VANITY FAIR

NEWS FEBRUARY 1991 ISSUE

The Born-Again Don

How did Michael Franzese—a capo in the Colombo crime family and one of the richest "made" men since Capone—leave the Mob and take up with the Feds, then live happily ever after in Hollywood? They made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Fredric Dannen reports.

BY FREDRIC DANNEN

APRIL 5, 2012

His parents wanted him to be a doctor, so he dutifully enrolled at a local college on Long Island and majored in biology. Michael Franzese was expected to do well. The only time his father ever hit him was upon being told—falsely—that the boy's A average in Catholic school had slipped. But he dropped out of college midway through his studies, and soon after that, Franzese paid a call on his father to announce that he was being drawn into the old man's profession.

Their meeting place, the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, was a stark reminder of where that profession could lead. John "Sonny" Franzese, a *caporegime* in the Colombo crime family, had gotten fifty years in a bank-robbery case. Sonny was a shark-eyed, bull-necked hoodlum who looked like John Garfield in *Body and Soul;* a legendary enforcer given credit for dozens of murders; a man who had been tossed out of the U.S. Army as a "psychoneurotic with pronounced homicidal tendencies."

Sonny was not surprised at the news. Though Michael was an adopted child, he had raised the boy from infancy, and, he told his son, "I seen that spirit in you." As long as Michael was going to be "on the street," Sonny wanted to give him "a proper introduction" to certain of his friends. But first there was an important matter to clear up.

"Let me ask you a question," Sonny said. "If you had to kill somebody, do you think you could do it?"

Michael thought for a moment. "If the circumstance were right," he said. "For the right reasons, I'd do it. Yeah."

Sonny arranged for Colombo soldier "Joe-Joe" Vitacco to reach out for his son, and Michael Franzese began his formal schooling in "the life." In 1975, at age twenty-four, he was deemed ready for induction into the Mob. Tom DiBello, acting head of the Colombo family, presided over the solemn ceremony in the back room of a catering hall in Brooklyn. The Colombos laid out a symbolic gun and knife, murmured in Sicilian, and drew blood from Franzese's shooting finger. He was now a "made" man.

Within a decade, Franzese had become a *caporegime* like his father, one of the biggest earners the Mob had seen since Capone, and the youngest individual in *Fortune* magazine's survey of "The 50 Biggest Mafia Bosses." His far-flung ensemble of businesses included high-rise construction, car dealerships, a security guards' union, and the production of B-movies. But his biggest scam involved selling millions of gallons of bootleg gasoline in several states and robbing federal and state governments of the excise taxes. Franzese's personal take: an estimated $1 million to $2 million a week.

Before too long, however, the law caught up with him. By 1985, Franzese was under indictment in New York and Florida, and although he had beaten five cases in the past, this time it looked bad. A federal judge locked him up without bail after hearing evidence of his violent tendencies, including claims—which he still denies—that he ordered a competitor's head bashed in with a ball-peen hammer.

Defeated, Franzese copped a plea to racketeering and conspiracy. He would do ten years at Terminal Island and pay nearly $15 million in fines and restitution. It appeared he had come full circle, ending up like his father.

Today, Michael Franzese, thirty-nine, is a free man, having served about a third of his sentence. He has not paid a nickel of his restitution. He lives in a $2.7 million home in a swank Los Angeles neighborhood with his second wife, twenty-seven-year-old Cammy Garcia, a former aerobics instructor who danced in one of his movies. They drive a Mercedes and a Porsche. Franzese gives his occupation as movie producer. He is represented by ICM, a leading talent agency, which recently sold CBS the rights to a four-hour mini-series about his life. John Travolta and Tony Danza were both mentioned as possible leads. The series is now on hold—Franzese didn't like the script. But later this year, Harper-Collins will publish his memoirs, written with best-selling author Dary Matera.

Why has the federal government been so good to Franzese? He has become that most prized of commodities—an informant. Which explains everything, until you look at whom he has given up. To date, Franzese has publicly testified against two people—a Jewish booking agent and a black janitor—neither of them, to be sure, a member of organized crime.

[redacted]

Lawmen who struggled to bring Franzese to justice are appalled. To them, he has played expert-level Monopoly with the federal system and drawn the "Get Out of Jail Free" card. The F.B.I. and the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section of the Justice Department—representatives of which all declined to be interviewed on the subject of Franzese—are protecting him in the apparent hope that he will somehow prove a star witness. Meanwhile, police and local prosecutors in several states cannot get permission to question him about serious crimes, including unsolved murders. They say Franzese has pulled off the scam of his life.

"When I heard he was cooperating, I laughed," says Jerry Bernstein, a former Brooklyn-strike-force lawyer who spent three years pursuing Franzese—and then got frozen out of the mobster's secret negotiations with Washington. "Cooperating, bull. He's the kind of person who does things on *his* terms." Ray Jermyn, who worked side by side with Bernstein, is even more blunt: "He's making a jerk out of the system."

But even his detractors in law enforcement cannot fathom how Franzese expects to stay alive. His refusal to join the Federal Witness Protection Program—and then embarking on a high-profile life in the entertainment business—seems almost suicidal. And consider this: in a twelve-hour interview spanning three days, Franzese freely identified members of crime families, denounced the Mob in scatological terms, and bragged about having bested Gambino boss John Gotti in a business deal. He promises more of the same in his autobiography. Such contempt for Mafia convention is simply not tolerated.

Franzese says his sweet but determined wife is the catalyst for his new life-style. As improbable as that may sound, he does appear almost mesmerized by her. "I myself observed that she has a Svengali-like hold over him," says Ray Jermyn. "In her presence, he's like a lapdog." (The original working title of the Franzese memoirs was *Quitting the Mob: The Yuppie Don and the Billion-Dollar Mafia Empire He Gave Up for the Woman He Loved.)* Franzese further claims that his wife has converted him to the born-again-Christian faith, which seems a stretch to people who recall his reputation for viciousness.

Outmaneuvering the government is second nature to Franzese—he's made a career of it. Defying the Mafia is something else. Perhaps he *is* doing it for his wife's sake. But unless he holds an ace up his sleeve, organized-crime experts warn, his disrespect for the Mob code is going to get him killed.

[redacted]

"Everybody's trying to figure out my angle."

Michael Franzese is smiling. Despite his reputation, he has a most-popular-boy-at-school charm. But at odd moments his gaze turns icy, and one can picture him ordering an act of brutality. "Don't be fooled," warns Larry Iorizzo, a former partner in crime, now a protected witness. "He's a stone-cold gangster. Never was anything else."

Franzese (pronounced Fran*-zeace*) has declined to be interviewed at his home, and requests that his address not be published. Instead, he has selected as a meeting place the lounge of a Beverly Hills hotel. He pulls up to the front entrance behind the wheel of his black Porsche, which has a "Jesus Saves" fish decal on the rear hood. There is no bodyguard. He appears relatively at ease, though he seats himself where he can observe the entire room. Franzese is handsome, with high cheekbones, of about average height, and well muscled. His dark-brown hair is gray around the edges and touches his collar. He dresses casually; his trademark is a pair of aviator sunglasses. Though he grew up on Long Island, his baritone voice has faint traces of Brooklyn.

As Franzese explains it, his only "angle" is a desire to put family before Family. He now has three children with Cammy: Miquelle, aged five; Amanda, four; and eighteen-month-old Michael junior. Then there are his three older children, who live with his ex-wife in New York. Franzese says he made a determination for their sake to avoid the fate of his father, who has spent all but three of the last twenty years behind bars. He currently resides at the federal pen in Petersburg, Virginia, and is not scheduled for release until 1994, when he will be seventy-five.

"My father went through twenty damn years of aggravation," Franzese says. "My mother's a nervous wreck, my brothers and sisters are all wrecks. Where is all this honor and this baloney? You can't believe in this damn oath when you've got a family to think of. What about them? My mother's been alone for seventeen years. So which is the more honorable stand? My father's position is: This is how I've lived all my life, and I don't want anybody to ever say that I was a rat or a snitch, so I'm gonna die this way. O.K. I *guess* I can relate to that. But I'm in a different position. I'm thirtysomething years old. I've got six children, I've got a young wife. And I'll be damned if I'm gonna put them through what *my* family had to go through. Especially for something I no longer believe in.

“When I first got into the life, I had a very idealistic view,” he continues. “My father was my idol, and anything he was part of had to be the greatest thing in the world. And when Tom DiBello sat me down and described the life, it *sounded* great. It was a group of men, there was honor, you had friends all over the world. And justice and fair play was the standard. A guy can get killed because he’s in the drug business. A guy can get killed if he messes around with somebody’s wife. To me, what I felt to be honorable things.”

Now he professes to feel otherwise. “The Mob is no good, it’s full of shit, it’s a money-hungry operation, and it’s not something that should be idolized. I’ve seen guys afraid to walk into a meeting—they may not come out. I’ve heard guys complaining that every time they turn around, somebody’s grabbing money off of them. This is not how it was supposed to be. It’s all bullshit. And if admitting that is gonna cause me a problem, then so be it.”

Because he was such a spectacular earner, Franzese says, he needed to proclaim publicly that he had quit the Mob or every wiseguy in creation would be knocking at his door. And that, he insists, is the main reason he agreed to testify for the government—not so that he could get sprung from jail. “Show me *one guy* that ever got on the witness stand who is now running around with the Mob. This was my way of making a statement that I’m *out*. However, I gotta say, I would rather walk out this door and get killed than have anybody think I’m a coward, or that I ratted out everybody and ran into the witness program. I couldn’t live with that.”

Tina Franzese sees things differently. Learning that her son had turned informant was a terrible blow to her. It seemed to invalidate all that she had suffered for, her long, lonely vigil for Sonny. The past two decades have been full of hardship. Her money has run out, and she fears losing her home. A few years ago, she was arrested for credit-card fraud. In 1974 a Colombo soldier named Carmine Scialo, who, it was rumored, had been attentive toward her, was found buried in a cellar with a garrote around his neck and his genitals stuffed in his mouth—an apparent signal of Sonny’s displeasure.

“My husband and I have been on different wavelengths for years,” she says, “but I respect him thoroughly. He’s a great man. He has the kind of theories and moralities that we could use today. ”

Tina receives her visitor at the kitchen table of her immaculate home in Roslyn, where Michael grew up. The white stucco walls are covered with mirrors; the furniture is modern. Still lovely at fifty-six, Tina wears a black ribbon in her honey-blond hair, speaks in a soft voice made husky by cigarettes, and seems frequently on the verge of tears.

“I don’t respect Michael for what he’s done,” she says. “When you went to school and someone threw a paper and the teacher asked, ‘Who threw it?’ how many raised their hands and said, ‘*He* did it’? That’s not the way we were brought up. Why do that to people that didn’t hurt you? I can love him till I die, but I can’t forgive him. Because it’s too huge. I’m hurting every day. He could have hung on in jail another two years and then chose whatever he wanted to do—but no witness stand. And then I would still have my son.”

It pains Franzese that his mother has cursed him for turning informant. Sonny’s opinion of his son’s heresy is not known. The elder Franzese has epitomized the good soldier and “stand-up guy,” determined to walk out of prison ramrod straight. He plays racquet-ball with other inmates several hours every day—and generally wins. At seventy-one he looks no older than fifty. “The guy could probably take on ten of us,” says a police detective. One suspects that Sonny is none too proud of Michael, with whom he has not spoken since 1985. There was even a story circulating for a while that he had a contract on his son. “I laughed it off,” Michael says quietly.

He also frets about being lumped in with famous stool pigeons like Joe Valachi, Jimmy “the Weasel” Fratianno, and Henry Hill, all of whom joined the witness program. Hill is the subject of the best-selling biography *Wiseguy* and the recent hit film *GoodFellas,* which has won praise as an accurate depiction of the Mob’s depravity. Franzese says he “got sick” watching *GoodFellas,* because of the violence. “If you couldn’t walk out of there and say, ‘These guys are fucking *animals,*’ there had to be something wrong with you.” But he was glad that Henry Hill was not made a hero; to Franzese, he was “a lowlife” for giving up Lucchese boss Paul Vario. “Paulie treated this kid real good.”

One will never confuse Michael Franzese and Henry Hill in terms of their usefulness to the federal government. Hill not only testified against Vario but helped nail mobster Jimmy Burke on murder charges. And Hill was a low-level soldier, not even a made man. Franzese is the highest-ranking Mafia apostate of the past decade. Federal law enforcers seem to go limp at the prospect of ensnaring a “T.E.,” or “top echelon” informant.

It appears that Franzese exploited the allure of his name to negotiate an unprecedented one-year cooperation agreement with the government. Signed on May 18, 1989, it compels Franzese to cooperate only in cases filed through April 30, 1990. Upon setting his name to the document, Franzese was let out of prison. “I’ve never heard of anything like that being done,” says one state prosecutor. Henry Hill’s agreement, to be sure, has no expiration date.

It probably didn’t hurt that two months before Franzese signed the agreement he helped the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Chicago win a racketeering case against Norby Walters, a former nightclub owner and a longtime friend of Sonny’s. (As a boy, Michael knew him as “Uncle Norby.”) Over the years, Walters had built a New York booking agency for black pop stars that was second to none—clients included Dionne Warwick and Kool & the Gang. In 1985, Walters sought entrée into the sports-agency business, with $50,000 in seed money from Michael Franzese, delivered in cash in a brown paper bag.

Franzese’s testimony, however, had more to do with extortion charges involving Michael Jackson and his brothers. In 1981, Walters had made a bid to handle the bookings for the Jacksons’ national concert tour. Unfortunately, Ron Weisner, at the time one of the group’s co-managers, wasn’t keen on him. Franzese testified that, at Walters’s request, he flew to Los Angeles for a sit-down with Weisner: “I explained to him that, if Norby wasn’t involved in the tour in some manner, there might not *be* a tour.”

"It was threatening," Weisner assured the jurors. As it turned out, a watchful L.A.P.D. picked up on Franzese's activities and persuaded Weisner to hang tough. As a safety measure, Weisner kept the Jacksons away from the Nassau Coliseum, on Long Island—Franzese's backyard—and Walters never did get a piece of the tour. (Walters was sentenced to five years for racketeering, and his former partner and co-defendant, Lloyd Bloom, to three. But last September a federal appeals court overturned the convictions of both men on the grounds that the judge gave faulty instructions to the jury and that Bloom should have been granted a separate trial.)

Franzese's only other appearance in open court thus far has been to point a finger at a janitor, Ornge Tutt, who worked for Frank Campione, Sonny Franzese's ex-driver. As luck would have it, Tutt's "girlfriend-fiancée" sat on a 1984 grand jury investigating Michael Franzese. For $1,000, Tutt leaked him information about the probe. Last summer, a federal court in Uniondale, Long Island, convicted Tutt of obstruction of justice.

Chances are good that Franzese will testify at least once more, against real-estate developer Gerald Guterman, indicted last year on charges that he conspired with union officials and Mob contractors to defraud the I.R.S. Guterman is perhaps best remembered as the man who chartered the *Queen Elizabeth 2* in 1986 to throw a Bar and Bas Mitzvah celebration for a son and two daughters. He allegedly used Franzese to buy labor peace and provide Mob protection for work done on apartment complexes in New York and New Jersey. Franzese says the general-contracting company he formed with Guterman was among his most lucrative ventures.

Still, Guterman qualifies as a white-collar defendant; Franzese has yet to testify against a member of organized crime. He received a summons to appear at the extortion-and-labor-racketeering trial of New Jersey Mafia boss John Riggi, but never made it to the stand. "They had me on the witness list," Franzese recalls. "I said, 'Fine, put me on—but I'm gonna conflict with your main witness.' " Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Brian Gillet, who won a conviction against Riggi all the same, won't comment on why Franzese was not called.

"He's picking and choosing who he's gonna testify against, which to me is reprehensible," says Ray Jermyn, the rackets chief of the Suffolk County D.A.'s office. Recently, Jermyn subpoenaed Franzese to appear before a Suffolk grand jury in a Mob loan-sharking case. After he failed to show up, Jermyn hit him with an arrest warrant. It proved an empty gesture. When Jermyn asked some L.A.P.D. officers to take down Franzese's license-plate number and get his address—a routine procedure—their efforts were quashed by the F.B.I. "The Feds are running interference for the guy," Jermyn grouses.

Franzese seems to think his slipperiness as a witness has made him a less likely target for the Mob. Sure, he says, someone could justify a contract on him merely for testifying. "But I think people measure things more on, Is he a threat to *me?* And maybe the point is becoming clearer that I'm not gonna be a big star witness." Especially, he adds, after the Riggi case.

He doesn't deny that his life is at risk. But so what? "It's not new to me to have the feeling that, hey, today, tomorrow, somebody may take a shot at me. I understood that when I was in the life. Why should it be any different now that I'm out of it? But I make provision. I'd like to think that I'm pretty astute and know what's going on around me. If somebody's gonna get me, they're gonna have to work at it. I'm not walking around with my head up my ass."

Cammy Franzese has just arrived from a dance class; her current goal in life is to become a choreographer. On her necklace are a figurine of a dancer and a crucifix. She wears a tightfitting green blouse, a black skirt, and cowboy boots, and is altogether voluptuous—no more the image of an anorexic ballerina than she is a classic Mafia wife.

As she takes a seat beside her husband, he warms perceptibly. Thanks to Cammy, Franzese was baptized in a wading pool at their church about a year ago—a decade and a half after his induction into the Cosa Nostra. His pastor advised him that to be a Christian it was necessary only to believe. But Franzese dismissed that as "too easy," and the immersion appealed to his feeling for ritual. "I said, Wait a minute, this is something I can *relate* to. Like, now I'm part of something."

Cammy's first words upon sitting down are "God had a plan for Michael." Unfortunately, the thought seems to have crossed her mind lately that maybe God's plan does not correspond with her own.

"I just worry about him," she says. "Some days my faith is so strong, I know, God, you're gonna take care of my husband. But then, the other day, we saw this retarded film, *GoodFellas*. I was in the ladies' room and I had tears in my eyes. It really frightened me. Could that happen to Michael?"

Franzese puts a reassuring hand on her arm. "I don't believe I'm meant to go down in a hail of bullets," he says. "I think I have a good grasp on my relationship with God. . . "

"I do sense he's aware of what's going on around him," she tells herself. "We'll go to a restaurant and he'll say, 'I'll sit here and you sit there.' And I'll notice him looking around the room." She turns to her husband. "Every day, I always tell you, '*Please* be careful.' But is it ever gonna end? Will we be able to live our life somewhat normal? It gets to you. When I came out of that movie theater, I was upset with him. My God, was he ever a part of that lifestyle? No, I would never see him being so mean and vicious as the men of that movie." Franzese shakes his head.

A college dropout, Camille Garcia was twenty-one when she married Franzese in a hasty ceremony at the chapel of the Circus Circus casino in Las Vegas. It was January 1985, and he had just been indicted in a loan-sharking case that would end in acquittal—his last such victory. There was a lot about his life that Cammy didn't appreciate at the time, but it began to sink in after Vincent "Jimmy" Rotondo, her husband's co-defendant, was blown away by gunfire a few years later.

"I couldn't believe it," she says. "In front of his *house!* In his *car!* They *killed* him! I used to watch *The Godfather*. These men were interesting—tall, dark, and handsome. They walked into a room and people respected them. I liked it, but I thought it was fiction. When I realized it was true, it hit me: This is *terrible!*"

Growing up, Michael Franzese himself was kept in the dark about a lot of things, including any information about his supposed real father. When he was born, on May 27, 1951, his mother, Christine "Tina" Capobianco, the daughter of a transit worker, was married to one Frank Grillo. He disappeared after Sonny arrived on the scene. Setting a pattern that Michael would virtually duplicate, Sonny came with three children from a previous marriage, then had three more with Tina, putting Michael in the middle. In 1961 the family moved from New Hyde Park to a two-story Colonial house in Roslyn, Long Island, where the future gangster grew up as Michael Grillo, until he turned eighteen and Sonny adopted him. But Michael always saw himself as a Franzese, and to this day believes it possible that Sonny is his natural father after all.

Born in Naples in 1919, Sonny Franzese seemed destined for the Mob. (His father, Carmine, known as Tuttie the Lion, was a man of noted brutality who ran a bakery shop in Brooklyn and was legendary for stuffing adversaries in the oven.) As a young man, Sonny was arrested a dozen times for crimes including felonious assault and rape, but was convicted only of minor gambling offenses.

Sonny latched onto what was then the Profaci family and worked his way up as an enforcer. A shade over five eight, he was crew-cut, craggy, menacing, and, unlike most other mafiosi, abstemious. Also cheap. "He had a reputation for being very tight with a buck," recalls former F.B.I. agent Bernie Welsh. "An informant told me that one time Sonny supposedly went into an S. Klein's department store in Hempstead and stole the Christmas tree. And bragged about it."

Officially, Sonny owned a dry cleaner's in Brooklyn. Unofficially, he was becoming the reigning gangster of Long Island, with an interest in restaurants, clubs, topless bars, and several record labels. Sonny's livelihood was never discussed in the Franzese home. The Colombo soldiers who frequently dropped in were all "uncles" to Michael. But he felt the effects of the life during the Gallo-Profaci war of 1961 through 1963. "Crazy Joe" Gallo and his two brothers were attempting to wrest control of the family from Joseph Profaci; for two years, it rained bullets, and Sonny never ventured outside without a bodyguard.

The war proved fortunate for Sonny. He remained a neutral party, trusted by both sides, and won the favor of Joe Colombo, who became head of the family in 1963. On Christmas Eve of 1965, *Newsday* published Bob Greene's groundbreaking profile of Sonny Franzese, "The Hood in Our Neighborhood." Greene asserted that the aging Joe Colombo was "gradually paving the way for Franzese to take over completely. . . . The Cosa Nostra accepts him as a coming king." Sonny said nothing about the article, but after it appeared, the Franzeses' English maid, Pauline, sat Michael down and explained to him that his father was a member of organized crime.

He felt no shame at the news: "By this time I viewed the government as the enemy. We had cops sitting outside our house and following us in helicopters." Once, when he was sixteen and "in a mood," Michael got into his father's car and led some police detectives on a high-speed chase, for which he was nearly arrested. Sonny was livid. "Do you think this is a game?" he asked Michael. "These guys are *treacherous*." Another time, Michael recalls, two policemen followed Sonny and family into a local diner and began to harass him at the table. Sonny lost his temper, and one of the officers gestured toward his holster. "Go for your gun—I *want* you to," Sonny said, glowering. "You seen the cop was scared stiff," Michael says.

Sonny held court at two famous nightclubs, the Copacabana in Manhattan and the San Su San on Long Island. Artists such as Sammy Davis Jr., Bobby Darin, and—one of Sonny's personal favorites—Tiny Tim convened at his table.

But Sonny's public appearances would soon draw to an end. It had become a high priority for J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. to get him off the street. The reasons for this remain obscure; Hoover seemed far more interested in Red-baiting than in the Mafia, whose very existence he denied. Tina Franzese claims that federal agents bugged the house in Roslyn—even the bedroom. In the mid-sixties Sonny was hit with four indictments, all based on the testimony of four "skells" who had paid tribute to him from the proceeds of their petty crimes. Two state cases involving theft ended in acquittal. He was also cleared in the murder of Ernie "the Hawk" Rupoli, a Mob hit man whose corpse—shot, stabbed, and weighted with cement blocks—had washed ashore on a Long Island beach.

But Sonny was convicted on federal charges that he conspired with the skells to rob banks. Ironically, it was perhaps the weakest of the four cases and may have been a frame. An F.B.I. agent who requests anonymity thinks it more likely that Sonny learned of the robberies after the fact and merely demanded his "whackup." In 1967, he was sentenced to two consecutive twenty-five-year terms. He remained free on bail for three years as the process of appeal dragged on, but in 1970, Sonny was shipped to Leavenworth to begin serving his time.

A few months later, Michael Franzese, then a freshman at Hofstra University, got a phone call from a former member of Sonny's crew. Joe Colombo's son had been arrested, and Colombo senior was forming a new organization, the Italian-American Civil Rights League, to protest persecution. The boss planned a rally in front of F.B.I. headquarters on Third Avenue.

Michael joined the thousands-strong picket line with a sign that read: I AM A VICTIM OF F.B.I. GESTAPO TACTICS. MY FATHER WAS FRAMED FOR 50 YEARS. In the course of the rally, he had words with a policeman. "He pushed me, and I hit him," Franzese recalls, "and then all hell broke loose." Franzese says he was beaten, cuffed, thrown into a paddy wagon, and charged with assaulting an officer. Joe Colombo arranged for noted Mob lawyer Barry Slotnick to defend him. He pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and was fined $250.

It was on the picket line in front of F.B.I. headquarters that Michael Franzese was drawn into the life of crime. The wiseguys took a liking to him. He had the Franzese name, and, he adds, "they could see I was a hustler."

Now in his early twenties, he found himself in a crew of men considerably older than he. Some were hulking giants, like "the Chubby Brothers"—John and Robert Verrastro, both more than three hundred pounds—and Phillie Vizzari, a Colombo soldier who had reported to Sonny. Their base of operation was an automobile-leasing outlet on Long Island that belonged to a man named Tony Morano. Nassau County detectives succeeded in making an informant of Morano, who had a

[redacted]

[redacted]

gambling habit and was in Dutch with Colombo loan sharks. He was fitted with a body mike. Soon after that, Franzese's partners suspected that Morano was embezzling from them and, according to Franzese, threatened to kill him. Believing their informant's life was in danger, police burst in—one of them aimed a shotgun at Franzese's head—and arrested the entire crew. Still in college, Franzese faced four indictments, on charges of conspiracy, grand larceny, possession of stolen property, coercion, and extortion.

The cases were weak, and Morano damaged them further with an unhelpful performance on the witness stand. "I think he had a change of heart," Franzese suggests. Two cases ended in acquittal, one was settled with a fine, and the fourth was dismissed after three hung juries. But the process dragged on for two years, at the end of which Franzese was broke, unemployed, and no longer in college. By then, he had only one ambition: to make money with a vengeance.

It was 1974, and the Colombo family had decided to "open the books" and make new members for the first time in two decades. To become a made man, Michael would need to serve a year's internship. One of his jobs was chauffeuring Tom DiBello, who was acting as surrogate don while the true head of the family, Carmine "Junior" Persico, awaited release from jail. "I went around and met everybody from the different families, and learned what this life was all about," Franzese says. "And I was available at all times. They said, 'You might get called tonight, you might get called a year from now.' I said O.K." Called for what? "In case any act of violence had to be done."

Franzese knows the conversation has taken a dangerous turn; his plea agreement does not grant him immunity for murder. Over the years, his name has been mentioned in connection with several killings, among them the 1983 gang-land-style slaying of Lawrence "Champagne Larry" Carrozza. A former member of Franzese's crew, Carrozza is believed to have "dishonored" one of Michael's sisters.

Franzese vehemently denies involvement in Carrozza's death. But isn't it true, he is asked, that in order to be made you have to kill *somebody?*

"Yeah, that is the rule," he says. But "they were making a lot of guys, and there's only so many people to kill. With guys like me, because my father was who he was, I guess they felt it was in the blood. So there was a couple of us that were told, You're gonna be made, and when the time comes, if you have to do something, you gotta be ready."

But it never happened?

Franzese pauses for a long instant.

"Not at that time," he says.

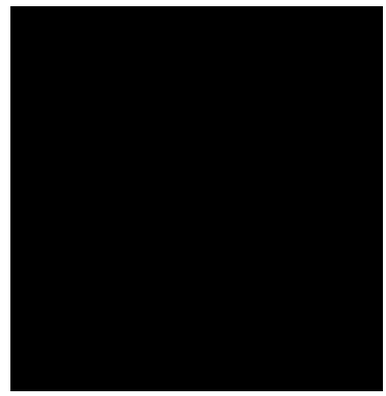
Around the time of his induction, Franzese married a neighborhood girl, Maria Corrao. They moved to Commack, Long Island, and, after Franzese began to make his fortune, advanced to a million-dollar mansion in Brookville, New York, complete with an indoor racquet-ball court. Their first child, a daughter, was born in 1976.

In late 1978, Sonny Franzese was paroled, after serving only eight years of his half-century term. (There have long been rumors of bribery—the F.B.I. even investigated a member of the parole commission—but nothing was ever proved.) Michael was now placed under the elder Franzese; he would run Sonny's operations and shield him from open involvement with convicted felons, which could lead to his parole being revoked.

Soon after he became an acting captain for his father, Franzese found himself at odds with a man who held the same title within the Gambino family, a rising star named John Gotti. According to Franzese, an associate was running a Long Island flea market, and he asked Franzese to chase off a partner who was dealing drugs on the side. Franzese, who had an interest in the operation, did so, only to be told that the drug dealer had ties to Gotti. He reportedly shot back, "Fuck John Gotti."

According to *Mob Star,* a recent biography of Gotti, Franzese was summoned to the Our Friends Social Club in Queens to discuss the problem; he left shakily after getting a taste of Gotti's confident terrorism:

As Franzese rose to leave, Gotti told him: "There is a guy running around the city saying, 'Fuck John Gotti.' What do we do with a piece of shit like that? Should we beat him up? Kill him? He's a dog, right?"



"Yes, anybody who said that wouldn't be a friend, they would be a dog," Franzese replied.

Not quite, says Franzese. "I'd like to think I was intelligent enough not to walk around and say, 'Fuck this guy'—especially because John was a good fella. And there's no way in God's creation I'd have sat at a table and let anybody talk to *me* like that. Junior [Persico] would have said, 'Are you out of your mind?' Did Gotti try to show his muscle and make you think he was more important than you? That was John's style. He would want you to believe that he was more powerful than any boss that ever lived, even at that stage of his life. When John talks, his voice is naturally an octave above everybody else's. He's got a tremendous ego." The upshot of the meeting, Franzese adds, was that he persuaded Gotti to buy out his interest in the flea market for about $70,000. "And three or four months later," he says with a smile, "it collapsed."

Franzese soon became involved with another famous New Yorker, the Reverend Al Sharpton, the civil-rights activist. Franzese met Sharpton through mutual acquaintances in the record industry, where the reverend is notorious for aggressive fund-raising. Sharpton won a patronage job as a community-relations director for the Jacksons' 1984 Victory Tour, allegedly by threatening to organize a boycott of the concerts if the black community—apparently meaning Sharpton—was kept "off the gravy train." He and three associates were paid more than half a million dollars for their services—an impressive score, considering that Franzese's earlier efforts to shake down the Jacksons had come to naught. (Sharpton claims that his out-of-pocket expenses on the tour exceeded his pay.)

Franzese says that Sharpton offered to assist in another shakedown scheme in 1984. The mobster had corrupted Allied International, a large union of security guards, and he hoped to persuade the guards at Atlantic City hotels to become members. “Sharpton seen dollar signs through me,” Franzese says. “He came up to me in Norby Walters’s office and says, ‘Michael, let me help you. I’ll go down to the hotels and tell them the guards are black, and if they don’t join the union, I’ll have ten busloads of five thousand niggers in front of the hotels every day.’ ” Franzese liked the plan, but before it could be implemented, the union president, Daniel Cunningham, was indicted for racketeering. “That’s absolutely ludicrous,” Sharpton says when asked about Franzese’s account. “I offer to help and I didn’t ask anything in it for *me?*”

Although Michael was running interference for his father, Sonny began to slip into familiar ways, mingling with other convicted mafiosi at a club in Brooklyn. In 1982 he was caught, and a federal judge sent him back to prison.

With Sonny Franzese in jail, Michael was soon elevated officially to captain, the Mafia’s equivalent of senior vice president. His crew included Frank Cestaro, known as “Frankie Body Shop,” to signify his day job, and two alleged enforcers, Louis Fenza and Frank Castagnaro, or “Frankie G.” The *G* stood for gangster. Castagnaro was a big man with a short temper: among other things, he allegedly bludgeoned an auto dealer with a telephone and advised a bankruptcy trustee who tried to evict him that his car would be blown up.

In the Mob, there is no faster ticket to stardom than to be seen as an “earner,” and Michael Franzese was about to set new records. His secret was the magic of his father’s name combined with superior intellect. He collaborated with several white-collar criminals to defraud corporations, but for his biggest scam Franzese teamed up with Lawrence Iorizzo, head of Vantage Petroleum, a large chain of unbranded gas stations on Long Island and in New Jersey. A career con man, Iorizzo had attracted the attention of two West Coast wiseguys who wanted to seize control of his business. Iorizzo had turned to Sonny for help. The two wiseguys backed off, and in 1981, Michael Franzese became a silent partner in Vantage. The company’s assets were bled dry so that he and Iorizzo could form a new outfit, Galleon Holdings. Within a few years, Galleon comprised hundreds of stations, storage terminals, and fleets of tankers, and sold millions of gallons of gasoline in New York, Florida, and New Jersey.

Larry Iorizzo stood more than six feet tall and weighed close to five hundred pounds. It was said he could consume nine pizzas at a meal. He was also a bigamist with two Long Island homes—one for each wife. “I take my hat off to him,” Franzese says. “Huge as he was, he moved around.” Iorizzo played fast and loose with the Internal Revenue Service as well. Gasoline wholesalers are supposed to pay state and federal excise taxes, but Iorizzo set up a daisy chain of dummy companies to pass along the tax bill until it ended up at a “burnout” company—one that went bust right before I.R.S. agents showed up at the door. After each bankruptcy, a new daisy chain was formed. To further confound the tax man, some of the dummy companies were incorporated in Panama, where Iorizzo boasted a residence, a phony passport, and, he claimed, a friendly rapport with President Manuel Noriega.

Because Galleon paid no taxes, it was able to undersell the competition; soon, even name-brand filling stations like Texaco and Chevron and Shell were welcoming Galleon tankers—after dark. Iorizzo claims that Franzese drew as much as $100 million from the operation.

Franzese supplied men to run the gas stations and fend off competition—“all the muscle we needed,” Iorizzo says over the phone. Iorizzo and Franzese have been none too friendly since the former joined the witness program in 1984 and set in motion the events leading to Franzese’s downfall. “He was always threatening people and throwing his weight around,” Iorizzo asserts. “If it weren’t for his father, who was a real old gangster and tough son of a bitch, Michael would have been hunted down like a dog and whipped.”

Yet Iorizzo is the first to admit that Franzese took a number of “brilliant” steps to expand the operation. The most important was his decision in 1983 to combine forces with a key competitor, Michael Markowitz, a member of the socalled Eastern Bloc Mafia, who operated a gas scam similar to Iorizzo’s. Markowitz seemed intimidated by Franzese, and agreed to the smaller end of a 75-25 split. (In 1989, with Franzese long out of the picture, Markowitz was shot dead behind the wheel of his silver-and-maroon Rolls-Royce. The murder hasn’t been solved.)

Franzese and Iorizzo spent their profits lavishly. “We had yachts, we had jet planes,” Iorizzo recalls. They also bought a $350,000 mobile home in Florida, where the gas business was booming. It was there, in 1983, that Franzese founded Miami Gold, a movie-production company that laundered some of Galleon’s profits, though its original purpose was to expand the Colombo family’s presence in the film industry. Franzese had already dabbled in the screen trade as an executive producer of *Mausoleum,* a low-grade shocker featuring self-defrocked minister Marjoe Gortner. Bitten by the film bug, Franzese put up money for several more pictures, including *Savage Streets,* starring B-movie goddess Linda Blair. Miami Gold’s first and only production was *Knights of the City,* a teen-gang musical. To commemorate the launch of the movie company, Miami Beach gave Franzese the keys to the city and, in an act of excruciating irony, made him an honorary police commissioner.

Knights proved a disaster at the box office, but Franzese would never regret making the picture. For the break-dancing finale, the director flew in a California troupe called Dance Machine, featuring nineteen-year-old Cammy Garcia. She made an instant impression on her future husband. “I was sitting by the pool with Frankie Body Shop, and I seen Cammy,” he recalls. “And she caught my eye. But I said, ‘Frankie, you know what? I gotta stay away from that kid. That innocent look in her—she’d be trouble.’ ”

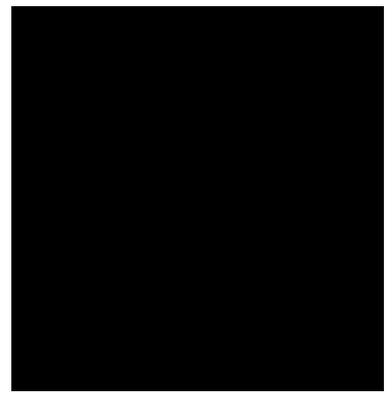
Franzese’s whirlwind of activities had not gone unnoticed by law enforcement, but the boom landed first on Iorizzo, who in 1984 was convicted of mail and wire fraud and interstate transportation of stolen property. As Iorizzo awaited sentencing, Franzese grew nervous. “I was coming to grips with the fact that, look, the guy’s five hundred pounds—he just couldn’t do jail time. Plus, he was weak.” So, Franzese says, he encouraged Iorizzo to fly to Panama with his phony passport. Nothing more. But as Iorizzo tells the story, the mobster was a bit more heavy-handed: “They took my son to Franzese’s office. And Franzese told my son, ‘If your father don’t do the right thing, we’re gonna kill you.’ ”

Iorizzo did travel to Panama City, on his private jet. But his stay was cut short when two unidentified locals kidnapped him at gunpoint and put him on a plane to Miami. He arrived into the welcoming arms of F.B.I. agent Dan Lyons. Iorizzo claims he has no idea who kidnapped him or why. “Things happen strange in Panama,” he concludes.

Franzese, newly married to Cammy, was soon hit with indictments from the state of Florida and the Brooklyn strike force, based heavily on Iorizzo’s grandjury testimony. Franzese surrendered in Miami, but then federal agents brought him up to New York to face felony charges along with eight members of his crew, including Frankie Body Shop, Frankie G., and Louis Fenza.

Prosecutors gave evidence that Franzese was a threat to society. They claimed that he had arranged for a competitor in the auto-leasing business to be hit over the head with a hammer, and warned a Beneficial Commercial Corporation employee who was pressuring him to repay a loan to back off or Franzese would “cut his heart out.” It was also disclosed that Sonny Franzese’s no-nonsense parole officer, Jim Stein, had received an anonymous death threat over the phone only two days after Sonny was ordered back to jail and Michael had confronted Stein outside the courtroom. “We were nose to nose,” Stein recalls today. “And he used certain profanities—‘scumbag,’ ‘prick,’ and ‘fucking G-man’—to express his feelings toward me.” Shortly before Christmas of 1985, Franzese was remanded without bail.

Behind bars for the first time, Franzese began to assess his chances, and they did not look good. He explained to Cammy that if he went to trial and lost he could be sent up for at least twenty years. In March 1986, Franzese struck a plea bargain: he would accept a ten-year term in the Brooklyn case and nine in the Florida case, to run concurrently. He would pay $4.7 million in civil penalties by liquidating a number of properties, including the house in Brookville belonging to his first wife, Maria. The U.S. government would also acquire the rights to *Knights of the City*.



In addition, Franzese agreed to pay $10 million in restitution. He proposed to raise part of the money by making a soundtrack-album deal for *Knights* and setting up a luxury-car leasing operation in Hermosa Beach, which Cammy would learn to run. In order to perform these tasks, Franzese suggested that he be let out of jail for the three months before his sentencing and kept under surveillance in a condo on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Naturally, he would pay the expenses of the U.S. marshals guarding him. Flush with victory in the plea bargain, the Brooklyn strike force consented to the plan.

It would prove an embarrassment. The NBC News team of Brian Ross and Ira Silverman had been following Franzese’s escapades in the gas business. They filmed him cruising around Los Angeles in his Cadillac Eldorado, with the marshals trailing behind. At one point, the marshals drove off for lunch and left Franzese unattended for fifteen minutes. When this footage appeared on the evening news, “I got a sinking feeling,” Franzese says. His fate was sealed when it was also learned that he had given the marshals $8,000 in bad checks. Franzese was sent back to jail.

By early 1987, he was serving his sentence at Terminal Island, a medium-security federal prison in San Pedro, California. He found prison life more than bearable—he worked as a clerk and typist in an air-conditioned office and procured a television from the athletic department.

Shortly before his confinement, Franzese had held secret discussions with Brooklyn-strike-force head Edward McDonald. A charismatic former basketball player, McDonald was the man who had wrung cooperation from Henry Hill, and he can be seen playing himself in the final minutes of *GoodFellas*. McDonald hoped he could get Franzese to roll over, but the Colombo capo insisted he had no desire to become a government witness.

Then, some months later, F.B.I. agents in Chicago noted a relationship between Franzese and Norby Walters, who happened to be under investigation. In early 1988, Franzese was escorted to a secret meeting place in Illinois for a tête-à-tête with Chicago U.S. attorney Anton “Tony” Valukas.

Here was a man quite different in temperament from the hard-asses in Brooklyn, someone Franzese could deal with. Valukas explained that if Franzese agreed to testify against Walters he would ask McDonald to recommend a sentence reduction. Franzese decided to take up Valukas’s offer. “By that point, I had made up my mind that I was out of the life,” he says. “So I didn’t have a moral problem with testifying. My problem was, I didn’t know if I was gonna like myself.”

His willingness to testify astounded the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section of the Justice Department in Washington, and McDonald was ordered to renew talks with Franzese to try to get him to sign a cooperation agreement. Franzese didn’t like McDonald, and the negotiations dragged on inconclusively for weeks. Then McDonald had an inspiration. “We stuck him in a county jail in some jerkwater town in rural Illinois,” he recalls, laughing. “Here’s this major mafioso from New York getting checked out by all these low-level petty thieves. The next day was when we negotiated in earnest.” In May 1989, a month after Norby Walters was found guilty, Franzese set his name to the cooperation agreement and walked out of jail.

McDonald defends the agreement, arguing that Franzese had as little as one year left to serve and that he has put his life in jeopardy. He also predicts that Franzese will be compelled to testify in the so-called window case, filed shortly before Franzese’s agreement expired; Genovese boss Vincent “the Chin” Gigante and other top-echelon mobsters are accused of rigging the bids for the windows in public housing projects.

Franzese agrees that he may be asked to testify in the window case. But, he adds slyly, “we’ll have to see what happens. They had the ability to call me in the Riggi case, and I never got to the stand. So I don’t know.”

Not surprisingly, Franzese and his long-suffering mother have barely spoken since he got out of prison. “I enjoy the distance between us,” he says simply. For a while, Cammy prayed for a reconciliation. She always got along famously with Sonny, who gave her pasta recipes by phone from prison. And when she first met Tina, “she was as sweet as can be,” Cammy says. But then word came back that Tina was calling her a “dirt-poor Mexican bombshell.” Now she thinks it’s best to leave Tina alone: “She’s just not a nice person.”

As for Tina, she has a theory about why her son gravitated toward his wife's born-again evangelism.

"Michael needed to excel," she says, "and maybe it's hurting him that he couldn't handle what he chose. He got into trouble right away."

In other words, he had to embrace religion because he failed as a criminal?

"That's right. He could not *cut* it. So he has to look for a believable cause. That's my maternal feeling."

Tina Franzese may be struggling to get by, but it appears her son is doing all right, although he claims that his two luxury cars are leased. One source familiar with his house confirms that it has a market value of $2.7 million, and says that Franzese is quietly purchasing it through a lease option.

Indeed, if Franzese has outfoxed the criminal system, he's made an absolute monkey out of the civil division. The government does not appear to have collected much of the $4.7 million he owes in forfeitures: the rights to *Knights of the City* proved worthless, and Maria Franzese still owns her home in Brookville. As for Franzese's restitution, the I.R.S. has received nothing. "He owes me 10 million bucks—I haven't gotten a penny," says an I.R.S. agent.

Meanwhile, the money Franzese made in the bootleg-gas scam has never been accounted for. "It's gone," he says. "Where did it go—out on a date?" says Larry Iorizzo. Franzese testified that he had no foreign bank accounts, but Iorizzo recalls that "he would take our private jet, fly to the Cayman Islands and Europe, and stash money. It's been well invested and sheltered." Ray Jermyn has his own theory. "Knowing his personality, he would have to keep it close to home. I think it's probably buried in the ground someplace. Literally. With talcum powder on it, to keep it from going bad."

Franzese seems almost amused by the speculation. Even friends and family, he admits, are sure he is worth millions. Well, he says, they'll just have to wait until 1993, when, because of the statute of limitations, he can no longer be charged with perjury for having testified in 1986 that he had no hidden assets. "But until that time, I've told the government, 'If you find it, come and get it.' "

For now, Franzese wants to work at building up his film company, CammyCo Productions. He has a couple of scripts in development, including a thirty-page treatment he wrote himself, about prison life. And if the movie business doesn't work out, he'll find another way to support his family. But, he vows, returning to crime is not an option. "I'll never get back with these guys," he says. "I've still got it in me. I'm still a street guy. I'm leveling with you—there's times I get tempted to cross the line. But so far I haven't. And hopefully, if things work out for me, I never will."

Fredric Dannen

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Captured: 19 November 2023, 05:08:59