, and MGM allowed Connie to choose all her own songs.

In 1961 Connie chose to sing *Never On Sunday* on the Academy Awards TV broadcast. This was the first time a foreign song won the award for Best Song. She was the youngest star to have her own TV special in the United States on ABC-TV and had her own TV specials in England, Germany, Spain and Italy. She was honored by the wildly-popular TV shows *This Is Your Life* and *Person to Person* and toured extensively in foreign countries. She had hugely successful runs at the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, Hollywood’s Coconut Grove and Miami Beach’s Eden Roc Hotel, Boston’s Blinstrub’s, The El San Juan and Caribe Hilton Hotels in Puerto Rico, The Diplomat in Hollywood, Florida and Harrah’s in Lake Tahoe among many others.

In 1963 she was summoned for a command performance for Queen Elizabeth. In December 1967 she went to the boondocks of Viet Nam to perform for the soldiers and boosted the morale of all who saw her there. Connie marks this time in Viet Nam as the most gratifying experience of her career. “I never felt more needed,” she says. In an attempt to reach audiences behind the Iron Curtain, she also had her own weekly show on Radio Luxembourg for years and was the voice on Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and the Armed Forces Network. In 1971 she was asked by the State Department to represent the United States in Romania, in an effort to ease the tension between the two countries.

Aside from the Canadian comedy team of Wayne & Schuster, Connie appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* more often than any other performer. Sullivan appearances included shows aired from the Moulin Rouge in Paris, Guantanamo Naval Base, and the Berlin Wall.

In 1959 Connie became the biggest-selling female recording artist in German history. In 1959 and 1960, her first foreign language albums – in Italian, Jewish, and Spanish – remained on the charts for almost a year, and her contract with MGM called for five albums per year. She was presented with the

Custom Clothiers' *Best-Dressed Award* and was included in *The World's Who's Who* and *The Who's Who of American Women*. In 1960, Connie was named Miss Coca Cola and embarked upon a heavy schedule of radio and TV commercials promoting the soft drink.

Mystically, Connie Francis has not been inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. Of this glaring omission Connie comments, "I have no *logical* explanation for this oversight and I'm certain that if asked, the 'impartial' members of this committee couldn't dream up a *logical* explanation either, but I take solace in the fact that both Neil Sedaka and Neil Diamond have also been overlooked by this exclusive club. It's a colossal joke."

From a personal standpoint, Connie was not nearly as successful. She was married four times. She married and divorced Sahara Hotel public relations director Dick Kanellis in 1964; married and divorced Las Vegas hairdresser Izzy Marion in 1971; married travel tycoon Joe Garzilli in 1973 and was divorced in 1980; and, was married to TV producer Bob Parkinson for only 81 days in 1985. Connie readily admits, "I could pick hit records, but not hit husbands. It's like when you play poker: If you know you have a losing hand, you simply fold."

In 1967 Connie underwent cosmetic surgery, which left her unable to sing in air-conditioned venues. She was forced to curtail her personal appearances dramatically.

For three years starting in 1969, Connie semi-retired from music. Depressed after suffering a miscarriage in 1974, husband Joe Garzilli encouraged Connie to return to singing. She was booked into an engagement at the Westbury Music Fair on Long Island. On the fourth night of the engagement, she was brutally robbed, beaten and raped at knifepoint, an event that garnered international headlines. Understandably devastated, Connie went into seclusion for seven years. She became somewhat of a symbol as America's most famous victim of violent crime, and received thousands of letters from other victims.

In 1976 Connie and her husband went through a tortuous trial against the Howard Johnson's Motel chain. Connie was awarded \$2,600,000 for the motel's failure to provide a safe room. It was the largest award in history for a case of sexual assault. This case was a watershed of litigation against the owners/operators of establishments – wherever the public was allowed to congregate, and is still used in law schools and legal treatises as the seminal case for hotel and motel security. One month after the rape she adopted a five-month old baby boy, Joey, whom she learned was available for adoption on the night just hours before her assault. Now 35 she says of Joey, "He's been the true love of my life."

In 1977, Connie embarked on additional nasal surgery to correct the damage done a decade prior. However, this procedure left her entirely unable to sing for four long years. It took three subsequent operations to restore her voice. When she finally granted her first interview she said, "When I lost my voice, I lost my identity because, in my mind, I was my voice. Without it, I was a different person. I had no self-confidence, and as a woman, I had the worst relationships during that time than any other time, because I wasn't me – without a voice, I felt like nothing."

On March 6, 1981, Connie's only sibling, her brother Georgie, a former assistant district attorney (1965) and successful lawyer in private practice who had been indicted on land fraud charges, was murdered by the Mafia for cooperating with law enforcement.

One in-depth story read as follows, "The words conjure up an image of more sadness than would seem possible to bear. Every page tells the incredible story of the rise of a young singer, plagued by a domineering father, who experienced star-crossed love with a teen idol. She became the best-selling female vocalist of all time, only to go from being America's sweetheart to 'America's most famous crime victim' after being brutally raped. She had four failed marriages (and was physically abused by two of her husbands), a nervous breakdown, two miscarriages, completely lost her singing voice for four years and suffered the loss of her only sibling when he was murdered by the mob, in 1981. It's hard to believe it was fact, not fiction – but, I thought, in my wildest imagination, not even the most prolific novelist would

inflict that kind of pain on his unsuspecting heroine.

“Yet as I recently met and talked to the person who had lived this story, as told in her autobiography, *Who’s Sorry Now?*, I marveled at what I saw. Connie Francis looks much younger than her years, and she exudes a charming mixture of optimism, humor and vulnerability instead of the bitterness and hostility one might expect. Put to the true test of survival, Connie’s spirit has triumphed over the deepest depths of human tragedy, and with the help of good friends, not only has she lived to tell the tale but she is intent on writing a happier ending.”

Later in 1981, Connie tirelessly plunged into advocating for victims’ rights. She was granted her own task force under the Reagan Administration and spent two-and-half years vigorously advocating for legal and policy changes. As a result, she was instrumental in having several laws changed and/or passed including a Victims’ Omnibus Bill introduced by Senator John Heinz; passage of Proposition 8, the toughest anti-crime bill ever passed in California; the repeal of New York’s Earnest Resistance Law; and Connie was successful in getting the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to adopt a Crime Victims’ Bill of Rights for the first time, that she composed. Connie spoke to 6,000 chiefs of police at the IACP Convention in Atlanta in 1983 advocating for better treatment of crime victims by police departments, along with then Attorney General William French Smith, IACP President Jim Damos and FBI Director Daniel Webster. She also lobbied a joint session of the Texas legislature with Texas Attorney General Jim Maddox.

All of this intense activity left her unnerved and enervated so much so that in July 1983 Connie was involuntarily committed by her father to a mental institution and was incorrectly diagnosed with manic depression. Thereafter she was involuntarily committed in such hospitals 17 times in the next nine years in five different states until February of 1991 – New York, New Jersey, Florida, California and Texas. Coming full circle on May 19, 2010, Connie was named the national spokeswoman for Mental Health America’s trauma campaign which she calls: STAR – Stress, Trauma, Awareness, Recovery. In this campaign Connie will attempt to accomplish for those people suffering from mental illness what she did for victims of violent crime.

Currently, Connie is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the filming and release of the movie *Where The Boys Are*. The City of Fort Lauderdale is launching the yearlong festivities with a beach party and retrospective during Memorial Day weekend, 2010. Connie has also teamed with famed music producer Rob Fusari (creator of and award-winning producer for Lady Gaga, among other high-profile artists) to create a new club version of the song *Where The Boys Are*. Also in May 2010, Connie triumphantly returned to Las Vegas with a series of shows at the Las Vegas Hilton with Dionne Warwick.

Of late, Connie has toured internationally with visits to Malaysia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, France, and Canada; and, here in the US in New Jersey, New York, Florida, California, Arizona, Massachusetts, Chicago and Pennsylvania. Connie is always enthusiastically greeted by legions of very loyal fans. She is now penning her second autobiography. This book will take a detailed look at the experiences of her life through anecdotes, photos, news and magazine articles and the backup-accounts of how it all happened. Some passages will leave you laughing, some will shock you, and some will bring tears to your eyes. This book is not just another autobiography, but a humorous and poignant romp through a career that brought unprecedented accolades.

Connie speaks candidly about the traumatic rollercoaster ride of her personal life and her long successful career and declares that the inspiration she received from people all over the world, the support of her family and friends and most especially her sense of humor are those things that have sustained her all her life. She has been quoted as saying that she would like to be remembered “...not so much for the heights I have reached but for the depths from which I have come.”