

OBITUARIES

John 'Sonny' Franzese, powerful mob boss who hung out with Frank Sinatra, dies at 103

BY LARRY MCSHANE
FEB. 25, 2020 10:54 AM PT

Legendary Colombo crime family mobster John "Sonny" Franzese, who hung out with Frank Sinatra and befriended Marilyn Monroe before a bank robbery conviction eventually made him the nation's oldest federal inmate, has died at a New York City hospital. He was 103.

"Tough loss at any age," his son Michael said. "He was so much a part of who I am as a man, good or bad. He loved his children. No doubt about that."

Franzese, who died Monday, had been living in New York since being released from prison. A cause of death was not announced.

The renowned tough guy did his prison time without ever turning on his mob associates following a 1967 conviction that was widely considered both inside and outside organized crime as a setup.

After he was sentenced to a 50-year stretch, Franzese offered only this prescient observation: "I'll bet I do every one."

Franzese, widely admired and respected in the Mafia for sticking to his oath of *omerta* and keeping silent, was finally freed in 2017 at the age of 100. His son Michael, who initially followed his father into the mob, eventually left organized crime and became a born-again Christian and motivational speaker.

The elder Franzese was born in Sicily, moving with his family as a child to Brooklyn. Mob lore held that the precocious gangster became a made man at age 14, and was soon running a mob-controlled craps game.

Over the years, Franzese listed his legitimate work as a tailor, a baker and a salesman. But his real job was as a gangster, authorities said, and living the high life.



John "Sonny" Franzese, center, is escorted to the Elizabeth Street police station in New York after his arrest on a 43-count gambling indictment. (Anthony Camerano/AP)

Franzese, dark-haired and handsome, would claim dalliances with Monroe and actress Jayne Mansfield. He hung out with Sinatra and fellow Rat Pack member Sammy Davis Jr. at the legendary Copacabana nightclub in New York.

Once asked if he knew Sinatra, the gangster was quick to turn around the question: "You asked the question the wrong way. You should have asked, 'Did Frank Sinatra know Sonny Franzese?'"

But the business side of Franzese was darker: He once acknowledged killing

10 men during a 2006 chat with a mob informant, with other estimates of his mob murders running as high as 60. Yet he was tried for murder only once, and was acquitted.

Most importantly in his mob career, Franzese was an earner, making money for the family in a variety of ways. He worked in the record business, and put up some of the cash behind the mob's [alleged investment](#) in the classic porn flick "Deep Throat" — reportedly securing a piece of its supposed \$600-million gross.

Franzese returned to his family in Brooklyn after his release in 2017 from the Federal Medical Center in Danvers, Mass., leading a quiet life far from the spotlight of his youth.

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