

Spotlight on Frank Busso

Musician, Educator, Conductor and Ambassador of the Accordion

By Joan Grauman, AAA Historian



It is always difficult for me to find just the right opening words for my articles to set the tone I want to convey. This article was no different – until I received these beautifully expressed words of love and admiration from Frank’s daughter, Christina Busso:

“My dad is my hero and, through the eyes of this adoring daughter, he is larger than life!



Christina and Frank, Jr. with
competition trophies

At some point, you realize that playing the accordion is a somewhat remarkable thing. But for me, growing up, I simply didn’t know anyone who didn’t play the accordion! It started with my dad as a role model, of course, and then extended to my uncles, family friends and scores of students in and out of the music school. It was therefore natural for me to begin taking lessons when I was four, and I was always so proud to be part of the music school. I loved when I was old enough to join the orchestra and so excited to have my dad as my conductor.

As my dad was also the music teacher at two schools in our area, it was not uncommon for me to hear in the local grocery store, ‘Ohhh, you’re MR. BUSSO’S daughter!?!’ That was music to my ears. I could not have been prouder.

Now that I have my own children, I wasn’t sure whether they would share the same love for music, and love for the accordion. Apparently, it must be in the genes! Alex (nine years old) has been playing since he was five, and Caroline (five years old) started lessons at age four. Nothing makes me happier than to see and hear them practice and to play alongside my dad, my brother, or me. Truly, it is a family affair.

When my brother first started conducting his own orchestra a few years ago, to some it may have seemed like a passing of the baton, but it was also him picking up his own melody. I recall in the first orchestra piece my brother conducted, I played alongside my dad and followed the lead of my brother, and watched my mother, my husband and our children in the audience. Somewhere in the middle of the piece, I nearly lost my place as I teared up.

Playing the accordion isn’t a hobby – it is something that ties our family together across THREE generations – WOW.”

And all of this because Frank’s childhood home was too small for the piano that his mom had dreamed her son would learn to play. *But there was room for an accordion, and the rest is history, and quite a delightful story of hard work, dedication and love that continues to this day.*

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Frank's Childhood

Frank, the only child of Constantino and Jeanette (Rapino) Busso, was born on Staten Island, New York in 1943. Tragically, his father died in World War II on the USS Ticonderoga in 1945, when Frank was just two years old. After his father's death, he and his mother moved into a three-room flat with Frank's grandparents.

When Frank was seven, he began taking accordion lessons from Prof. Omero Castellucci. An excellent European-trained accordionist, Castellucci encouraged young Frank to practice daily, and invited him to join his band. This band consisted of all instruments plus vocalists and met weekly above the local police station. They regularly put on shows for the community. Castellucci was also a composer. He composed and directed the world premiere of his opera, "The Prince of Peace" in 1955 at the Sailors Snug Harbor auditorium in Staten Island. Renowned musicians and singers performed in the orchestra and chorus... and one accordion player. So impressed with his 12 year old student's abilities, Castellucci wrote a solo part for Frank, which he performed in that world premiere.

Frank's mother remarried when Frank was seven years old, and they eventually moved to another section of Staten Island. It became difficult for Frank to get across town for his lessons, so when he was 14, his stepfather found him a new accordion teacher: Tony Ettore.



Frank, 1963 AAA US Senior A, 1st place winner

The Ettore School of Music was filled with "the sound of music", and Frank really enjoyed being there. Encouraged to enter competitions, Frank took 1st place two years in a row in his elementary school's music contest, and he won the American Accordionists' Association (AAA) US Senior A Solo Competition in 1963 at the age of 20. From 1959 to 1965, Frank won numerous national, regional and state accordion championships. The national and regional competitions were sponsored by the AAA, while the state championships were sponsored by the New York State Accordion Association.

With Tony Ettore's guidance, Frank started teaching at the Ettore School of Music at the age of 18 and soon had many private students. He also conducted ensembles and bands at the school.

Early on, Frank knew that his life would revolve around the accordion. He loved to play and bring joy to others through his music. At 13, he began performing for church groups and playing club dates in hotels including the Statler Hilton and the Biltmore. He also really enjoyed teaching, arranging and conducting. When he was 32 years old, Frank started his own band, "Rendezvous", which performed all over the NY metropolitan area for decades. But this was just a small part of Frank's activities and accomplishments.

While playing out several nights a week, Frank completed his college education. He holds a BS in Business from St. Peter's College and an MBA from Wagner College. This background helped him when he opened a music center, "Music City", which he eventually expanded to four locations in

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Staten Island. While running these stores, teaching accordion and playing club dates, Frank also found time to meet, court and marry his lifetime partner, Carmela (Felitti) in 1975. And how did they meet? through Carmela's brother, Gerald – an accordionist!

Carmela enjoys reminiscing about their first days together. *“Frank and I started dating and as is true to this day, he always chose fine dining restaurants. After several evenings, I remember going home and telling my mother, ‘It’s like dating a movie star!’ Due to his years of performing/entertaining and his music stores (Music City), he was well-known on Staten Island. People would come over to chat as well as simply point to him and whisper, loudly, ‘That’s Frank Busso!’ I am still proud to be his date!”*



Frank and Carmela's wedding,
1975

New Ventures and Faithe Deffner's Influence

Faithe Deffner took a liking to Frank early on in his career. Faithe was highly respected for her fierce lifelong dedication to the accordion, the manufacturing of fine instruments, as well as her tireless involvement in the AAA and the international accordion scene. She admired Frank's energetic and successful efforts with his students, as well as his work ethic. Faithe also felt that he shared her desire to heighten interest in the accordion throughout the country at a time when the accordion's popularity was beginning to wane. Frank and Carmela took a tremendous liking to Faithe, and a close friendship blossomed which lasted until Faithe's passing in 2014.



Staten Island Accordion Orchestra takes
1st place in AAA orchestra competition,
1976 in Washington, DC



Frank accepts 1st place trophy from Carmen
Carrozza and prize money from Maddalena
Belfiore, 1976



Cake celebrating the victory

Faithe's influence in Frank's professional life was immeasurable. In 1975 he owned and managed four music centers. "I wanted to get out of the business at this point in my life", Frank said. Faithe stepped in and, insisting that Frank was just what the young students and the accordion world needed, sent him to Les Ray in Florida to learn how to manage an accordion school. Frank returned to Staten Island, closed his four businesses and opened the "**Staten Island Music School**" in 1977. He and Carmela purchased a building on Main Street in Great Kills. The music studio was on the first floor and they lived upstairs. With Faithe's encouragement, Frank created a very successful school which, at one time, had 175 accordion students. He sold



Carmela and Frank Busso with Faithe
Deffner, 1990

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accordions, his students and the bands repeatedly brought home trophies, and pretty soon he was teaching his own two children, as well.

Carmela speaks of those early years. *“Christina and Frank, Jr. were both born in the same house where Frank gave music lessons and rehearsed his accordion bands. They were involved in attending and participating in at least three accordion festivals/competitions annually. As a result, I think they believed that everyone played the accordion! They learned to walk, talk and play the accordion.”*

Christina and Frank, Jr. loved their lessons with their father, and they loved being part of the music school’s bands and orchestra. Both children were encouraged to learn other instruments. Christina played the flute and Frank, Jr. played the trumpet. Frank wrote arrangements that featured each of his children on these instruments in the accordion orchestra. It was delightful watching these young teens removing their accordions to begin their solos.



Christina on flute and Frank, Jr. on trumpet as Frank conducts the Staten Island Showband. AAA Festival 1996, Philadelphia



Staten Island Showband, US Championship, Springfield, MA 1975

Peter Tripi began taking lessons from Frank in the late 1970s. He was 12

years old when he began and he never left. He has been performing in the Busso Orchestras and Showbands for close to forty years! The Busso Music Showband will be performing at the 2017 AAA Festival in Princeton, New Jersey, and Peter will be featured as the band’s vocalist. He still plays his accordion as well. Peter spoke glowingly of his teacher and friend. *“Frank was a very inspiring teacher. He taught us lifelong lessons such as how to work with others. He set a great example for all of his students.”*

Frank became the President of the Affiliated Accordionists of New York in 1971 and, with Faithe’s encouragement and recommendation, became a member of the AAA Governing Board in 1973. He has been a member of the Governing Board for 45 years.

AAA Governing Board Positions

Frank has faithfully served the AAA as Treasurer, Vice President, President (1981, 1992-94) and also chaired many committees including the national festivals and the Young Artists Concert Series. He has held the position of Comptroller of the AAA for many years.

Lana Gore, Frank Busso and former AAA President, Linda Soley Reed, were all born in the same year. These three ‘comrades’ joyfully met each year at all of the AAA competitions and festivals since they were teens. Linda reflects on these memories.



Playing duets with Tony Dannon, AAA Festival's Gala Concert, Cleveland, 2001

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AAA Tribute to Willard Palmer, Houston, TX 1995. L to R: Sam Falcetti, Pietro Deiro, Jr., Mary Tokarski, August Arruda, Jr., Faithe Deffner, Lana Gore, Maddalena Belfiore, Linda Soley Reed (back), Elsie Bennett, Frank Busso. Seated in front: Willard Palmer

“I have known Frank, or I should say have known OF Frank, since I was eleven years old and attended my first AAA competition. Held at the Charles Evans Hughes High School in New York City, the competition for the eleven year olds had over 40 contestants. Fourteen of them came from my studio in Connecticut, but the 1st place winner was some ‘kid from Staten Island’ – Frank Busso. And there was another one who was always there: the ‘kid from Detroit’. That was Lana Gore. There were no 4th place ribbons or ties, and certainly no ‘attaboy’ awards for just showing up. At 16, I finally won that coveted 1st place solo trophy, but the ‘kid from Staten Island’ wasn’t there!!

The three of us baby boomers, Frank, Lana and Linda, became united again as adults, each with our own students competing and orchestras to conduct. And then we got involved with organizing events: Accordion Day, Eastern Cup, Summer Competitions and this became our lives. Encouraged by both Maddalena Belfiore and Faithe Deffner, we were soon AAA Governing Board members (Frank and I), then officers and committee chairs.

We were not only ‘accordion friends’ but real life friends, attending each others’ ‘special’ birthdays, weddings, etc. Frank was so helpful to me when I realized that the accordion students started to dwindle and I decided to add a retail outlet to my then struggling teaching business. I drove down to Staten Island after teaching to pick up instruments and merchandise. We would go to dinner and talk about upcoming events and ideas for entertainment at each. We both held various offices in the AAA, but Frank was the one who got me through ten years of the Presidency of AAA. I would call him and say, ‘What do you think of this...?’, and in an instant he would give me all the pros and cons needed. I treasure his friendship and wisdom and hope this bond will continue for many years to come.”

In addition to his many Board positions, the AAA festivals have benefitted from his years as Public Relations Chair, Festival Coordinator, Hotel Liaison, Conductor of the Massed Band and Conductor of the Festival Orchestra.



Conducting the AAA Massed Band, Cleveland, OH, 2001

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Music Teacher at three Parochial schools on Staten Island



Frank conducting in the 1970s

When Frank's daughter Christina was quite young, she recommended her dad when an organist was needed for a school production. Although he is not an organist, Frank played the organ for the event. Impressed with his abilities and his rapport with young children, Frank was asked to take over the music classes at the school. Frank accepted and was soon teaching 600 elementary school students at two parochial schools. A few years later, he was asked to teach 7th and 8th grade music students at a third school, and he accepted. Frank taught for a total of 27 years at these schools, while continuing to teach private accordion students and direct his bands and orchestras.

The Busso Trio and More

Impressed with Frank's children's abilities and their joyful "performance personas", Faithe Deffner suggested that Frank, with his children, create a performing trio with two piano accordions and a bass accordion. "The Busso Trio" was created and made its debut at the 2001 AAA Festival in Cleveland, Ohio to a very delighted audience. The trio still plays together as often as possible. Christina, married to Marshall Lammers, is now a mother of two and a lawyer



"The Busso Trio", Frank, Jr., Christina and Frank



Uncle Frank teaches Christina's children, Alexander and Caroline Lammers

working as the Director of Advancement at Rochambeau, the French International School near Washington, DC. She is delighted that her two children are now studying accordion with her brother Frank. Master Sergeant Frank Busso, Jr., now the accordionist with the US Air Force Strolling Strings, also owns and



Master Sergeant Frank Busso, Jr. with his proud parents, Carmela and Frank

operates Busso Music, Inc. and Ernest Deffner, Inc. in Alexandria, Virginia. Frank, Jr.'s oldest child, Nicholas, now five, has just started taking accordion lessons from his dad! Soon, if Frank, Jr. and Suzanne's young twin girls take up the accordion (they are just three years old), we will hopefully be treated to a performance by "The Busso Octet" in the near future!

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Frank, Jr., while busy with his young children and his two full-time jobs, is pleased to earn a living with the instrument that has meant so much to him his entire life. He attributes so much of what he has accomplished – and enjoys – to his father’s influence. *“I’m the first-call concert announcer for the Air Force Strings, and that’s probably the case because I watched and learned from my father serving as the master of ceremonies for countless concerts, recitals and award ceremonies.”* He also spoke about his outlook on his work versus that of many of his colleagues: *“Having the opportunity to work with so many accomplished musicians, I’ve had colleagues who now look at music as their job, and they don’t really get the same level of enjoyment out of performing as they did when they were younger. Just recently, I asked my father what motivates him, even after all these decades of performing, to take out the accordion to play for family holidays and engagements. Without hesitating, he said, ‘To make people happy’.”*



Busso Music Showband performing at the 2016 AAA Festival in Buffalo, NY. Father, daughter, grandson with son, Frank, Jr., conducting

Frank and Carmela retired and moved to Virginia in 2015 to be close to their children and grandchildren, and they winter in Florida. Of course, the accordion still plays a major role in their daily lives no matter where they hang their hats. *“I am proud to be the sister, wife, mother and grandmother of accordionists!”*, Carmela beamed. Because of Frank’s influence and the example he set, all of the Bussos are so proud to be a part of the accordion world, and the accordion world is very blessed to have the Bussos!

The popular, award-winning Showband is still going strong and is now under the direction of Frank, Jr. What a joy it is to watch father and daughter, along with many fine accordionists, play on stage as son Frank conducts the orchestra that his father founded so many years ago. At the last AAA Festival in Buffalo, New York, an extra special treat was seeing Christina’s then eight year old son, Alexander, come up on stage for a duet with his friend as the orchestra accompanied them.



The Busso grandchildren: (L to R) Francesca and Julianna Busso, Alex Lammers, Nicholas Busso, Caroline Lammers, 2017