

A Special Section

Frankie Valli / The Four Seasons



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K-tel Congratulates Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons

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Frankie Valli / The Four Seasons

“Frankie Valli. He dared to do what other lead singers talk of doing but never do. A member of the Four Seasons, Frankie Valli stepped out in 1967 to make some solo singles and a solo album while still continuing to work with the group. He may not realize it, but with all the current talk of musicians’ pools and cross-fertilization in rock and supersessions, it may have been he who opened the way for singers and instrumentalists with occasional solo yearnings and an equal need for group security.”

Once again the late Lillian Roxon exhibits the depth of her perceptions of the world of rock and pop music. The above quote, of course, comes from her mammoth 1969 opus, “Rock Encyclopedia.” And not only was her comment on the nose for Valli, but solo efforts by group members have become a way of life in contemporary music.

The wonder of it all is that for Valli and the Four Seasons this mode of dual existence has sustained an entire decade—ten years laced with hits for Valli the solo artist and for the Four Seasons. This on the heels of five years of non-stop chartbusters. From “Sherry” to “Ragdoll” to “Can’t Take My Eyes Off Of You” to “December 1963 (Oh What A Night)” to “Swearin’ to God,” it has been Valli’s distinctive falsetto that has kept both soloist and group member on the mark.

Lillian Roxon was right. Valli dared do what others talk of doing. And we’ve been singing along ever since.

Frankie Valli / The Four Seasons

The Four Seasons: Standing the Test of Time

By KEN BARNES

■ During the '50s the three principals of the Four Seasons story, Frankie Valli, Bob Gaudio and Bob Crewe, were (not always successfully) engaged in various & sundry musical pursuits. Valli sang lead for the Four Lovers, who had one mid-chart hit in 1956 with "You're The Apple Of My Eye," and made one album for RCA which is now a frighteningly valuable collector's item. Later in the decade, following the melting pot example of Bobby Ridarelli (Rydell) and Frankie Avallone (Avalon), he recorded as Frankie Valley in a fruitless attempt to secure a piece of the lucrative Italian teen idol market.

Bob Gaudio, meanwhile, was ensconced within the Royal Teens, who went top 5 in 1958 with "Short Shorts;" but their fabricated novelty appeal faded quickly. And Bob Crewe was helping to produce Danny & the Juniors and the Rays ("Silhouettes") records, working up to his own momentous chart debut as a singer on 1960's "Whiffenpool Song" which soared over everything in its path to a lofty mid-90s position.

Clearly, things could have been better, and they soon were. Valli and Gaudio teamed up with fellow New Jersey-ites Nick Massi and Tom DeVito, became the Four Seasons (a clever name which was to inspire all manner of spicy jests). And recorded briefly for George Goldner's Gone label without success. But in August, 1962 Gaudio contacted Crewe and they concocted a novelty which exploited to the fullest Valli's superhuman piercing falsetto capabilities. "Sherry" became an inescapable #1 in the fall of 1962, on Veejay. It was one of those perfect generation gap records—it set the old folks' teeth on edge, but the kids loved it. However, the group's first lp ("Sherry And 11 Others"), as if to appease the older crowd, contained quite a few standards and generally seemed to treat the group as a novelty act.

Follow-Ups

Follow-ups are the death of novelty acts, they say, but that was just an alibi in the case of the Seasons, who came up with an even stronger second single in "Big Girls Don't Cry," featuring a fuller production and a thrilling falsetto chorus, a teen classic and

their second straight #1. By now it was Christmas and all through the charts, all the distributors were calling for a seasonal Seasons disc. Crewe obliged with an ultra-shrill rocking treatment of the Xmas chestnut, "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town," and it rocketed into the top 20 in three short holiday weeks, remaining to this day a rocking Christmas standard (Bruce Springsteen occasionally performs a version which owes a lot to the Four Seasons).

'Walk Like A Man'

Crewe and Gaudio teamed up for the next single in January, 1963, the group's most electrifying yet, the unforgettable message song, "Walk Like A Man," with its brisk handclapping percussion and irresistible tune. It was the third straight #1 right out of the box, a record rarely, if ever, matched. A new album followed, imaginatively titled "Big Girls Don't Cry and Twelve Others." But their hot streak didn't last, as the group unaccountably turned from their riveting Crewe/Gaudio collaborations to a Fats Domino '50s hit, "Ain't That A Shame," reworked completely but a disappointing seller.

Fortunately this drought was short-lived, as "Candy Girl" (written by currently popular balladeer Larry Santos), featuring a truly bloodcurdling falsetto hook, jumped into the top five in the summer of 1963, just in time to lead off a new album called "Ain't That A Shame and 11 Others." Another miss followed, "New Mexican Rose," but it was merely issued to fulfill contract considerations, as the group was about to switch to Philips. Veejay continued to exploit their Four Seasons catalogue, getting a 1964 hit with "Stay" and issuing several more albums, including a memorable double package billed as "The International Battle Of The Century — The Four Seasons Vs. The Beatles," casting the Seasons in the role of American champs.

Heirs

And they were arguably America's top group. As the last surviving heirs to the New York vocal group sound, they were as fiercely supported by east coast partisans as their chief rivals, the Beach Boys, were out west. "Sherry" and "Surfin' Safari" hit in the same month, and for the next four years they fought a chart

battle to a virtual standoff, each scoring more than two dozen chart hits, with about half going top 10.

Of course, with The Beatles taking over in 1964, the battle for "Top American Group" was not so crucial as before, but just like the Beach Boys, the Four Seasons rose to the "British Invasion" challenge with a series of their greatest records yet. In 1964 they opened with "Dawn (Go Away)," a classic saga of self-denial with a newly powerful production. On the flip, "No Surfin' Today" was a dig at the Beach Boys, who'd warned "Four Seasons, you better watch out" at the end of their 1963 lp cut, "Surfers Rule."

"Ronnie" followed "Dawn" into the Top 10 with more falsetto pyrotechnics, and then came their masterpiece, "Rag Doll," a brilliant Phil Spector-influenced production and a wrong-side-of-the-tracks teenage classic (it also spawned a Four Seasons-styled girl group called the Rag Dolls, just one of countless imitation acts through the years). The B side was "Silence Is Golden," which became an international smash for the Tremeloes in 1967 — the Seasons were so hot that even their throwaways were natural hits.

1964

"Save It For Me," sounding like a mixture of "Telstar" and Spector and was a top 10 item that summer, followed by "Big Man In Town," an overlooked soap opera classic wherein the small-timer who was no good for Dawn plotted how he'd show up her snooty parents by coming back as a big shot. It brought a fabulously successful 1964 to an end, a year when they had also found time to score two more top 10 albums, "Dawn (and 11 Other Great Songs)" and "Rag Doll (and 10 Other Brand New Hit Songs)."

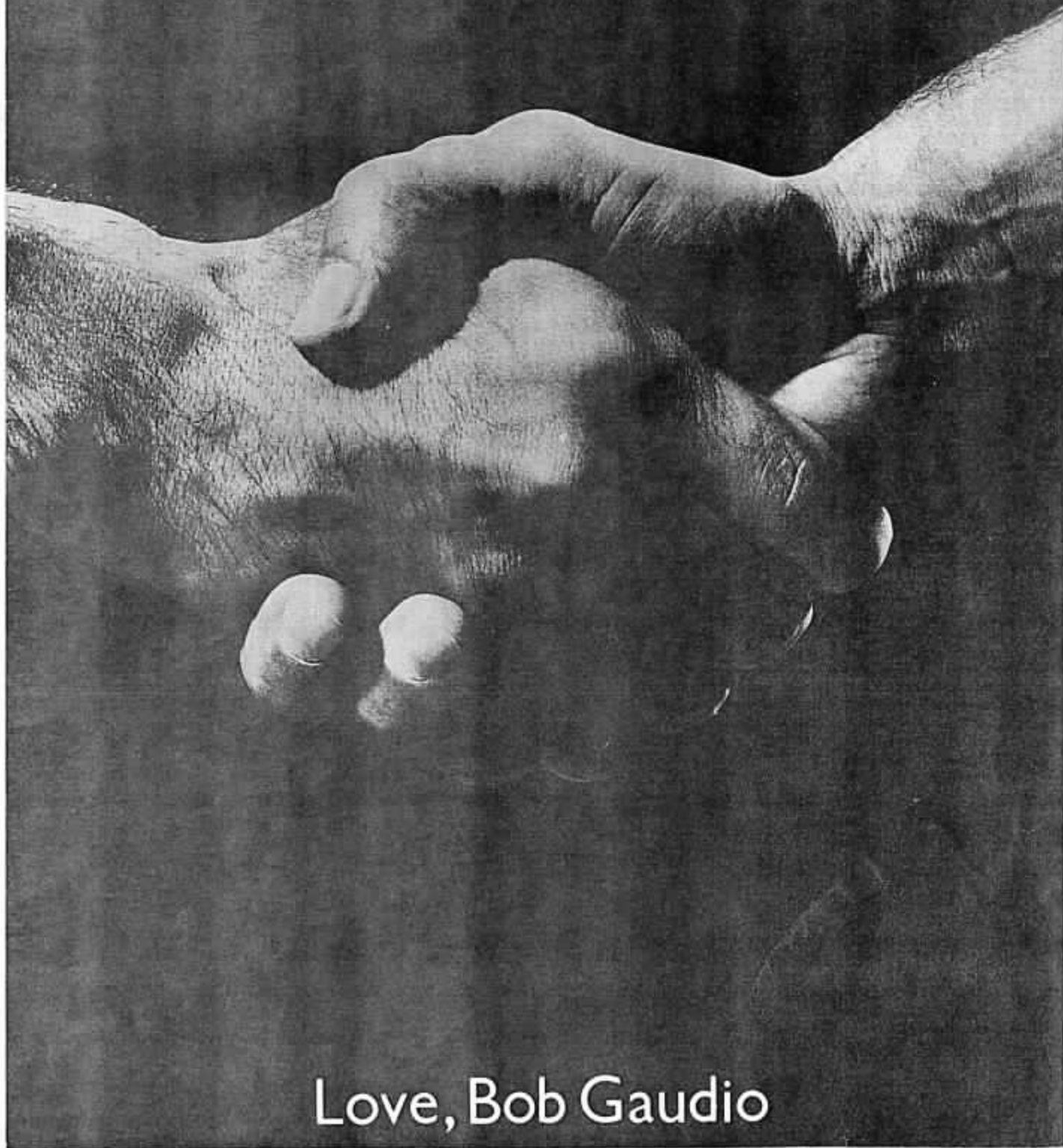
In 1965 the Seasons subtly moved from the teenage traumas of '64 to broader romantic concerns, as "Bye Bye Baby" deftly incorporated a more "adult" tone in lyrics and melody. It was another smash, though for some reason "Toy Soldier" and "Girl Come Running" were not. But "Let's Hang On" clicked immediately, back to the top five, a commercial masterwork featuring a punchy, brassy production far removed from the Spectorized "Rag Doll" era material or the

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Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons

FIFTEEN YEARS
ON A
HANDSHAKE



Love, Bob Gaudio

Frankie Valli / The Four Seasons

Frankie Valli: The Man with the Magic Voice

■ LOS ANGELES — Late in the summer of 1962, the release of the debut single for a young white New Jersey quartet by Vee Jay Records literally caught America by the ear: "Sherry" wasted little time in playing its trump, the soaring high falsetto voice of the group's lead singer, and the first line of the song showcased that striking instrument by demanding a quick, octave jump that this new mystery singer executed with sufficient aplomb to carry "Sherry" and The Four Seasons to a solid Number One footing on their first try.

"Sherry" also served as the prototype for a long and impressive string of Four Seasons chart hits, all of them built around Frankie Valli's stratospheric lead vocals. Today, though, Valli is the first to admit that the Seasons' entry into the winner's circle was hardly overnight.

A native of New Jersey, Valli had always loved music, and a strong voice and the necessary instincts led this self-taught singer to start professional jobs while in his teens. A strong arts program at Valli's school had enabled him to gain needed confidence, but when he began singing for a living his first performances were light years from the pop and r&b elements that would dominate both his later solo work and his first chart triumphs with the Four Seasons.

"I started out doing country music," he recalls, "and concentrated on that for about three years. Once you got out of the mainstream of New York City, there were a lot of little clubs that catered to that audience.

"I worked as a solo, with other bands, and in trios. In those days, you had to be self-contained to work, so whatever format I worked in, we handled our own playing. After that, I did r&b for about three years."

Range Of Styles

Yet, even with those early specialties, Valli managed to cover a broad range of styles during his formative years, including a wide exposure to more arcane harmony groups and jazz soloists. "I tried to touch on everything," he explained. "We did modern music for awhile, or what was being called that then. We'd try Four Freshman type things, with those close harmonies." Although he had never learned to read music, Valli and his various partners absorbed the subtleties of those in-



Frankie takes a solo

tricate harmonies, laying the groundwork for the precision and blend of Frankie's later chart hits.

Valli remembers his first real pop breakthrough as a member of the Four Lovers, and wryly notes that the group's r&b-based early rock style wasn't considered Top 40 yet. "We had a couple of chart records," he remarks. "It was early rock, which was really considered as just another form of r&b then, but those records had yet to reach Top 40 itself. In those days, Top 40 radio had jockeys like Martin Block, who would play all the standard pop songs on their shows." Rock had yet to make a toehold on respectability, but by the time Valli and his partners reappeared as the Four Seasons, pop radio, like the music itself, had undergone radical changes.

One of the group's newest members, Bob Gaudio, had joined from the Royal Teens, and when a chance meeting with producer Bob Crewe, followed by an unplanned and unconscious audition of Frankie's as yet untapped falsetto during a novelty number,

led to an offer of Crewe's assistance, Gaudio quickly composed "Sherry" as a showcase for the Valli voice.

"We cut 'Sherry' as a master," Frankie would later recall, "and it was sold to Vee Jay. Records were designed a lot differently in those days. A lot of them were 'sound' records, that made their point through a musical hook instead of a lyric. 'Sherry' was a sound record."

The "sound" proved immediately potent, and subsequent Seasons singles only confirmed a public appetite for the group's music. Yet the Four Seasons themselves weren't really aware of all the attention, despite their chart success; to some extent, their audience was nearly as unaware of who this group really was.

"I think a lot of people really thought we were black," Valli explained, noting that Vee Jay's image as a top r&b label helped add to the confusion. "There was even a ghost group, calling itself the Four Seasons, that we were told was a black outfit."

But the Seasons were then too busy in the studio to keep up with

either their own burgeoning success or the occasional intrigues inspired by that appeal. Pop music in the mid-'60s was far more confined to the studio, since the major concert and club tour were still rarities. "We were doing background vocals for various producers, and we were also playing on sessions," Valli remembered of the scene at that time. "We didn't feel like going out on the road all the time—we never played out on the west coast that often, which may explain why we were better known back east—because the mainstream of what was happening then was in the recording studio itself.

"I don't think anybody really realized what had happened with 'Sherry' for about a year. It's still really hard to accept that success when it comes, especially when you come from a relatively poor background; it's hard to digest, after you've always been looking for that one hit record, to take you out of whatever environment you're in."

Misconceptions

There were other misconceptions about the group as well, one of them centering on the then-prevalent trend for vocal groups lacking any instrumentation. Despite the assumption that the Seasons were just one element in a studio recipe, Valli asserts that the group had always played. "We were always self-contained, and we've played on every record that we've had a hit with," he said. "But there weren't that many self-contained groups around then, so often they'd bring in a slick arranger to handle the instrumentation. But then the group would have difficulty doing the tunes on-stage. We never had that problem."

Today Valli still remembers that first lengthy string of hits with affection, and while he's proud of the current group's greater diversity and instrumental virtuosity, he sees the work of the Seasons and their early '60s peers as the foundation for pop's variety and quality in the '70s.

"For a long time, I think that the people involved in show business simply forgot that there were kids growing up who needed music, too. That's really where rock records came in, because the younger listeners couldn't digest more sophisticated music," he observed. But then, as Valli is quick to point out, the Four Seasons
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**We've come a long way, Baby....
....Congratulations!**

Bob Kane