

## The Accordion World Lost a Great Musician and Friend Frank Marocco: January 2, 1931 – March 3, 2012

By Joan Grauman, AAA Historian



It is with deep sadness that I find myself writing in the past tense about someone with whom I worked so closely for six years and who had become one of my dearest friends. It is also an honor for me to have the opportunity to share my cherished memories of this endearing man with the accordion world, and to

share the memories of others whose lives Frank Marocco touched so deeply. I will begin with a brief biography of this world-renowned and very much loved and respected musician, husband, father, grandfather and friend.

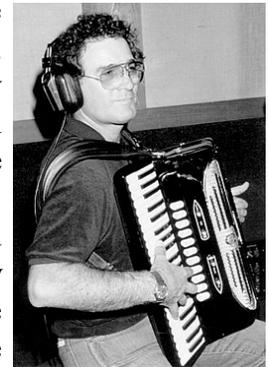
Frank Marocco was born on January 2, 1931 in Joliet, Illinois and grew up in the small town of Waukegan, near Chicago. The eldest of six children, he began to study the accordion at the age of seven. Frank described his first instructor, George Stefani, as being the one who inspired the young boy to not only learn the classics, but to also explore as much in the world of music as he could. Frank studied piano and clarinet, along with music theory, harmony and conducting. He played clarinet in his high school band. He later studied accordion with Andy Rizzo, a well-regarded teacher of many of the finest players in the Chicago area.

At the age of 17, Frank won first place in a national music contest. He performed his winning solo with the Chicago Pops Orchestra to a huge crowd at Chicago's Soldier's Field. Frank said that the comments from the judges of this contest were the words he needed to move toward the style of playing that he loved so much: jazz. The judges told Frank that his "musicality" and creativity were what set him apart from all of the others. It was also at this time that he decided to make music his career and he formed a trio which toured the Midwestern states. The trio played jazz and popular standards.

It was during one of these tours that he met his wife, Anne, in South Bend, Indiana. "Anne moved with me wherever the music took me. When Anne was expecting our first child, Cynthia, we decided to settle down. We chose the Los Angeles area." This proved to be a good move for Frank as, by the early 1960s, he became one of Hollywood's most prolific and sought-after studio musicians. A list of Frank's movie, television, and numerous other credits can be found on his website, [www.frankmarocco.com](http://www.frankmarocco.com).

When asked about the highlights of his early career, Frank would always say how much he enjoyed traveling all over the world with Bob Hope and visiting the servicemen.

He also enjoyed playing with the Les Brown Band at many venues, including on six Love Boat cruises. Through the years, Frank's studio work kept him busy with movie soundtracks, TV movies and series, as well as jingles for commercials. He is considered one of the most recorded musicians in the world. Frank also found time to record on multiple media, including vinyl records, tapes and CDs, compose and arrange both jazz and classical music, and to work with other composers such as Henry Mancini, Quincy Jones, Michel LeGrand and John Williams. His love of people kept him playing



private parties all over the country, as well as performing and giving workshops at accordion conventions and festivals. In jazz circles, Frank was considered one of the finest, not just as a jazz accordionist, but as a jazz musician.

Frank received many awards through the years. Nominated eight years in a row for the Recording Academy's Most Valuable Player Award, he received the award in 1985 and 1986. Frank was inducted into the Accordion Hall of Fame in Vicenza, Italy, in 2000. In 2006, he received the coveted Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Accordionists' Association (AAA). The event brought friends and colleagues from as far as Texas (Nick Ballarini, who played during the dinner in Frank's honor) and California (Sylvia Prior and Sandy Martin). Frank spoke often of this award ceremony as it meant so much to him to see so many of his peers and close friends there honoring him for his lifelong efforts to showcase the accordion as an instrument whose capabilities are extraordinary and limitless.



AAA Lifetime Achievement Award dinner, l to r: Faithe Deffner, Linda Soley Reed, AAA President and Frank Marocco

In 2006, Frank approached my husband, Dan, and me and asked us to direct an accordion orchestra camp



Rehearsal at the FMAE



Anne & Frank Marocco enjoying an evening event at FMAE

for him. We chose the winter months in Mesa, Arizona as a good time and place for this popular four-day event, the Frank Marocco Accordion Event (FMAE), which has sold out annually. Frank loved conducting, composing and arranging, and he



Some 2011 FMAE participants pose for a photo with Frank, l to r: Lenny Feldmann, Karen Lee, Lynn Ewing, Amy Jo Sawyer, Dick Myking, Donna Massey, Gail Campanella, Frank, Joan Grauman, Stas Venglevski

enjoyed sharing good times with accordionists from all over the US, Canada and Italy at these camps. His 80<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated at the 2011 FMAE with a five-hour gala tribute that included a family slide show, performances and presentations by some of the country's finest accordionists and a performance by two terrific singers: his young granddaughters, Chelsea and Tory.



Celebrating Frank's 80<sup>th</sup> at FMAE

In 2008, at age 78, shortly after surgery to replace his hip, Frank embarked on a European tour with his new agent, Elke Ahrenholz, co-owner of Victoria Accordions in Castelfidardo, Italy. This was a new beginning, as he was soon performing and giving workshops to sold-out audiences in China, Japan, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. He was an adjudicator at the International Primus Ikaalinen Accordion Competition in Finland in 2010. Frank's reputation as a stellar jazz musician spread quickly worldwide. He performed



Frank, Richard Galliano and Coba, Japan, 2009

overseas with other world-renowned accordionists such as Coda from Japan, Richard Galliano from France, celebrated Italian bandoneon player, Daniele de Bonaventura and many others.

After attending the 2010 and 2011 FMAE camps, Elke Ahrenholz asked Frank and the Graumans if she could take the camp to Castelfidardo, Italy. She received an enthusiastic, “YES!”, and the FMAE



2011 FMAE-Europe orchestra performance, Castelfidardo, Italy



Frank entertains at the hotel in Castelfidardo

European Edition took place June 2-6, 2011. With accordionists from Italy, Germany, Austria, US and Canada, the event was a resounding success.

Shortly after returning to the US from Italy in late June, 2011, Frank began to suffer with symptoms from what was diagnosed months later as metal poisoning from his 2008 hip replacement. Before his untimely death at the age of 81, on March 3, 2012, and with yet undiagnosed symptoms, Frank performed beautifully in Italy, Lithuania, China and at the Las Vegas Accordion Convention in the fall of 2011 and received standing ovations at each of those venues.

A sweet, generous, soft-spoken gentleman to the very end, Frank will be missed worldwide for years to come. He leaves behind his wife of 60 years, Anne, three daughters Cynthia, Venetia and Lisa and eight grandchildren.

Many of my personal memories of Frank revolve around our frequent phone conversations. Frank worked well with Dan and me, and we were like

family to each other. How do I write about so many funny conversations (Frank had an excellent sense of humor)? Do I share the many sweet phone calls of concern for us when Maryland



FMAE staff, l to r: Assistant Music Director, Stas Venglevski, Dan & Joan Grauman, Frank, Bruce Lawrie

was experiencing bad weather, or his frequent panic calls when he would have “issues” with his computer?

Visits to Frank’s home and the time spent together in Mesa, at the Las Vegas Conventions, in Italy and at our home, bring floods of cherished memories as well. What I saw from spending time with Frank was a tremendously appreciative person who lived in the present, not in the past at all. He would totally “soak in” what was happening around him and thoroughly enjoy the moment. He loved watching all of us play the accordion. It never mattered to him how well we played, just that we tried hard. His beautiful beaming smile would say it all. Frank also showed his appreciation for every little thing anyone did for him. He so appreciated the work we did to prepare for the camp in Mesa each year. In early 2008, Frank learned that Dan and I were preparing to celebrate our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On the morning of our anniversary, Frank and Anne called with best wishes. Then Frank said, “Check your computer. I just sent you an anniversary gift.” There was an MP3 of Frank playing an arrangement, that he created for me the previous day, of Jerome Kern’s, “All the Things You Are.” It ended with Frank’s sweet voice saying, “Happy Anniversary, Joan and Dan.” The same email also had an attachment containing the sheet music, beautifully engraved by Ron Ostromecki. Wow – Dan and I felt so blessed just to know this man. There was nothing that we wouldn’t do for him.

Frank didn't teach the accordion for many years. Then, in early 2007, just before the first FMAE, a man named Frank Petrilli contacted us about coming to our event. One thing led to another during that first conversation and soon we discovered that he and Frank Marocco were practically neighbors. A call was made and the rest is history.



Frank performing with Frank Petrilli at FMAE

Frank Petrilli has written some of his memories that I would like to share with you:

*“There are people who come into our lives whose effect is so profound, that they become ‘life changing events.’ Frank Marocco was one of those people to me.*

*I met Frank and started taking lessons from him only a short five and half years ago. From the first lesson we made a connection not only through our love of the accordion and jazz music, but on many other levels too we became great friends in a very short period of time. We just clicked.*

*Frank became a huge musical inspiration for me as he generously shared as much as I could absorb with how he approached playing jazz accordion. It was a very humbling experience at times as Frank was a true genius. The greatest lesson Frank taught me with regard to music was to get oneself (my ego) out of the way, and let the music be primary. For Frank, it was always about the music first. He taught me to focus on the musicality and story of the song and to tell that story as tastefully as I could.*

*Frank taught this to me primarily by example. We would meet on Saturdays for two hour sessions and we would just play together and he would let me know what he didn't like and praise what he did like. But, more importantly, he would share his genius by playing right next to me, and we would play the same piece back and forth and over and over. Eventually, over a couple of years, that rubbed off and Frank let me know how proud he was of my playing which*

*gave me the confidence to move forward. His generosity with his music was unlimited and he held back nothing. I was blessed to have these Saturdays with Frank where I could play, learn and experience pure musical joy with one of the greatest jazz accordionist ever.*

*That was only part of our relationship though as we shared our lives with each other openly and honestly and we became very close. Frank was very humble, easy going, and extremely funny at times especially with his self-effacing manner. We often shared great laughter, we also confided in each other during difficult times. Our lessons and time spent together were not just filled with our passion for music and the accordion, but often therapeutic in the way that a true non-judgmental friendship can be.*



Frank & Frank in Italy

*I will always consider my relationship with Frank Marocco as one of the greatest blessings in my life, and the gifts I've received from Frank still continue beyond his passing. I loved Frank and will miss him the rest of my life. His music and his presence will be with me forever and that I will always cherish.”*

Frank Marocco enjoyed teaching Frank Petrilli so much that he agreed to take on a few more students whom he had met at our first FMAE. Donna Douglas Massey writes her feelings about those lessons and about Frank:

*“In my mind, super stars like Frank Marocco were ‘untouchable’ to the real world. But after attending the first Frank Marocco Accordion Event in January 2007, it was a pleasant surprise to discover Frank's genuine humbleness and his personal interest in all the participants. He was indeed approachable. I could hardly wait for the next year to attend the event. (Thank you, Joan and Dan Grauman. I give you the credit for creating*

and running the event so that Frank had the freedom to relax and be himself).

A few months later I was fortunate enough to become one of Frank's private students. My lessons continued for the next 4 years. Here is where I discovered Frank's incredible gift of patience, and his laid-back personality, which would take the edge off a stressful lesson. He encouraged me to 'get out and play for yourself...have fun and enjoy your music; then others will enjoy it too'. His unique arrangements found in his books are such a pleasure to perform. Hey...it's the closest I will ever come to sounding like a jazz player. He's left all of us with wonderful unforgettable memories, and there will never be another like Frank Marocco. I will always remember him."

Frank respected the work of others in the accordion field. He expressed these feelings openly and regularly, endearing himself to all. AAA Virtuoso Accordion Champion (1955) and retired accordionist for the US Air Force Strolling Strings, Lou Coppola wrote for Frank's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, "I think you are a prince of a guy. I know I am not alone in this opinion. In fact, it is shared by everyone who has known you. This is quite a tribute to who you are. Your body of work is something even God would envy, and we mere mortals cannot begin to touch your gifts. Whether you are performing for the movies or whipping up magical jazz, you stand alone as a true artist and fine musical craftsman."



Manny Bobenrieth & Frank jam at the Graumans', 2006

Frank's birthday in his honor. Manny wrote, "You embody everything I have aspired to be musically. You continue to perform at a level that is beyond reproach. As I continue my career as the accordionist in the US Army Band, I want you to

Manny Bobenrieth, accordionist for the US Army Strolling Strings and a good friend of Frank's, came to Arizona to celebrate Frank's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and presented him with a flag that flew over the US Capitol on

know that you are the yardstick by which excellence is measured."

Renowned jazz accordionist, Eddie Monteiro, flew to Arizona for the celebration and was the 2011 FMAE guest artist. He wrote, "Over the years, we had played together on a few impromptu performances and I was always honored to share the stage with him. I always left the stage wishing that we could have just played song after song – just he and I – conversing, going back and forth with musical ideas like many before us, in that beautiful language we call 'music'."



Eddie Monteiro & Frank, 2006



Frank & Joan Cochran Sommers, Las Vegas, 2010

Joan Cochran Sommers is not only a fine accordionist, but also an acclaimed teacher, adjudicator, conductor, arranger and all-around terrific ambassador for the accordion. Frank really liked and respected Joan. Here is her tribute to Frank:

"I became acquainted with Frank Marocco at an Accordionists and Teachers Guild Festival held in the Chicago area one summer. Since that time we met upon numerous occasions at various accordion events throughout the USA. Frank was always such a quiet and thoughtful gentleman, respectful of all those around him and offering both encouragement and praise for everyone. When he walked out on the stage to perform, he was still that quiet, unassuming person but once he began to play it was a true artist, a giant with tremendous finesse in everything he did; there was never a time when the music was not beautiful. Frank never made noise; he just

*captivated everyone with his blending of sounds into those lovely chords. He could play all the fast notes but that didn't seem to be his goal as a musician. Frank wanted beautiful sounds to emanate from his accordion and he always succeeded.*

*He never forced a sound beyond its limit but he certainly had lots of dynamics in his playing. Frank came up with some beautiful, interesting and arresting tunes, too, but he didn't take any more care in performing those than he did the tunes of others...another sign of his respect for his fellow musicians.*

*Today we miss him. We will continue to miss him for a very long time but, luckily for all of us, we still have his music both in written form through his many publications and in recorded form through his records, CDs, and live performances captured all over the world. And, of course, we cannot forget all those soundtracks for so many movies. We will have all of that wonderful music forever.*

*Thank you, Frank, for being so generous with your music and for sharing your artistry. Everyone loved you!"*

"Young accordionists are our future," Frank would say. At the 2009 FMAE concert, we met a young jazz pianist who came to see his friends, our bass player, Sean Brogan, and our percussionist, Wes Anderson, perform with the accordion orchestra.

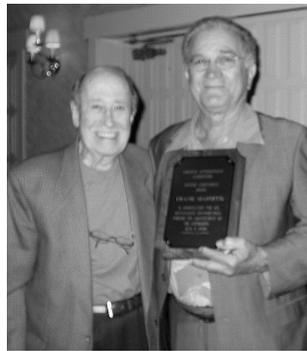


Frank performing with Gabe Hall-Rodrigues, 2010 FMAE

Gabe Hall-Rodrigues impressed Dan, Frank and me immediately. He had just discovered the accordion and was "blown away" by the

evening's concert. Frank invited him, on the spot, to attend our camp the following year and gave Gabe one of his CDs, *Be-Bop Buffet*". Gabe remembers that evening. *"I could not believe what I heard. Words cannot describe the feeling I had discovering not just Frank Marocco's music, but accordion jazz in general. His playing seemed effortless and his*

*amazing sense of time and rhythm created an infectious swing that I have yet to hear from any accordionist."* The talented Gabe worked hard and, within 16 months of that first meeting with Frank, and with the help of master accordion teacher, Ilmar Kuljus, became the 2010 AAA Virtuoso Champion.



Frank with Ralph Stricker, AAA Lifetime Achievement Award dinner, 2006

Frank had a close friend for decades, Ralph Stricker from New Jersey. They spoke on the phone weekly for over 30 years. The accordion brought them together, but it was their willingness to share and their appreciation for the other's thoughts, views and music that kept them together as close friends.

They collaborated on a book that jazz musicians consider one of the best, *"Jazz Theory and Improvisation Studies for Accordion,"* and respected each other tremendously. Ralph recently said, *"There will never be another Frank Marocco. His playing, sharing, attitude and the love of playing which reflected in his playing, can never be duplicated by anyone"*.

Yes, there will never be another Frank Marocco. Frank's manager, Elke Ahrenholz told me that in the first week after Frank's death, she received over 400 expressions of grief over his passing and of praise for this irreplaceable man, and they still come in almost daily. Elke writes about her memories and of the time spent with Frank:



L to r: Elke Ahrenholz's children, Martin & Lisa Breccia, Frank and Elke, 2011 FMAE

*"In the last 5 years I worked as Frank's manager, concert organizer as well as road manager, which gave me the possibility to spend a lot of time with him during our travels. I have lost my friend, my mentor, a great gentleman - but I did not lose his*

*music and spirit! Frank was such an inspiration to me and to many, many others as well, from beginners to seasoned professionals - he was not just a great accordionist but a great musician and a great person. I feel very lucky to have gotten to meet him, talk to him and most of all get to know him. I feel privileged to know that he considered me a friend and felt honored to be in his company. He was a truly great man in many different ways. During the last 3 months I got more than 2000 E- mails from all over the world, from people that did know Frank very well, that only met him once, from people who never met him - the tenor in all these letters was the love and respect for a great man, musician and accordion player and of course a deep sadness about his passing away. We did many CD productions in the last 4 years and looking back, I am happy that his legacy is saved in the publishing of CDs and printed sheet music, and I will work to go ahead to let younger generations get the possibility to know the music of the legend, Frank Marocco. His eyes reflected great humanity, generosity, passion and clearly a strong personality, which he reflected in his music; the desire and passion to tell stories through music, to tell it honestly and with heart and passion. Frank Marocco influenced my life in many good ways, and I will never forget him and never stop work to keep his legacy alive!"*

When Frank died, a part of all of us died with him. For me, he was the "wind beneath my wings" and now I need to push myself along the musical path that Frank would want me to take. Fellow AAA Governing Board member and one of Frank's favorite FMAE regulars, Marilyn O'Neil, wrote to me the day of Frank's passing, "*Today, the accordion world was stabbed in the heart.*" How true. I will conclude with a beautiful quote from Gabe Hall-Rodrigues:

*"We will all miss Frank. The personal and musical void he leaves is impossible to fill. However, I believe that he would want us all to keep learning, working hard and practicing.*

*Photo credits: Bruce Lawrie, Elke Ahrenholz, Lou Coppola, Joan Grauman*

A wonderful radio interview of Frank Marocco conducted in 2010 can be found at <http://www.susanmccray.com/Archives2010.html> (scroll down to June 29, 2010).