

Panorama interviews: Frankie Valli



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RICH PITNICK

"A hit single is little more than icing on the cake," observed Frankie Valli, who in his fifteen years of performing has had more Top 100 hits than any other American pop group. As a solo performer and as a member of the now legendary Four Seasons, Valli has achieved phenomenal success — twenty gold records and over 85 million records sold.

"I really wasn't surprised by the success of Grease," explained Valli. "The Broadway show ran for twelve years and was always a popular hit. I also loved the song when I first heard it and knew it

"I will always have a strong appreciation for the music of the '50's and '60's," Valli added. "I give a lot of credit to the innovators of rock and roll.

By Gary DiCarlo

The legendary Frankie Valli is currently packing the Bagdad showroom with old and new fans of his inimitable song style. Joining Valli for the two-week engagement is David Steinberg, who is enlightening audiences with his subtle wit and observations.

Valli as a performer, never comes across as slick or superficial. There are no fancy dance numbers or overworked arrangements. What Valli gives the audience is no nonsense singing and a broad selection of his

greatest hits; all performed to perfection. His voice is as strong and assured as ever and he can still hit those high notes with apparent ease.

Valli is by no means limited to his past hits. His new material was very well received by the audience and represent some of the best of the current crop of new songs. Throughout the evening, people were swaying and swinging to Valli's magic touch, and it's obvious that his fans are still enthralled by his presence.

Steinberg, a star of television and a long-time

favorite of Vegas audiences is in top form as he touches upon a broad range of topics; religion, politics, TV, sex, and culture. Steinberg always handles his material in good taste; his ethnic jokes are never off-color, but always humorous.

Steinberg's subtle approach and charm make his delivery one of the smoothest on the comedy scene.

Valli and Steinberg make for a great evening of entertainment. They provide just the right blend of nostalgia and contemporary excitement.

Valli traces his stylistic influences to the sounds of early jazz and many of the black R+B singers. Sam Cooke, Frank Sinatra, Stan Kenton, the Hi-Lo's

We should never lose sight of the innovators. They were very successful in changing musical styles. I have a deep fondness for them."

and Jackie Wilson and the Drifters were all major influences. Valli's current style includes female-back-up singers, a full orchestra, and some fancy footwork.

"The disco influence is so strong now that a performer has no choice but to respond to it," Valli said. "Learning to move on stage is a whole education in itself."

Valli's touring continues



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pop group. As a solo performer and as a member of the now legendary Four Seasons, Valli has achieved phenomenal success—twenty gold records and over 85 million records sold.

It is with no small amount of irony, therefore, that Valli, in a recent interview with the *Panorama* remarked, "It would be sad if a career depended solely upon hit records. His singles are important, but a singer still needs to establish himself as an entity. You need a strong base stylistically."

Valli added, "Personal appearances are very important in order to stay in this business and not have to worry about chasing the record business and being as good as your last three minutes."

Although Valli himself is at a loss at times to explain his own success, it is Valli's attitude towards his fans and his sense of himself as a performer that perhaps best explains his broad appeal and enduring successes in an art form that fluctuates so often stylistically.

"I feel an artist wants to know that the public is getting what it wants, that the people are really enjoying the music," he said. "I'm a firm believer in the idea that you don't perform for yourself but for your audience. The audience expects to hear the songs they relate to and like."

Fans all over the country are still relating to

"I really wasn't surprised by the success of Grease," explained Valli. "The Broadway show ran for twelve years and was always a popular hit. I also loved the song when I first heard it and knew it would be a hit."

Penned by Bee Gee Barry Gibb, Grease was written with Valli in mind. "Barry and I had talked about working together before," Valli said. Grease was our first effort together."

Few singers captured the sound and the feel of the sixties as consistently and successfully as Frankie Valli. With his distinctive, 3½ octave range and the unmistakable harmonies of the Four Seasons, Valli provided the major link between the black dominated R+B sound and early rock and roll.

Valli is by no means obsessed with his past successes nor does he feel limited stylistically by his past sound. While Valli looks back with fondness at the music of the early and mid sixties, he is stimulated and excited by today's songwriters and styles.

"The music today is definitely more sophisticated than it was in the past," Valli observed. "There are tons of great writers."

"While I do feel that music today is less of a reflection of the times the way rock was, I think today's music tends to encourage people to participate more, to dance and socialize."



Frankie Valli

and some fancy footwork. "The disco influence is so strong now that a performer has no choice but to respond to it," Valli said. "Learning to move on stage is a whole education in itself."

Valli's touring continues to be varied. He plays to all types of audiences, from Las Vegas to New York's Central Park to small clubs. "I enjoy college dates and theater in the round as much as I do Vegas," he said.

While pleased with his own musical successes and the changes and growth in music in general in the past ten years, Valli bemoans the lack of music education in this country.

Valli stated, "Music and art should be a regular part of education. I was fortunate that music was a part of my education; but kids today don't know what to do with the talent they have. There aren't enough outlets for them or enough encouragement. Music needs education to take the big step forward."

Valli himself is taking major strides musically. His next album will be more jazz oriented, and he plans to include more original compositions on his records. He has plans to do several TV shows and will continue to perform throughout the country.

"But," he adds, "the greatest success I've had in this business has been through recording, and I'll always concentrate first on that."



Frankie Valli & David Steinberg

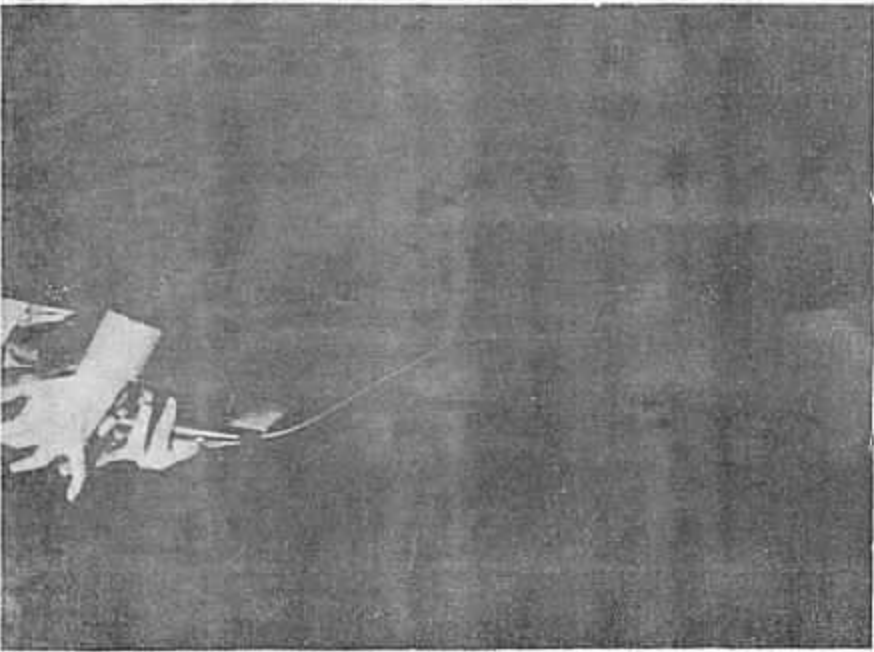
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Panorama
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The following article appeared in Dutch in a magazine published in Holland. Our thanks to Peter for kindly translating the article into English.

One of the most remarkable and most successful groups in the history of pop is, with no doubt, the 4 Seasons. Founded in the 50's, the group demonstrated in the 60's a totally unique 'sound'. The man responsible for this is Frankie Valli. 'The most pop ever', pop-journalist Nick Cohn said about the 4 Seasons in his book 'AwoBopLocBopALopBamBoom'. There were more people who also thought the same, based upon the groups' record sales. In the 60's there were sold a legendary number of 80,000,000 records.

After a time of trouble with labels and reorganisations, the group is back in pop-business, after 1½ years. The comeback from the new Seasons and Frankie Valli (the man who is the only original member of the group) were good enough for four million sellers.

The story of the 4 Seasons starts with Frankie Valli. Without him there would not be one Season. Frankie Castelluccio, his real name, was born in 1937 in Newark, N.J. He knew very early that he wanted to start a singing career, and at the age of 17 he joined a group called the Variety Trio whose members were Nick and Tom De Vito and Hank Majewski. They were aged 17 and also came from N.J. When Valli joined the group they changed the name to the Variatones. The songs they sang were mainly ballads, C&W songs and songs from Italy, but they did not get a recording contract. The only success they had was a solo-single by Valli, "My Mothers' Eyes". In '56 the group obtained a contract with RCA and that was the time they changed their name to The Four Lovers. With the 4 Lovers they made four singles, one EP and one LP, but only one single was successful, "Apple Of My Eye".

The future seemed a bit dark for Valli and friends. They were waiting for a new record boss or producers who would give them a new chance. A meeting with Bob Crewe gave them this perspective. At that time Crewe was co-owner with Frank Slay, from the Swan label in Philadelphia, but he also was an independent producer. In this quality he placed a different number of 4 Lovers records under different names and different labels. The 4 Lovers also did sessions for Freddie Canon, The Rays and Danny and The Juniors. In the 60's Hank Majewski and Nick De Vito were replaced by Nick Massi and Bob Gaudio. Gaudio came from the Royal Teens and was a real gain for the group. Again they changed their name: the new name was now "The Four Seasons", named after the restaurant they used to play in.

In 1962 the single "Bermuda" was released on the Gone label. The record reached a very low place on the charts of Cash Box, nevertheless this record showed us many sides of the 4 Seasons style in the future. A style, based on the black 'doo-wop'.

It was Bob Crewe who had listened very well to these vocal sounds. It was Crewe who requested that Valli should sing one octave higher and this was the key to success. Valli's falsetto, the black 'doo-wop' harmony from the other Seasons and the instrumental backing all gave "Sherry" more power than other vocal groups and novelty records from this time. This was the beginning of the long row of hit records the group would have until the end of the 60's. At the start of the 60's the group changed record lable, from Vee-Jay to Philips. Vee-Jay had some financial problems, the Seasons did not get their royalties in time. After the label went bankrupt, the Seasons had to give back the old 'masters'. But before they did so, Vee-Jay released a couple of singles, and that is one of the reasons that the Seasons had in December 1965, four records in the charts under three different labels; "Little Boy" on Vee-Jay, "Workin' My Way Back To You" on Philips, "You're Gonna Hurt Yourself" on Smash and "Don't Think Twice" on the Philips label, under the name 'Wonder Who?'

It was Frankie Valli who got permission from the other members to start a solo-career. This was a very welcome change for him. "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" would be his greatest hit. "Don't Think Twice" were the Seasons under the pseudonym 'Wonder Who' with Valli's voice in quasi-novelty style; an experiment which showed how much the 'sound' of the 4 Seasons was acclimatized.

Bass player, Nick Massi had left the group and with the bass the typical 'doo-wop' sound had gone. The harmony was more equalized now since Valli did not sing with such a high falsetto anymore and the group had a more vocal group sound. Nevertheless

the sound of the 4 Seasons still was unique. Therefore it was not strange that there were no other groups covering their style. The Tokens were singing with a semi-falsetto sound "He's In Town", "Portrait Of My Love" and The Happenings did the same with old tunes like "See You In September" and "I Got Rhythm". The Happenings were produced by some members of the Tokens, like Hank Madress, who was going to be the producer of Tony Orlando & Dawn ... and recently Frankie Valli.

The Seasons' line-up today still includes Bob Gaudio, who joined Valli, Tommy DeVito and Nick Massi from the Royal Teens in 1960. The three-part ingredient for success was made up by Bob Crewe, publisher, producer and label owner throughout the 50s. Gaudio and Crewe wrote together, and the vocal harmony, with Valli's three and a half octaves at their disposal was perfect and bendable.

Although Valli and the others had had their varying monikers stamped on every conceivable label during the 50s the first Crewe/Gaudio outing, "Bermuda" was an assigned master to the small End/Gone label.

Black sounding, it was the first to bear the Four Seasons in name. The next single was "Sherry", and this time the tape was handled by the black-owned Vee Jay label in Chicago. Only a month after "Sherry" hit the top of the charts "Walk Like A Man" was up there too - a winner all the way.

Although it took eight years to hit it, the group's chart vein was rich. Rock 'n' roll had faded away, and a few teen idols (Dion, Bobby Rydell) littered the charts. But there wasn't much else ... except the Beatles.

In contrast every Four Seasons song was different (from the last that is, stylistically they owned a lot to the black vocal groups of the 50s). Come Merseyside high water and licensing battles (as both did), the Seasons were changing. And staying.

Only the Beach Boys and the Four Seasons really kept up with the Beatles, as a chat with any active pensioner will tell you. Vee Jay never signed a contract with the Four Seasons, and when the group moved to Philips they continued to release material. The result was a double chart assault: "Candy Girl" and "Stay" from Vee Jay, and "Rag Doll" and "Bye Bye Baby" and "Let's Hang On" among a host of others from Philips. The group swept the board, beat Spector at his own game (with "Big Man In Town"), and had just the right balance.

In 1965 Valli had a shot at proving he didn't wear tight trousers all the time by beginning a solo career as well as working with the Seasons. While he had a minor hit with "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore" (yes, before the Walker Brothers) the Four Seasons had "Let's Hang On".

Then a further extension was the Wonder Who's (also the Four Seasons) concurrent success with "Don't Think Twice (It's Alright)" in which the trilling falsetto and tenor refrain was an instant giveaway.

Single success continued unabated for two years, as did live appearances. Trouble was, they'd only sold 'thrown together for the hit or Christmas' albums, and they wanted more. Valli cracked through as a major soloist finally in 1967 with "Can't Take My Eyes Off You", but as a group they felt they wanted a substantial album.

"Genuine Imitation Life Gazette" was it. Gaudio teamed up with a folk singer, Jake Holmes, to try and blow the gaff on the American Dream, the Four Seasons way. "Life Gazette" became the most talked about bomb since "Pet Sounds", although musically it was exceptional. At the time pop groups with something to say dropped like hot bricks.

The intolerance spread as far as the record company who were reluctant to finance the venture (including the expensive imitation newspaper sleeve), and the following four years saw a messy break with Philips.

The last noticeable 60s hit was "And That Reminds Me", on Bob Crewe's own label. Two years later they sued Bob Crewe, finally left Philips, and kept on touring. In 1972 they signed with Tamla Motown. Various group changes followed but despite Valli's solo efforts ("You're Ready Now", re-released from 1966, was a monster hit in 1971) the hit magic seemed to have disappeared. Philips, however, released the best selling hit compilation, "Edizione D'oro" in 1972. Many regarded it as the essential double album until K-Tel came along. Through Ewart Anber, formerly Vee Jay president when the Seasons were signed to them in 1962, Bob Crewe also went to Motown as producer, re-uniting with Gaudio to produce the Four Seasons. Crewe also teamed up with Valli for his first solo album on Private Stock, "Close-up". The new freshness teamed with commercial success came for Valli first, as a tenor soloist. The Four Seasons' last album for Motown produced a minor hit in America, "Life And Breath" (from "Inside") and after complex legal and personnel problems they turned up on Warner Brothers in 1975 with "Who Loves You". Valli scored with "Swearin' To God", "My Eyes Adored You" and "Fallen Angel", (the only track on the second Private Stock album produced by