

# American Gangster

Franzese in custody in 1966. Credit: Newsday/Marvin Sussman

## Part 1

# Building an empire of crime

Sonny speaks: Franzese and his rise from the Brooklyn streets to Colombo family underboss

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*Published: Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020*

John (Sonny) Franzese wanted to secure the royalties from a hit song for a friend's record company in the '60s, he recalled recently, so he hung the songwriter out the window of the Brill Building in Manhattan by his legs until the man said, "You got it."

Around the same time, Franzese moved in on a Long Island trucking company, sending four men to attack the owner with baseball bats, said Gerald Shur, a former official in the U.S. Justice Department. After signing over half his business, the owner approached federal investigators but was too terrified to testify. That incident, said Shur, led him to successfully push for the creation of the Witness Protection Program.

Some years later, Franzese's youngest son, John Jr., remembers, he was driving his father along the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn when Franzese gestured as if he were putting a gun in his belt and grunted, "Over here, son."

At first, John Jr. didn't understand. "I've got to explain to you everything!" he recalled his father yelling. "That's why you'll never be like me! Around here, there was some work done, and now let's go."

"Work" is a Mafia euphemism for murder.

**“I never hurt nobody that was innocent.”**

**-John (Sonny) Franzese**

In these instances and many others, Franzese, the longtime Colombo family underboss who died in a New York City veterans hospital last Sunday at 103, left an indelible imprint on Long Island and came to personify the noirish glamour of New York City's underworld. To many, he is one of the most darkly iconic mobsters ever. When FBI agents wrote reports about him, they were often addressed directly to

J. Edgar Hoover.

Having outlived the mob giants of his time by years if not decades, his passing qualifies as a final death knell for an era when organized crime infiltrated huge swatches of the nation's life with a menacing force and bravado.

Franzese's story has never been fully told. But after spending 35 years in prison and another 15 on parole, he started telling it himself to Newsday in a series of interviews over the last two years.

His cogent remarks, made over lunches in his Queens nursing home, displayed undiminished brashness, enduring allegiance to the Mafia's crumbling code of silence and no regret for his life of crime. "I never hurt nobody that was innocent," he said.

The conversations became the foundation of a deep look into his life, the Mafia on Long Island and beyond in the golden age of the mob, and how the arc of justice played itself out.

Franzese moved to his two-story house in Roslyn when most of the mob's activity on Long Island was in its infancy and built an empire of loan sharking, extortion and gambling that comprised fully half the rackets on the Island, according to one Nassau investigator at the time.

In New York City, he cut a ruggedly elegant figure at clubs like the Copacabana and the Latin Quarter, maneuvered his way through mob wars and moved in on businesses that touched untold people in unexpected and hidden ways. He was the silent partner behind some of the biggest pop records of the day and the biggest grossing porn movie of all time, "Deep Throat."

And by his own admission on an FBI wiretap, he was responsible for many murders, although that's not how he remembered it in his final Newsday interview on his 103rd birthday, Feb. 6.

"I never murdered nobody," he said, his defiance clear, even though he was recovering from pneumonia.

Although Franzese refused to acknowledge even the existence of the Mafia or complicity in any crime he could still be charged with, he spoke proudly of his criminal career.

Asked about his reputation, he said, "I'm not a guy that scares easily. I don't care."



John (Sonny) Franzese is escorted by police in March 1966. Photo credit: AP / Anthony Camerano



Franzese in his Queens nursing home in April 2018. Photo credit: Jeffrey Basinger

Asked if during his night-clubbing days he knew Frank Sinatra, Franzese replied, “You asked the question the wrong way. You should have asked, ‘Did Frank Sinatra know Sonny Franzese?’”

Asked if the FBI pressured him to violate omertà — the mob’s code of silence — he repeatedly professed ignorance: “What does that mean? I don’t get it.”

Still, he reflected at another point, “They wanted me to roll all the time. I couldn’t do that. Because it’s my principle.”

During the interviews, Franzese exuded an earthy charm that was well known not only to friends but adversaries. Numerous FBI agents and prosecutors told Newsday he could be gentlemanly, even while being arrested. His son Michael speaks of his “chameleon” personality.

Former FBI agent Vincent D’Agostino, who listened to hours of secretly recorded tapes, said Franzese was charismatic, funny and a great storyteller.

“There’s a duality that comes with most criminals, not just organized crime, but it’s especially pronounced with people involved in organized crime,” he said. “I’m not a psychologist, but to me [they] clearly are narcissistic sociopaths. That’s part of the way they survive.”

This was apparent in Franzese's conversations, D'Agostino said. "He'd be talking about great food at a restaurant one minute and then the dismemberment of a body literally a minute later."

Beyond the bonhomie and dire deeds, a more cautionary story emerges of the cost of mob life, not only from Franzese's own words, but from extensive interviews with two of his sons and scores of friends and other family members. These interviews are buttressed by thousands of pages of prison, court and police records dating back to the 1930s.

As Franzese sat in prison for decades after a conviction for a crime he denies committing, his family disintegrated. A daughter died of an overdose. His sons did time themselves and put their lives in danger by cooperating with the feds. And his once-elegant wife, Tina, beset by increasingly irrational rages as Franzese's devotion to the Mafia kept pulling him away, wound up sick and destitute, living briefly in her car.



Tina Franzese is interviewed at the kitchen table of her home on Shrub Hollow Road in Roslyn in December 1970. Photo credit: Newsday / Bill Senft

"I don't know of any family of any member of that life that hasn't been totally destroyed," Franzese's son Michael said.

Although until the end Franzese was mentally sharp and a lively raconteur, still proudly boasting a full head of hair, he mostly relied on a wheelchair and suffered a litany of physical ailments.

Once a wealthy man who jetted with his family on the Concorde and entertained bands like Kool and the Gang at his home, he got by on government benefits.

"The money," he said, "it's all gone."

# Brutal rise

Every mob saga seems to start in a gritty immigrant neighborhood. For toughness, it would be hard to beat Franzese's: 1920s Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

He was one of 10 children who grew to adulthood in the family of Carmine (The Lion) Franzese, who was well respected in Mafia ranks, according to a memo from the Federal Narcotics Bureau, which preceded the FBI in investigating organized crime.

Franzese had some fond childhood memories — walking to Ebbets Field with his brother to watch the Dodgers and listening to the radio broadcast of the epic heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Luis Firpo in September 1923.

**“I don't know of any family of any member of that life that hasn't been totally destroyed.”**

**-Michael Franzese**

But then there are other memories.

When he was 2, he fought with a girl over a card and she stabbed him in the right eye with a fork, leaving him blind in that eye. At 15, he was expelled from Eastern District High School after he knocked out another boy in a brawl over a stolen cigarette lighter. His older brothers frequently called on him to settle disputes.

His brother Louie had a bread business, and a customer failed to pay him. “So I go down and I grab both testicles and I said, ‘You buy bread from my brother, right?’ He says, ‘Yeah.’” The man admitted that he was late in his payment, saying, “I'm having a little tough time.” Franzese would have none of that. “Pay him the money. ‘Tough time?’ Don't argue. Pay your other bills, pay his bill, too.”

The man paid.

By the time he was 18, Franzese said, he was running the largest craps game in New York. A “wise guy” hosted the game, but “I was the one running it.”

Despite not finishing high school, Franzese said he did well academically and impressed his principal enough that, after he retired, he asked about his former student.

“He comes back into the neighborhood and starts asking questions about me,” Franzese recalled. “When they told him that I ran the neighborhood, that I become a wise guy, he said, ‘I expected him to become something big, but not that.’”

After Pearl Harbor, he went to an Army recruiter and insisted on enlisting, bad eye notwithstanding. “They liked me because I had guts,” he said.

Federal court records show he was dishonorably discharged for “homicidal tendencies.”

His extensive rap sheet started before the war, with an arrest for felonious assault in 1938. It was littered over the years with charges that included common gambler, suspicious person, consorting and even rape. Shown his rap sheet in an interview, Franzese laughed, looking at it as if it were a high school yearbook, with a story behind almost every entry.

He adamantly denied the rape: “This was a lie, this rape case.”

He said he had met the woman at a club and found out later that two of his friends had raped her. A detective accused him; when he denied it, the detective demanded his friends’ names.

“So I said to him, ‘No.’ I said, “I don’t know who the guys are, and I don’t know who the girl is. I ain’t gonna admit to nothin.’ And they booked me under the goddamn charge. Now we go to court, and the girl won’t show up. We go to court again, and the girl won’t show up. The judge got aggravated and he threw the case out. So how the hell, now I got a record for a rape charge that I never committed?”

Her failure to appear was a harbinger for what was to come in other Franzese court cases. There were also witnesses with memory problems and witnesses who changed their minds. Franzese showed a remarkable ability to dodge jail time, as judges dismissed charges or he was acquitted.

He was inducted into the Mafia at an early age. John Jr. said his father was only 14 and that his induction was kept secret for two years because he was so young. Franzese was caught on an FBI tape telling an associate that he had committed his first murder at that age as a favor to mob boss Carlo Gambino, D’Agostino said.

Franzese steadily moved through the ranks of what was then known as the Profaci family, which ran numerous rackets in Brooklyn and later became known as the Colombo crime family. His reputation for ruthlessness, brains and self-discipline grew.

# Making his mark

Behind it all was the threat of remorseless violence.

John Jr. recalled that there was a pool of acid at one of the family's body shops and that it always caught his father's eye. "Bones dissolve in the acid," John remembers him pointing out.

The New York Times reported in 1967 that authorities believed he personally killed or ordered the killings of as many as 40 or 50 people.

Decades later, they had Franzese's own words to back them up. In a secretly taped conversation in 2006 with a cooperating witness named Guy Fatato, Franzese said: "I killed a lot of guys ... you're not talking about four, five, six, 10."

At his peak in the 1960s, Franzese was among roughly 100 top mobsters living in Nassau County – more than any other suburban area in the country— and a dominant local figure in the Colombo crime family.

The Colombos were the family most active on Long Island in the 1960s. They were involved in all the rackets but specialized in loan sharking. Through that, they infiltrated liquor wholesalers that supplied many bars, restaurants and clubs and moved into meat markets, pizzerias and even linen supply companies.



Frank Giampoli, second from left, and Franzese, second from right, are booked at the Queens District Attorney's Office in June 1962. Also pictured, from left, is Assistant District Attorney Eugene Feldman, Det. James Caparelli and Assistant District Attorney Guy R. Vitacco. Photo credit: Newsday/Jim Nightingale

Franzese was a caporegime, or captain, ranking just below the boss and underboss, according to FBI files. Below him were his crew of soldiers and associates, who were not made men, who helped him run



operations and kicked up money to him.

He didn't smoke or drink and eschewed the wine-fueled pasta lunches other mobsters enjoyed. In one interview, he spoke of the dangers of sugar. Asked in a recent interview when he last used sugar, he replied, "1942."

He never used the same pay phone twice. Michael remembers that when he and his father discussed business, Franzese would lead him into the bathroom and turn on the water to drown out their conversation.

Members of his crew were both fiercely loyal and utterly terrified of him. Sal Polisi, a former mob associate whose uncle was in Franzese's crew, recalled what happened after Franzese sold his car to a Long Island dealership. A salesman told the purchaser to have it swept for bugs because it had belonged to "a hoodlum named Sonny Franzese."

Word got back, and three thugs attacked the salesman with baseball bats. He was crippled for life, according to Polisi.

"He was hardcore," Polisi said of Franzese.

## Going strong

According to an FBI report, he owned or had interests in clubs like the 107 North Disco in Glen Cove, San Susan club in Mineola, Decameron Room in Levittown, Apple Orchard Restaurant in Roslyn and Le Tique Disco in Levittown. He also had a health spa and a motel and was moving in on labor unions.

"I started making money and then I opened up a club, another club, another club, and I started making big money," he said. "Never under my name though — I couldn't get a license."

Asked why, he said, "I was a bad guy."

He also was a loan shark and extortionist who infiltrated legitimate businesses, according to an FBI memo.

 **He seems to be involved in everything."**

## **-Norman Levy, then-rackets chief of the Nassau DA's office**

In 1962, the NYPD uncovered an intimidation campaign directed at beauty parlors in Queens aimed at extorting \$5,000 from each business. The Queens district attorney charged Franzese and an associate with flooding the parlors with mice, dropping off coffee containers filled with bees and sending in women “goons” who noisily demanded instant service. The charges were dismissed, for unclear reasons; the records are sealed.

“He seems to be involved in everything,” Norman Levy, rackets chief of the Nassau district attorney’s office, told Newsday in 1965.

Shur, the retired Justice Department attorney who started the Witness Protection Program, put it this way: “I don’t think there was anything he wouldn’t do to get money.”

In December 1964, the state Commission of Investigation subpoenaed Franzese to testify at a hearing about loan sharking in Suffolk County. He refused, invoking the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination 18 times.

Other mobsters appeared, but a terrifying story about Franzese’s crew captured public attention.

A trembling, middle-aged woman testified that when her North Babylon luncheonette fell on hard times, her husband turned to a loan shark for desperately needed cash. Soon, Franzese associate Felice (Phil) Vizzari and other mobsters moved in, using the luncheonette to take bets. After the woman complained in a letter to the Suffolk district attorney, two thugs showed up one night at her house and beat her.

The couple wound up leaving town.

## **Love at first sight**

Around 1950, Franzese, then 33 and married with children, met 16-year-old Tina Capobianco. Friends invited him to the famed Stork Club because they thought he’d like Tina, a pretty cigarette girl. He was smitten immediately.

“I fell in love with her the second I saw her,” he said. “Isn’t that something? That’s how it went. Love at first sight. She was very pretty, a very pretty girl. She knew how to dress, she knew how to walk, every

goddamn thing.”

Tina became his abiding love and the one person he couldn't tame.

“He was no match for my mother,” John Jr. said.

Tina was sophisticated, intelligent and had exquisite taste, according to family and friends. They also said she was a “gangster” herself, unafraid to go toe-to-toe with her husband, sometimes even threatening him with a knife.

“She wasn't that scrambled-egg bimbo stereotype,” said Artie Ripp, a music producer and former business partner of Franzese, describing her as someone who could hold her own in any social situation.

Franzese and his wife, Tina, circa 1959. Photo credit: Courtesy of Roberta Franzese

Franzese said Hollywood producers wanted to sign her for a movie contract, but he was dead set against it, concerned about Hollywood debauchery. Although he would cheat on her constantly, he would not tolerate even the possibility of her cheating.

“I told her, ‘You do that, we'll break up. You're not gonna be my girl,’” he said. “I'm a diehard guy. You're my woman, you're my woman, nobody else's.”

“She didn't take it.”

Their courtship was rocky, marked by breakups. When she was 18, Tina married another man and had a son, Michael, but Franzese pursued her relentlessly, persuading her to marry him in 1959.

When they returned from their Mexican honeymoon, she learned for the first time that he had three children from his first marriage and that she would be caring for them.

That pattern of withholding information — an essential trait in Franzese's business — persisted throughout their marriage, and her resentment festered.

“The women [in the family], especially, got lied to all the time,” John Jr. said.

In short order, she had three children with Sonny — John Jr., Gia and Christina. Overwhelmed and angry at her circumstances, Tina treated her stepchildren differently, even giving them less expensive Christmas gifts, John Jr. said.



View from the street of the Franzese home on Shrub Hollow Road in Roslyn in November 1965. Photo credit: Marvin Sussman / Newsday



A view of the backyard of Franzese's Roslyn home in an undated photo. Photo credit: Courtesy of Roberta Franzese

By January 1962, the family had moved to a newly built colonial on Shrub Hollow Road in Roslyn. Franzese complained to his friend, boxer Tommy Gallagher, that he had to move to Long Island to escape cops shaking him down.

This has some confirmation in the FBI's voluminous file on Gregory (Grim Reaper) Scarpa, a Colombo caporegime who became a valued informant in 1961. He told agents that Franzese and Joseph Colombo were paying NYPD cops \$1,500 a month for protection of a single Brooklyn craps game.

Franzese was always suspicious of Scarpa, John Jr. said. Warning his son to "be very careful," Franzese told him, "there's something very wrong about him."

Four former Shrub Hollow neighbors recalled Franzese's unusual impact on the block. "I remember my

parents saying there were never any robberies around because they were there,” remembered Diana DeRose Gilbert, whose brother was in the same grade as Franzese’s daughter Gia.

And having FBI agents on the block couldn’t have hurt. They surveilled the house constantly. Occasionally they would question children as they got off the school bus, Gilbert said.

Franzese could be expansive. “We used to have this ice cream man come down and there were times when he would just buy it for all the kids on the block,” Gilbert recalled.

Inside the house, life was less all-American. FBI agents had planted a bug in the kitchen wall and were listening to daily conversations. Previously undisclosed FBI notes document frequent arguments between Tina and Franzese, often over money.

One day, Franzese was angry about an overdrawn checking account. On another, Tina yelled at him sarcastically, “Does it cost a lot to support me?”



An undated Franzese family photo: Sonny is in the middle in the vertical-striped shirt; Carmine is the tallest one, in the back row; John Jr. sits in the front row in the Jets jersey, and Maryann has her arm around him; and Lorraine is the third from the left in the back row. Photo credit: Courtesy of Roberta Franzese

Other times, they argued about childcare chores and even whose mother was better.

More ominously, the notes show that the couple feared for each other’s safety, particularly after an epic war broke out within the Profaci family that resulted in at least a dozen murders. It started after the brash mob insurgent “Crazy Joe” Gallo and his brothers demanded a bigger share of the profits.

Tina told her mother that every time her husband went out, she was afraid she would read that he had been murdered, according to one FBI memo.

And in one argument, Franzese told her, “I was on pins and needles. I didn’t know if something had happened to you.”

Michael recalled it as “really a tense time.”

“I remember my dad being gone for days at a time, being on the lam,” he said, recalling one particular day: “He came home in the morning, it was early, with a very heavy beard. And he was with my mother and I was kind of sitting on the steps looking out. And we had two guys outside, just kind of watching everything.”

Within a year, fortunes changed. Profaci died of cancer, Gallo was in prison, and Franzese was deeply involved in brokering a truce, gaining the respect of both sides. His close friend and partner, Joseph Colombo, became the family’s leader, cementing Franzese’s reputation on the street.

On Long Island and in New York, the best, and worst, was about to come.

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