

BIG MAN IN TOWN

Frankie Valli has come a long way from being a Jersey Boy

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BY CHUCK DARROW
CORRESPONDENT

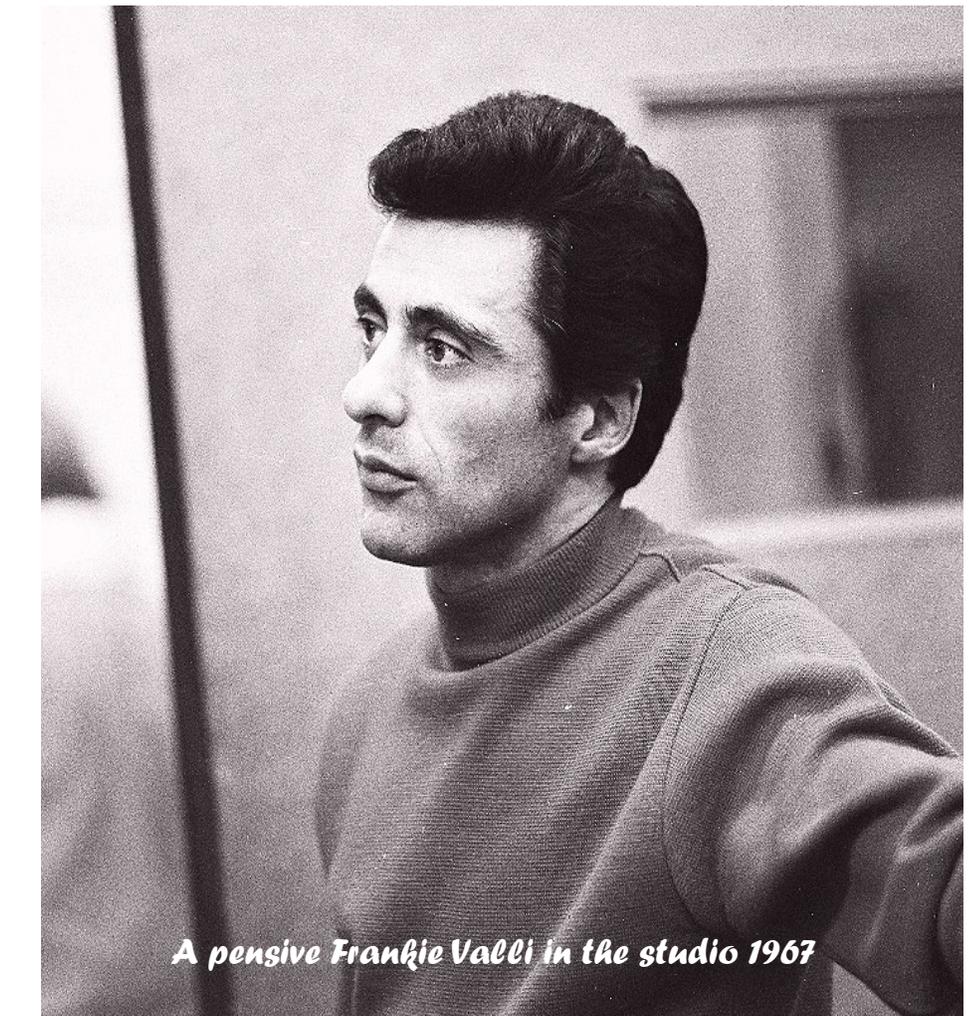
So, did the Jersey Boy ever figure on being a Broadway Baby?

"I always had that kind of dream, but I never thought it would happen," marvels pop-rock legend Frankie Valli about "Jersey Boys," the biography of Valli's early-'60s pop powerhouse, the Four Seasons. The show at New York's August Wilson Theatre reigns as the Great White Way's hit musical of the 2005-'06 season.

"Jersey Boys" tells the stranger-than-fiction tale of how a crew of mob-connected Dead End Kids from the mean streets in and around Newark defied the odds to become one of rock's all-time, best-selling acts. Although "Jersey Boys" was authorized by each of its four main subjects — Valli, Tommy DeVito, Bob Gaudio and the late Nick Massi — it's hardly a hagiography. While the unit's massive artistic and commercial triumphs are celebrated, the play's considerable drama springs from the darker elements of the group's story, from DeVito's troubles with mob loan sharks that helped torpedo the act at the height of its success, to Valli's dysfunctional family life that included the death by drug overdose of his daughter, Francine.

Not surprisingly, such scenes made it difficult for Valli, who headlines tonight and Saturday at Caesars Atlantic City, to watch as his life unfolded on the stage of San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse, which is where director Des McAnuff (who also brought "The Who's Tommy" to Broadway) first staged "Jersey Boys."

"I hadn't gone to a lot of rehearsals, so the first time I saw it, I was a little uncomfortable. So I tried to analyze it intellectually," he says. "After the



A pensive Frankie Valli in the studio 1967

second and third times, I started to feel a little more comfortable."

What may have been tougher, admits Valli, was having to interact with his former band mates from whom he'd been estranged for years. "The fact that we'd not been that friendly after the breakup (in the mid-1960s) — that wasn't a very comfortable feeling. That was quite difficult."

Although "Jersey Boys" has been a hit for months, Valli's season in the spotlight will continue. He'll reprise his role as wise guy Rusty Millio on "The Sopranos," which begins its long-awaited new season on HBO March 12.

"You'll see me on a few (episodes) this season," he says, adding that his limited appearances are a function of a 100-show a year performing schedule, and other activities related to his musical career, which remains his bread and butter. "They were terrific," he says of the "Sopranos"

production crew. "They worked around my schedule."

While his "Sopranos" work hasn't been as extensive as he would like, his participation in the acclaimed drama has caused the acting bug to sink its teeth into Valli. "I'd like to do more," he offers. "I just like to dabble a bit. It's fun, it's challenging, it's adventurous. It's different."

Valli adds that branching into acting has nothing to do with achieving grand success — just as that never really was part of his musical equation.

"I didn't go into the business I'm in to (achieve superstardom). I went into it knowing the odds of making it are (so small). I went into it for the love of it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it.

"To me, success is doing what you want to do and making a living at it. That's all I wanted to do."