

Past his prime, but still

■ Latest **Franzese** trial puts focus on mob family squabbles

■ At 93, 'Last of the Mohicans' may be nearing end of line

BY JOHN RILEY
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In a 1965 article, "The Hood in the Neighborhood," Newsday chronicled the life and times of Roslyn's John "Sonny" **Franzese** — a suburban commuter with a well-manicured lawn whose gangland power extended from Manhattan's entertainment industry to an estimated half of all the rackets on Long Island.

Law enforcement and mob sources alike expressed a certain admiration for the Colombo family's emerging star, at 48 a "good family man" who handled himself like a rising young executive at IBM but whose tools of power were "greed, fear and, when necessary, the gun."

"He's a home man, a family man, which is very important with them," one underworld associate said, explaining **Franzese's** appeal to La Cosa Nostra's upper echelon.

Forty-five years later, **Franzese** — now 93 — is in the headlines again, on trial for the last three weeks in federal court in Brooklyn on racketeering, extortion and loan-sharking charges, with closing arguments expected today.

Different circumstances

But he's no longer a comer or feared enforcer. Instead, as the case has unfolded, this time around the headline seems to be, "The Hood Who Lived Too Long."

Nearly a half-century past his prime, **Franzese** clutches a cane, is regularly rolled out in a wheelchair for bathroom breaks, and occasionally nods off during testimony. On secretly recorded prosecution audiotapes, he is heard reliving old murders and obsessing over seedy strip joint extortions. When he's not around, small-time hoods call him the "Last of the Mohicans," and describe loan collections as Sonny's "Social Security."

As for taking care of his family, he may have done so, yet the key witness against him has been his son John **Franzese Jr.**, who made many of the incriminating tapes while speaking to his father in 2005. On the stand, he said he loved his dad, called him a great father — and tried to bury him in jail.

Outside the courtroom, another son,



PHOTO BY JAMES CARBONE

Michael — a former Colombo capo — has defended his father. But Sonny **Franzese's** estranged wife, Cristina, 75, wandered the courthouse like a wraith during John Jr.'s testimony. She urged her husband to spare their son by pleading guilty and complaining that her whole family has paid dearly for **Franzese's** devotion to the mob.

"It was a horrific life," she told reporters.

Sonny **Franzese**, the patriarch of this complicated family, grew up the son of a baker in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. He earned his early mob reputation as an enforcer. On one tape, not played at trial, **Franzese** brags that he "killed a lot of guys. . . . You're not talking about four, five, six, 10" but was "never caught," according to prosecutors.

The fractured Franzese family

John 'Sonny' Franzese, 93, a legendary enforcer who exercised control of Long Island rackets and Manhattan entertainment industry for the Colombo family. Spent much of his life behind bars since a 1967 bank robbery conviction, but still was reputed family underboss when indicted on racketeering charges in 2008. Now lives in Brooklyn.



Cristina Capobianco Franzese, 75,

married Sonny in the 1950s and raised a family of seven children with him in Roslyn. Now estranged from her husband, she called on him to plead guilty to spare her son John Jr. from testifying. Lives in Selden.



Michael Franzese, 59,

son of Cristina and adopted son of Sonny, became a major Long Island mob figure and made millions off a gas-tax scam in the 1970s. Quit the mob after a prison term. Has become a Christian motivational speaker who has faulted his younger brother for taking the stand against their father. Lives in California.



John Franzese Jr., 50,

son of Cristina and Sonny, became a cocaine addict and HIV-positive. Kicked his habit and turned FBI informant who wore a wire that incriminated his father. Star government witness against his dad. Placed in the witness protection program.

— JOHN RILEY

According to book "Blood Covenant" that Michael **Franzese** wrote about his family, his father and mother — a telephone operator and part-time hatcheck girl at Manhattan's famed Stork Club — married in the 1950s. The merger of three families — Michael is Christina's son, Sonny had three children by a previous marriage, and the couple had John Jr. and two daughters together — was not without tension.

Long time since his heyday

The 1960s were Sonny **Franzese's** heyday. He had pieces of movies like "Deep Throat" and "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." He made friends with Frank Sinatra by helping to pack a Long Island nightclub for his son,

Frank Jr. Both Michael and John still describe him as a great dad with a soft spot for his kids.

In 1967, however, **Franzese** got a 50-year sentence on a bank robbery conviction. Paroled after 10 years, he was repeatedly — five times — returned to jail for associating with mob cronies. He was true to the mob code, never squealing, and, the government alleged, still a Colombo underboss as of 2008.

But a lot happened to his other family during his long absences.

Michael, the adopted son, became a major Long Island mob figure in his own right in the 1970s, making millions in a gasoline tax scam before pleading guilty and serving time. Now married with kids and living in Califor-

in spotlight



NEWSDAY FILE PHOTO

A dapper "Sonny" Franzese in custody in Brooklyn in 1966.

Rider accuses LI bus driver

BY JOSEPH MALLIA AND JENNIFER BARRIOS

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A Suffolk County Transit bus driver pleaded not guilty yesterday to charges he held a lone female passenger captive aboard a bus and attempted to rape her, State Police said.

Richard T. Downes, 43, of Middle Island, who works for an outside contractor, was arrested Saturday after the passenger told police Downes pulled his bus over on County Road 51 near the Riverhead County Center and tried to rape her.

Downes was arraigned yesterday at Southampton Town Court on charges of unlawful imprisonment and attempted rape. Bail was set at \$1,000 and he was taken to Riverhead Correctional Facility, authorities said.

Downes had not made bail as of last night and is due back in court July 22, according to an employee at the Suffolk County sheriff's records department at the Riverhead jail.

Downes has a 1987 criminal conviction for weapons possession, according to court records. In that case, Downes, who was living in Brooklyn, was charged with two counts of felony weapons possession. He pleaded guilty to one charge and was sentenced to 5 years' probation. In 1989, he pleaded guilty to attempted unauthorized use of a vehicle, according to court records. The terms of that sentence were not available.

The outside contractor that supplied Downes' services as a driver, Sunrise Coach Lines of Greenport, ran a fingerprint and background check on Downes and he passed, said Robert Shinnick, the county director of transportation operations.

A spokeswoman for Hampton Jitney, which owns Sunrise, was not available for comment yesterday.

In the Saturday allegation, State Police said the passenger told them she was the lone rider on the 8A bus at about 2:50 p.m. when Downes suddenly pulled the bus over. She told police Downes started talking to her, then forced her to the back of the bus and tried to rape her. After she fought back, police said, Downes gave up and resumed driving, dropping her off in Riverhead.

She approached a Riverhead Town police officer, who took her to State Police because they have jurisdiction in Southampton Town, where the alleged crime occurred. Troopers found the bus on Route 24 off the Long Island Expressway and arrested Downes.

Shinnick said Suffolk County owns the bus system but contracts out maintenance, repairs and driving. Contractors must perform fingerprint and background checks. Sunrise told the county that it followed the law in vetting and hiring Downes, Shinnick said.



Driver Richard T. Downes

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THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1778 The Revolutionary War Battle of Monmouth took place in New Jersey; it was from this battle that the legend of "Molly Pitcher" arose.

1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated in Sarajevo by Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip — the event that sparked World War I.

1919 The Treaty of Versailles was signed in France, ending the First World War.

1978 The Supreme Court ordered the University of California-Davis Medical School to admit Allan Bakke, a white man who argued he'd been a victim of reverse racial discrimination.

NOW ONLINE

See photos of "Sonny" Franzese through the years and look for news updates on his current trial. newsday.com/crime

nia, he's a Christian motivational speaker who says he quit the mob to serve God and his family.

He has denounced his brother's betrayal, but also had a warning for his father in his 2003 book: "The legend of Sonny Franzese will not survive into the next life."

Son turned informer

John, younger when their father went away, became a mob hanger-on and descended into cocaine addiction. After cleaning up, he became an FBI informant. He was declared "subhuman" by his father's lawyer, but said taking on Sonny's choice of the mob life was the right decision.

"This life is a bad life," he testified, "and if people did things like this [testi-

fyng] maybe it wouldn't be around like this."

Cristina Franzese says that one of their daughters died of a drug overdose in 1990, and another died of cancer recently, without treatments because there was no health insurance. She says she lost the Roslyn house because the money ran out, and had to leave a Northport rental for the same reason.

She said she banished Sonny because she was sick of parole officers in her living room, and sees her son John as seeking "redemption" from the life Sonny Franzese bequeathed. "I made the mistake by marrying him," she says.

Franzese was stoic during his son's testimony — although prosecutors say that in 2007 when he first learned that John Jr. was an informant he behaved more like a Family man than a family man, trying to arrange for his son's murder.

He hasn't been talking to the press during the trial. But a month ago, leaving a pretrial hearing, he didn't seem overly concerned about returning to jail at age 93.

"Who cares?" he told reporters. "I gotta die someplace."