



My Memories of
Mario Lanza

by Eddie Durso

as told to
John Durso and Steve Vertlieb

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Mario the day before the Philadelphia Concert
March 12, 1951

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This work is dedicated to fans and admirers
throughout the world who have and will perpetuate
the memory of the most extraordinarily gifted singing
voice of our time..... Mario Lanza

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INTRODUCTION

This is a love story, a bonding of two boys on the mean streets of South Philadelphia in the nineteen thirties. It is a warm, funny, often poignant story of a relationship that transcended mere friendship. So many years later it might not have mattered at all that these boys found each other and shared the often precarious rites of passage. That their story survives and continues to generate interest today is a testament to the legacy of the greatest voice the world has ever known.

There is a special affection shared by men, boys in particular, that can never be equated with the romantic coupling of a man and woman. While not sexual it is, in many ways, a deeper, more profound sharing of human emotions and experience than can be found in more traditional relationships. One has only to look at perhaps the most popular motion picture ever filmed to realize the significance of such a friendship. When quintessential tough guy Humphrey Bogart puts Ingrid Bergman on a plane and greets the future, not with his girl but with his friend at the conclusion of "Casablanca," he walks off into movie history arm and arm with Claude Rains. While the music swells he muses "Louie, this looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Indeed, when Alfred Coccozza met Eddie Durso in 1932 at Vare Junior High School a relationship began that would endure, beyond separation and even death, for over sixty years.

Alfred Arnold Coccozza was born on January 31, 1921.... the very year that Enrico Caruso, his idol, died. Throughout his brief life Freddy remained convinced that he was born the reincarnation of Caruso, destined to inherit his voice and his fame, and yet this boy who would be king surpassed the artistry of the singer he idolized. Astonishingly, however, it has become fashionable to ridicule Lanza as a minor movie singer who could never have sustained the nightly rigors of performance on the operatic stage. That such critical snobbery persists is an indictment not of Lanza, but rather of the perverse, self flattering back patting that seems to plague so many one dimensional music critics. Someone once wisely said that there are two kinds of music ...good and bad. To dismiss an entire body of work merely because it was presented on the motion picture screen rather than on the concert stage is the epitome of musical ignorance as well as arrogance.

It is a matter of historical record that Enrico Caruso himself flirted with the movies at the height of the silent era. Rise Stevens performed exuberantly and memorably in Paramount Pictures' classic "Going my Way" starring Bing Crosby, while the modern darling of opera purists, Luciano Pavarotti, made an aborted attempt to launch a career as a musical movie star with the disastrous "Yes, Giorgio." The critics and public alike cried out "No, Luciano! "

One only wonders if Pavarotti might been crucified by his admirers had the movie performed successfully. Perhaps, then, the only recorded sin of Mario Lanza was that his motion picture career was profitable. Heaven forbid that an artist from any creative inspiration be successful.

In their zeal to attack Lanza's musical credibility his detractors in and out of the press have accused him of being temperamental, an ego out of control and as huge as his girth. It's easy to forget that most of the greatest operatic singers of our time have suffered much the same criticism. Maria Callas was known as much for her temper tantrums as for her legendary voice. Indeed, few supporters of either Pavarotti or Placido Domingo would not concede that their fiery temperaments were at least as colorful as their talent.

Those who gleefully point out Lanza's lack of discipline or staying power seem conveniently to have forgotten the singer's operatic debut on the evenings of April 7th and 8th, 1948 at The Municipal Auditorium in New Orleans where, under the direction of Walter Herbert and under the auspices of the New Orleans Opera House Association, Mario Lanza performed the role of Lieutenant Pinkerton in a full length production of Puccini's " Madame Butterfly ."

From his first screen experience in the chorus for 20th Century Fox's war time extravaganza, "Winged Victory" (1944) until his last appearance as the star of MGM's " For the First Time " in 1959, Mario Lanza lit up the motion picture screen with a fiery brilliance not experienced before or since. He sang with greater clarity and passion than, perhaps, any singer in history. No one who ever heard him sing could forget the haunted, brooding brilliance of an artist who was truly touched by the hand of God. It was fitting, then, that the last recording he would ever perform, finished just one month before his death on October 7, 1959 in Rome, would be " The Lord's Prayer." With his beloved Maestro Constantine Callinicos at the piano, his sole accompaniment at Cinecitta Studios, the great singer bade his emotional farewell to the music he so loved.

Before the pain and turbulence of the public Mario Lanza, however, there was the mischievous, irrepressible Freddy Coccozza.....the boy who loved to laugh.....and his companion Eddie Durso, the Damon and Pythias of South Philadelphia.

This is their story.

Steve Vertlieb

PREFACE

Eddie Durso was one of Freddy Coccozza's (Mario Lanza) closest friends from the time they met in Vare Junior High School in Philadelphia , Pa. in September, 1932 until Eddie went into the U.S. Army in the fall of 1942.

Eddie played a major role in Lanza's early years. He was with him regularly, before, during and after school and spent many summer days at Freddy's grandfather's home in Wildwood, New Jersey. Mr. and Mrs. Coccozza were concerned that their Freddy have the right kind of friends to keep him out of trouble. (When he and Freddy were together they sort of accomplished that goal.) Many times Eddie would get a call from Freddy saying "Eddie, come and get me. My old man won't let me out. " So Mary and Tony Coccozza were ever indebted to him for the help he gave them in that respect. But, imagine what it must have been like to be with the young Freddy every day. There was always excitement, action and never a dull moment. In his early years Freddy Coccozza (or Al Coke, the name Lanza liked calling himself) would spend hours at Eddie's house (the living room set that they sat on is still in the Durso family) discussing the opera with Eddie's father, a former opera critic for a newspaper.

Eddie tells the story about a picture that Mario gave him when Lanza was just 15 years old. It was

August of 1936. In his words, " I was ill when Freddy came to my house. He went up to my bedroom to visit and sat on the edge of my bed. To boost my spirits he gave me a picture of himself. It was very serious looking, with hands folded, and seated in front of the piano in his living room. He signed it "To Eddie from Freddy Coccozza (the Great)". I thanked him for it. Freddy said to me (I will never forget his prophetic words) "Eddie, I got a million dollars right here ! " (as he grabbed his throat.) "I'm going to be the greatest, sensational, dramatic tenor that ever lived." I patted him on the back and said, " I know you're going to do it ." "It was then that Freddy told me what his professional name would be. He said, "Eddie, I am going to call myself Mario Lanza. How does that sound ?" I told him "That sounds like a name people will remember and your mother will be thrilled that you chose her name." After achieving his stardom Eddie and Mario Lanza got together whenever he returned to Philadelphia. We have put these anecdotal stories of Lanza and my father in print for others to enjoy. What an education it was for him to be with Lanza those ten years, the happiest, most carefree period of their lives.

It was not until 1990 that my father and I visited the Lanza Museum and attended the 1990 Lanza Ball held in Philadelphia. He saw Terry Robinson (Mario's closest Hollywood pal) there who related that Mario, and his parents had often spoken of Eddie Durso, Freddy's Phila. friend.

Terry hosted the event and introduced him at the Ball as a former boxer and "One of Mario's closest buddies." Their close relationship has remained personal all of these years but the enduring affection for his late friend enabled me to convince him to share some of his wonderful memories at long last. Since 5 books have already been published on the life and career of Mario Lanza, it is not our intention to present a definitive biography of the youthful singer but rather to offer a missing piece to an incomplete puzzle. This, then, will not replace any existing work but hopefully add a new perspective to an ever unfolding legend.

The only physical memory I have of Mario Lanza was a sad one. I was 6 years old at the time. I didn't attend the viewing or the funeral Mass although my father was a pallbearer. But, I clearly remember going with my father and brother to the airport on Sunday morning October 18, 1959 and seeing my father help place his friend's coffin on the conveyor belt to be loaded onto the plane and flown to California for the last of three funerals. It was a deeply moving experience for everyone present, reminiscent of a tearful Hollywood movie.

We watched the plane take off, and walked back to our car. As the plane lifted toward the clouds the car radio was playing Mario's recording of "I'll Walk with God." It seemed as though he was bidding us his final farewell. You just never forget something like that.

John Durso



Freddy Cocozza (The Great) 15 years old
Picture taken in front of his living room piano.

MY MEMORIES OF MARIO LANZA

BY EDDIE DURSO

What follows are my personal recollections of the young Mario Lanza, or Alfred Coccozza as he was known in the days prior to Hollywood. Before Mario became the " King of the High C's" he was Freddy, the " King of Fun. " To be with him filled your days with laughter and your nights with adventure. We know the artist.....the chilling excitement and pleading emotion of his voice. That was how he lived each day.

From the time we first met he copied my street wise attitude in order to survive the tough life in South Philadelphia. His main objective was to generate laughter among his friends. He was as colorful a character as I've ever known. His often irreverent behavior eventually made him the talk of Hollywood and the music world. I can assure you that even from the very beginning there was only one Freddy Coccozza.

Throughout the years we knew each other he would sit, deep in thought, either in my living room or his own, thinking... always thinking. I'd ask " What are you thinking about, Freddy?" He would jump out of his chair and say " Eddie, let's go! " I never knew where he was taking me or what he had in mind but I always went with him. I was a willing companion. I guess I knew that whatever the circumstances I'd be guaranteed a good time.

Freddy was the first out of the door after giving his parents his proposed itinerary. We rarely followed it anyway. His mother and father would pull me aside and ask me to " Watch Freddy." It seemed as though I was an insurance policy for their diamond in the rough. I was like a fisherman. I'd give him just enough line to enjoy himself and reel him in before he went too far.

In his short thirty eight years he lived as he performed.... passionately. He was one of a kind, an original.

FREDDY COCOZZA AND SCHOOL DAYS

We have to realize that Freddy knew at a very early age that he had a great voice and that his destiny was fame and fortune. Academics and regimentation were not a priority for him. His friends and I could only try our best to help him fulfill his destiny. We did enjoy school but boyish pranks and friendship were of equal importance to us.

The first time I met Freddy was at Vare Junior High School in September 1932. This was the 7th Grade. We were in gym class doing a medicine ball drill, sitting on the floor and throwing the ball back and forth. One boy would throw the heavy leather ball to me and I would throw it to the boy across from me who happened to be Freddy Coccozza. I was very thin at the time so I threw it a little too hard to him. He was much larger than I but it knocked him back and his legs went up in the air.

Now, this happened every time I threw it to him. Freddy was a chunky boy at that time and he was surprised that I had the strength to throw that hard. After that he watched me doing my gym exercises and I would show him how to do them. We became friends and would talk and kid around after our classes together. We would walk home after school each day. He lived for a time at 2205 Jackson St. with his parents at the home of his Aunt Lucy and Uncle Gus, nearby Vare Junior High. They moved into their home at 2040 Mercy Street, eventually purchasing it on February 3, 1937. I recognized something extraordinary in Freddy's voice within a few days of our introduction. Whenever he'd see me on the street he'd sing out my name in a high "C", as clear and as loud as a noon day siren. "EDDIEEEE!". I grew to expect his "siren call" whenever we came together.

His show-off-manship was first exposed in 8th grade. We had a Latin class together. At times Freddy and Company (Rocco Ochuida and Mike Capobianco) would come in 10 minutes late for class. Now, instead of coming in quietly, they would make a big entrance, slam the door, laugh like horses and bang their books down on the desks. Everybody in the class enjoyed the show except for the teacher. It wasn't long before these noise makers were eliminated from that class. Freddy and I had some run-ins with difficult teachers. They were tough on everyone in those days. It was after Mr. Goldberg's 10th grade English class at South Philadelphia High School that I brought a test to the teacher to ask why he had marked a couple of my answers wrong. We were still talking when Freddy came in for the next class.

Now this teacher and Freddy, for some reason or another, never got along. So, Mr. Goldberg made a remark to Freddy and Freddy said something back to him. Mr. Goldberg said "Cocozza, I am going to have you expelled." Hearing that, Freddy got very upset and backed the teacher against the blackboard. He was just about to let him have it when I got in between Freddy and Mr. Goldberg. I spun Freddy around, asked "Are you crazy?" and pushed him out of the classroom. Had Freddy belted that teacher, of course, he would have been expelled from Southern High in 10th grade and I would have missed out on a lot of fun to come. When I went back to the teacher he was marking everything I had previously questioned "correct." This was, I guess, in appreciation for saving him from the " Fists of Fury."

By Now Freddy was really developing his vocal gymnastics. Changing classes one day we were walking down the hall. Before entering our next class Freddy sang out a brilliant, clear and very loud high note I had never heard him hit before, and held it for about five seconds. The principal came running out of his office and stopped us, demanding to know who had generated that piercing high note. Freddy said "One went this way and one went that way", pointing around the corners of the opposite hallway. The principal ran off desperately looking for the guilty person. I said to Freddy "That was fantastic." We both started laughing and went into class.

That later became a calling card of his, letting these notes echo throughout the hallways before he would come into class.

Our 12th grade Italian class was taught by Mr. Maioriello, an expert in Italian and English. He could translate a book written in Italian into English while reading the book turned upside down and vice versa. He knew Freddy was studying voice and that he knew about operas. In fact, Freddy spent many hours at my home with my father, who was an opera critic for a newspaper, talking about opera. He really knew so much, in fact, that Mr. Maioriello would let him take over the class to explain the plots, characters and main arias of the operas to the students. Freddy did this with detail, authority and a great deal of humor. The class was thoroughly entertained by his lectures. Mr. Maioriello stayed in the back of the room and listened to the lecture and when it was completed applauded Freddy for a job well done. This, needless to say, was a class he never missed nor was late for.

Freddy was developing into a leader. His friends knew where they could find him during the day. In Hank Gowdy's 12th grade Chemistry class Freddy would make his evening appointments. He would sit by the window and call out to friends outside on the sidewalk on the Jackson Street side of the schoolyard :

"Hey, Joe Matteo, don't forget 7:30 at 7th and Morris." "Hey , Joe Mattarazzo, meet me at 6 O'clock." - and on and on....

The Chemistry Test

Freddy was unprepared for an exam so we figured out a way that I could take the exam for him. Here is the plan we devised and how it was supposed to work: Freddy would come quietly a couple of minutes late into class while the teacher was walking to the back of the room passing out the exams. Freddy would then take an extra test paper from the front desk and slip it to me on his way to his seat. I would then turn in two tests, with my name on one and his name on the other and he would pass. It didn't go quite according to plan, however. Here's what happened! :

Freddy made his usual grand entrance by slamming the door. Being pretty big he accidentally ran into the front desk and spun the desk, along with the student in it, completely around. The class started laughing and Mr. Gowdy looked at him, shook his head and continued giving out the papers. Freddy looked at me and I pointed to the table that had the extra tests on it. I motioned emphatically to hurry and get one. He kept trying to grab one while watching the teacher at the same time. He grabbed too many and the papers started flying up in the air. Mr. Gowdy caught on to what was happening and said to Freddy "Number four boy, put that back - You'll be the loser." This teacher never addressed the students by their names, only by the number he had assigned them. Later, however, Freddy did take that exam and we both passed..... to my utter amazement !



Eddie Durso and Freddy Coccozza
Philadelphia (1935)

FREDDY'S LOVE OF BOXING

Freddy first made his interest in boxing known at the time we were in the 10th grade. He was 15 years old. During our lunch break from Southern High School each day I would go home into my basement at 1637 Porter Street and work out.

One day Freddy asked where I was going at lunch break. I told him I was going home to punch the bag. He asked if he could come with me. I said "Ok." We went down into my basement and he watched me work out. He was really impressed. I showed him a few things, such as how to make a boxing fist, how to stand as a fighter, jab and throw various punches. Freddy showed immediate interest in the sport.

The next day while I was working out I looked up at my basement window. There was Freddy and a crowd he had assembled peering in at me. He had them all follow me home. I asked him "Why did you do that?" (something I wished I had a nickel for, because of the many times throughout the years I asked him that question) He answered "I just wanted to show you off to the other guys!"

I guess he admired me. I never thought that someday I would be admiring him. This was the first time that Freddy became a fight promoter for me. Freddy continued to come over at lunch time and I would teach him what I knew. My mother would beg us to eat lunch but we wanted to workout instead.

Soon Freddy became very adept at shadow boxing. He would slow trot down the street, shooting and dodging imaginary punches. Everyone, including Freddy, was duly impressed.

We outgrew my basement so I took him to the News Boys Gym at 13th and Shunk Sts. where they had better equipment. After that I found that the number of strangers challenging me to fight had grown dramatically. Whenever I asked them why they wanted to fight me the answer was the same. "Freddy Coccozza said I was a good fighter and a better one than they were ." I had every big bully in the area looking for me. Of course, they had to find out if this was really true. So, unbeknownst to me, Freddy had become my unwanted fight promoter.

In the summer of 1939 I asked Freddy if he wanted to go with me to see a fighter named " Two Ton Tony Galento " (a "heavyweight" fighter for obvious reasons) train for his upcoming fight in Philadelphia with boxer Lou Nova. I borrowed my Dad's car and we drove to a small town in Chester County, Pennsylvania about 25 miles from Philadelphia. During the drive our conversation was mainly about boxing and girls. When we arrived at Jimmy Dougherty's Lieperville Training Camp Tony Galento was working out on his " little " speed bag, twice as big as the one in my basement gym. It took a lot of power for him to maintain his punching cadence.

Freddy and I were standing behind Galento. It was a thrill for me to be close to a boxer as great as Tony. Tony, the #1 Heavyweight Contender, was really putting on a show for everyone there.

On occasion, he lost his punching rhythm, and Freddy hollered "Aw, you missed." Tony looked around to find who had insulted him, then continued the workout. He lost the rhythm again and Freddy repeated the remark. Finally, Galento was getting his rhythm and power together and tried to finish the exhibition with a big left hook. Unfortunately he missed the bag once again. Freddy screamed out "Eddie, why don't you show him how to hit the bag! " Tony Galento turned around and looked at me. Sweating, panting, almost breathless, he said " If YOU can hit this bag better than me I'll give you a hundred dollars! " I was shocked. I said " I could never hit it like you, Tony." He snorted, returned his attention to his admiring crowd and resumed his training.

I pulled Freddy aside and asked, "Freddy, why did you say that ? Are you nuts ? Are you trying to get me into a fight with Galento now ?" He laughed and said " No, I just thought you could punch the speed bag better than him." To think that he compared me to the number one contender of the heavyweight crown. I was terribly embarrassed, yet flattered nonetheless. I always looked forward to going out with Freddy because you never knew what to expect .

One day in the spring of 1936 Freddy came over to my house and said that Joe Louis, the fighter, was going to make a personal appearance at Municipal Stadium in order to promote his Brown Bombers baseball team. We went to the Stadium. Freddy spotted Joe down at field level and said to me "Hey , there's Joe. Follow me. Let's go say hello to him." We went through the guards (Freddy had a knack of getting through blockades) and went down onto the field. Freddy and I were standing right behind Joe, who was signing his autograph, when Freddy asked me "Eddie, should I give him a shot now?" He lifted his arm and began to throw a right hand punch to the back of Champion Joe Louis's head. I grabbed his arm and held it . " Don't do it," I yelled. Joe Louis turned around and looked at us. I pushed Freddy away, shook hands with Joe and told him how much we admired him. That seemed to calm everybody down. Freddy was trying to find recognition by throwing a punch at the soon to be Heavyweight Champion of the World .

He was actually going to hit the great Joe Louis. I said " You are a nut. I could see tomorrow's sports headline:" NUTTY FAN PUNCHES JOE LOUIS ." Freddy was known by all of the amateur fighters around town as Al Coke. He shortened his name from Alfred to Al and Coccozza to Coke. He and I went to the fights regularly at The Convention Hall, The Arena, The Mason Hall at 7th and Morris Sts. and The Olympia. If I couldn't go he would tell me all about it the next day.

He'd tell me "Eddie, this guy has a sensational left hook, or a sensational right. "Freddy always used the word "sensational" when describing something or someone he thought worthy of his respect. It was a favorite word of his.

He always enjoyed over emphasizing things. There was the day Freddy brought over a clipping from the sports section. It read " Al Coccozza Knocked Out In New York Bout." It wasn't Freddy, of course, but he was still very excited, proud and honored. Our Al Coccozza went around to all of our friends to show them his name in the papers, reporting that he had gotten "KNOCKED OUT." I mentioned this to Terry Robinson (Physical Instructor of Lanza's for MGM, also ex- fighter and friend of Mario's when they lived together in Hollywood) who related that once he had fought on a boxing card in Philly with a boxer named Al Coccozza. He mentioned this to Lanza when Mario told him that his real name was Alfred Arnold Coccozza.

Traveling with my youthful friend was always an adventure. I got a call from Freddy one day. He asked " Eddie, come and get me. I have to pick-up a set of weights." I borrowed my fathers car and we went to the back of a building at 15th and Arch Sts. Freddy said " Back up the car to that door and wait. I'll be right down."

When the door swung open Freddy was struggling with about 100 lbs. in weight plates which were dropped loudly into the trunk. I said "Do you need help?" He said " No...just wait here and I'll be right down." When I next saw Hercules he was lugging two 6ft. steel bars. Up he went again and came down carrying more weights, hundreds and hundreds of pounds in plates, dumbbells and bars. I said " Hey, Freddy, what are you doing to me?" The car can't hold this amount of weight." He said "Eddie, there are only a couple of hundred pounds to go and we'll be finished." After about his 10th trip it occurred to me that I was the dumbbell. When I saw him come out with a bench I screamed " STOP, NO MORE !" The whole car was filled with weights. The car was dragging as we drove away. I asked him who gave him the nice weight set ? He told me a friend from the YMCA had given them to him because they had purchased a new set. So, we brought the weights to his bedroom and started his weight lifting program. When I returned to my car I noticed that the heavy weights had broken both rear springs, which I had to repair before my father discovered it. I later learned that he took the weight set to Hollywood with him. Freddy always carried a lot of weight there.

It was Sunday December 7, 1941. Everyone of my generation remembers where they were on Pearl Harbor Day. I was with Freddy. We were at a club at 20th and Moore Sts. , on the second floor of a house, lifting weights and working out.

One of our members Gus DiPrimio (one of the strongest guys around who once picked up a horse) said "I feel great today. Put all of the weights in the house on the barbell and I'll lift them with my legs." We did and he lifted them with no problem. So I said " Hey Freddy, sit on the barbell and see if Gus can lift you and the weights too." Freddy (250 lbs.) sat on the bar and Gus let out a yell, lifting the whole works while Freddy laughed uproariously. Freddy liked to play practical jokes on the guys while they were lifting weights. He would flash a girly picture at just the right moment, making everyone laugh and drop the weights onto the floor. This also occurred while shooting pool with Freddy and the guys at the Sons of Italy at Broad and Moore Sts.

Our friend, Phil Sciscione, volunteered to teach Freddy how to lift weights properly without injuring himself. We'd drop by his house at 2219 McKean Street and Phil would conduct a private workout. Not one to take anything entirely seriously, Freddy gleefully whipped out the adult magazine once again and flashed it in Phil's direction. Phil, to his credit, tuned Freddy out and completed the "lift". I don't know how he did it.

Phil was a trained weightlifter and athlete. Freddy got himself into a " discussion" with Phil over who had superior boxing skills. It escalated into the scheduling of an actual match. When I heard this I feared for Freddy's safety. He was oblivious to the danger. I warned Freddy of the mismatch. I told him that Phil would "punch holes" in him.

Luckily Freddy finally got the message and backed off. Phil, being a friend, agreed to call off the one sided bout.

Freddy and I, like other guys, had our share of disagreements....like the time we held elections for president of the weightlifting club on McKean between 20 & 21st Streets. Freddy lost the election by one vote. Someone thought they could start trouble between Freddy and I by telling him that I was the person who did not vote for him. He confronted me and we had an argument, after which I told him that I had voted for him. I decided it was time to clear the air, and the ring seemed the best place to do it. I waited until we were at the shore. We went into the back of the Wildwood club where I was playing in a band that summer. I said " Freddy, let's box " and he agreed. As we boxed I stayed very close to him, never allowing him near enough to hit me with his right hand which packed quite a wallop. I continually hit him in the body, never in the face and would yell, in his Italian Abbruzzi dialect, "Da Li Botte, Freddy, Da Li Botte, Freddy ! " This translates "Come on Freddy, hit me. Keep it up." Finally he grew very tired and dropped to his knees . When at last he couldn't continue I knew I'd made my point. "Believe me, Coke," I said. " I voted for you." I helped him to his feet. Gasping for breath, he landed a sneak right hand to my jaw. "Eddie," he laughed, "I never doubted you for a second." What a way to make up.

Freddy made reference to this incident when he introduced me to Kathryn Grayson in 1949 at Palumbo's during his triumphant return as Mario Lanza. The world may have known him as a movie star but for Mario Lanza we were still trading punches at the Wildwood Club .

Freddy's only actual boxing experience as a boy, with my participation, was with James Calgiano. Through the years at Vare they continually argued over who was the superior fighter. Finally, in the spring of 1937, while we were at Southern High they asked me to find a secluded location in which they could settle their differences. I asked my friend Arthur Giansante for the use of his basement at 1625 Wolf Street. It was on a Sunday afternoon when Arthur agreed to loan us the use of his home. I had been training Freddy throughout the week. He worked out very hard. Finally Sunday came and we went down to the basement. Arthur and his brother Sam were present along with Ralph Spina, Nick Potere and myself. I served as the referee.

Unfortunately, no one could have foreseen the delivery of one ton of coal the day before, significantly reducing the size of the basement. Rather than reschedule, however, we decided to continue and make the best of the fight. Freddy and James put on the 16oz. gloves but remained in their street clothes. I still have those gloves. As the bout began Freddy was boxing beautifully, holding his hands high, jabbing effectively and blocking punches in just the way we trained.

As the "impartial" referee I was encouraging him. "That's it, Coke ," I said. " Your doing good. Jab, keep your right hand up, hit him!" Freddy stepped back into a pile of furnace coal behind him. Surprised, he lost his balance and started to fall backwards. He reached down to break his fall. I saw he was off balance and shouted " Hold it! " to have the bout stopped. Jimmy saw his opening and took advantage of it, landing a soft right to Freddy's chin. He sat down on the pile of coal. Freddy stood up again a moment later, unhurt but surprised that Jimmy had thrown the punch. I decided to terminate the fight. There simply wasn't enough room for the fighters to move around.

Of course, being kids, Jimmy bragged that he had floored Al Cocozza. Arthur, Sam, Ralph and I had to go around telling the true story.....that Freddy had been knocked down, not in the ring, but
BY THE RING !!

FREDDY AND FOOD

As young boys grow up it's a virtual certainty that great quantities of food will be consumed. Freddy was certainly no different than anyone else. There were eating contests going on all the time in South Philadelphia.

Whenever Freddy came to my home good food was there in abundance, and he ate abundantly. My mother always gave him as much as he wanted. He wanted a great deal. A typical breakfast for Freddy was 6 fried eggs, one whole loaf of Bond bread toasted with butter and one quart of milk. My mother and father always said, "God bless him , he has a good appetite." On the other hand my brother and sister were astounded by it. When he ate spaghetti and meatballs he swallowed the meatballs as easily as popping a pill. On days when my mother baked her famous pies, Freddy and the rest of the gang; Ralph Spina, Gus DiPrimio, Felix Dell'Angelo, and the Graziano twins would descend like bees upon our home and devour them.

Freddy rarely ate just one bowl of mom's delicious rice pudding. When Freddy was thirsty he'd drink a 16 ounce Pepsi Cola without even swallowing. He seemed to absorb it. He just poured it down his throat. The sound that followed was spectacular.

There was a young girl living across Mercy Street from Freddy. She loved to eat ice cream. During the hot summer nights they would walk to the corner store with a big spaghetti pot and have it filled to the brim with ice cream. Sitting excitedly on the step they'd consume the entire pot by themselves. It looked like more than two gallons of ice cream. It was hard to get close enough to see since they never shared a single scoop. Melted remains were seldom a challenge to Freddy. He'd simply drink the rest.

During one memorable dinner at my home and to the astonishment of everyone present, Freddy ate one full pound of cooked rice flavored with tomatoes and gravy. Yet, Freddy was always concerned about his weight. He'd tell me "Eddie, I gotta lose some weight " but he'd say this while we were just finishing a big meal. The weight loss never happened.

Freddy was a good hearted guy. Whenever we'd eat at either a local or New Jersey restaurant, whether alone or with a group, he would announce that the meal was his treat. Happily, we ate to our heart's content. Afterall, who had money in those days? I didn't have any money. Neither did my generous friend, Al Coke. Accordingly, after every meal Freddy would charm the waitress and the owner into accepting the famous Coccozza I.O.U. Freddy usually walked over and began talking to the owner. A couple of seconds later they'd be arm and arm, laughing and shaking hands.

Whenever this happened I knew we were home free. I always wondered what magical stories Freddy was creating in order to get our dinners for just an I.O.U. The owners always agreed to accept it. I never saw anything like it. He returned to those restaurants as Mario Lanza to settle up on the I.O.U.'s . However, no one ever accepted his offer. Having a famous star sitting in their restaurants was far better for business than collecting on an old and forgotten debt.

One day Freddy invited me to his home for dinner. He was 18 years old and we were looking forward to a great meal prepared by his mother, Mary. While we were walking he told me what his mother was preparing for the dinner. The more he talked the hungrier we became. Freddy, of course, proceeded to talk himself into an eating frenzy. When we entered the house we noticed a group of people sitting with his parents in the living room. They were friends of Freddy's father, Tony. Earl Denny, the famous Philadelphia bandleader, was there with his wife, as well as Johnny Varello, a musician friend. Earl Denny's pretty daughter was an added, if calculated, diversion. (Mr. Denny, had unsuccessfully attempted to tutor Freddy in Solfeggio. The sessions always ended with the lesson book flying across the dining room. Freddy, you see, had more pressing neighborhood appointments to keep.) Now, on occasion, friends of Freddy's parents would bring potential girl friends home for him to meet. Each visit was a virtual audition for young hopefuls wishing to date young Freddy, with the approval of his parents, of course.

After the obligatory hello's we sat patiently awaiting the next dramatic development. No one said a word. We simply stared at each other . After a couple of minutes the silence was broken by Johnny Varello who said "Alfredo, Parlate, Parlate!" which translates "Freddy, talk together, talk together." Freddy looked at her , smiled, and stood up saying "Io non voglio parlare, io voglio mangiare ! " meaning " I didn't come home to talk, I came home to EAT !! " Everyone laughed as we got up and went to the dinner table, devouring one of Mary's great meals. After dinner Freddy and Earl's daughter did finally " parlate " but I don't know that they ever went out on a date. Nothing but nothing could stop Freddy when he was hungry, not even a pretty girl. Freddy's greatest loves were food, his voice and girls. During our adolescent years Freddy had an intense desire for girls but he never had the desire to have a serious relationship with just one girl.

I ate dinner quite regularly at the Coccozza home. It was always like going to a nightclub show. Freddy was the emcee, comedian and headliner all rolled into one hilarious package. We'd be seated at the table; his mother and father, Freddy and myself. During the meal Freddy related the jokes he'd heard that day. Later he performed perfect impressions of the singers and stars of the period. His high register rendition of Bill Kenny and the Ink Spots singing " If I Didn't Care " was uncanny.

We were treated to appearances by Jimmy Durante, Louie Armstrong, Jimmy Cagney..... all at the Coccozza Dinner table. He'd have us laughing so hard we would choke on our food. He never seemed to know when to stop.

Freddy and I ate frequently at the home of our buddies', Tony and Carmen Graziano at 2951 South Broad St. (Carmen was a world famous manager of prize fighters.) Their mother cooked fabulous meals, all devoured with speed and assurance by Freddy. Spaghetti and meatballs, ravioli, brasciole, and pastries. All prepared with loving care by Mrs. Graziano. I can still hear her yelling at Freddy "Slow down Al , slow down ! " He usually replied "Don't worry, Mrs. Graziano, it tastes great. I'm enjoying myself."

Freddy's love of food continued to grow. While in the 11th grade we participated in a weiner eating contest at Jim's Greek restaurant at Broad and Snyder Ave. Ralph Spina, who was a champion eater, consumed 13 weiners and Lanza ate 12. After a few more contests, the weiner consummation count grew into the high 20's.

Ralph was a great friend of Freddy's. He was Freddy's greatest audience. Anything that Freddy did would send him into spasms of uncontrollable laughter. Even in class the teacher would have to pull Ralph out of the classroom when he began laughing. It got so bad that Freddy would actually have to watch his behavior in class to keep poor Ralph from being thrown out of the room.

Freddy and Ralph went on great eating binges often, which may have contributed to Ralph's early death from hypertension at the age of 32 in 1955. Mario sent a big floral arrangement to the funeral parlor the evening of Ralph's viewing with an inscription . It read :

" Ralph , I shall never forget you ! "

Mario Lanza

THE EATING FARM

Freddy and I always looked forward to spring when we'd travel to the Monetony Farm in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. This farm was owned by Mike Dell'Angelo, our friend Felix's father. I'd borrow my father's car for the day, pick up Freddy and pile as many guys as we could fit into the car. Romeo Di Jullio, Gus Di Primio, Ralph Spina, Sonny Barbo and Felix were usually included. We'd spend the day playing baseball with locals from the surrounding area. By the time we were finished we had ravenous appetites. This was really the reason for the trip, afterall. Not the game, but the food. Felix's mother, Minnie and Ralph's mother, Florence would cook the meal while we played. Homemade spaghetti, gravy and meatballs usually made up the menu.

We played only until we heard the dinner call. Then the spaghetti and meatball contest began. There was never any doubt that Freddy would win each contest. He ate and ate. On one occasion he consumed a huge turkey platter loaded with hot spaghetti,(about 2 pounds) 9 meatballs and a half pound of grated cheese dumped over the plate.

Everyone cheered him on and Freddy always won. He wore his crown well. He was truly a contented champion. The ride back to South Philly was always a very quiet one. We were too stuffed to speak. Like sheep being led to the slaughter this was the Silence Of The Lambs.

We ate countless dinners, sandwiches, hoagies and pizzas over the years at each other's homes and at such places as DePalma's, Victor's and restaurants in New Jersey. It was always a treat when Freddy spoke those immortal words.....

" Eddie , I'm hungry..... let's get something to eat. "

MR. AL ALCATRAZ

One day I got a call from Freddy. "Eddie," he begged, "Come and get me. My old man won't let me out." I heard him tell his father that he was going out with Eddie so his father said he could go. I came over with my father's car. When I arrived at his home at 2040 Mercy Street he was standing at the front door dressed in a black overcoat with the collar pulled up, wearing a black hat and twirling a big cigar in his mouth. When I saw that I knew we were playing "gangster." He said "Call me Al Alcatraz." I went back to the car, opened the passenger rear door and left it open. Walking to his front door I escorted Mr. Al Alcatraz to the back seat and closed the door. I got behind the wheel. Freddy took the cigar out of his mouth, waved it with a flourish and commanded me to "Pull Away." Off we went to the movies. He loved gangster movies and tough guy actors like Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable. The theatres we went to were mainly the Boyd, Broadway, Venice, and the President. Whenever we were in the movie house he always laughed louder than anyone else in the theatre. We performed this charade often. It demonstrated Freddy's acting ability to me and his ability to play convincing parts, so evident in his later years.

The Coccozza family was not without its share of tragedies. Freddy had an Uncle Vincent (nicknamed Scabby) Coccozza who had died at the age of thirty.

In Freddy's bedroom on Mercy St. he had a large oval picture of his uncle. Whenever he looked at it he'd say "Boy, My uncle Scabby was a great guy. He would do anything for me." I asked him what happened to his uncle. He simply said that he died the day before Memorial Day seven years earlier. So, I said that was a shame, left it at that and said no more about it. A few years later Freddy confided in me that when he was just six years old he actually witnessed his uncles untimely death.

On May 30th 1927 his uncle was standing in front of a South Philadelphia restaurant with two other men at 824 South 8th Street. Freddy took me there and showed me where Scabby was standing and where he had been observing his uncle just down the street at 8th and Christian Sts. He told me that a dark blue car drove around the corner of Catherine st. onto 8th street. Shots were fired from the car and men jumped out, shooting Scabby and his young friend. The third man dove and hid in the restaurant next door, escaping certain death. After the shootings the men got in the car and sped away. Freddy ran across the street and saw his uncle and the other man lying in blood, motionless, on the sidewalk. Little Freddy ran home to his Grandfather's store and told his family what had happened. His Uncle Scabby died that day. I know the violent act that he saw that day when a boy had a profound effect on him. Freddy missed Uncle Scabby. He'd always tell me about his uncle whenever we looked at that picture in his room.

FREDDY IN "WILD" WOOD

Salvatore Lanza owned a home in Wildwood, NJ. The house was located on Rio Grande Avenue. The upper story of the single home was an apartment which was rented to vacationers. The Lanza family lived in the bottom half. I stayed there on many occasions throughout the years. Freddy was there during the summers of his vacations. It was his vacation from South Philadelphia and South Philadelphia's vacation from him. Whatever constraints were placed on him by his parents at home fell away when he went down to Wildwood. The only problem confronting him was his inability to return home before 6 am.

I was present for many of the battles between Salvatore Lanza, his grandfather, and Freddy regarding that touchy subject. They would argue endlessly in the Italian Abruzzi dialect. His grandmother wisely stayed away from the front lines. The elder Lanza would question Freddy about his previous nights activities and then attempt to verify the story with me. The argument always ended with his grandfather threatening "Freddy, If you don't come home on time tonight I'm not gonna let you come down here next summer!" Freddy would always tell him "Nonno, (grandfather) I will definitely be home on time." Freddy would wink at me as his grandfather instructed me to bring him home early.

In the evenings on the patio there was always good food and conversation with Freddy's aunts and uncles, and of course the usual clowning and joking by Freddy. Freddy had constructed elaborate methods of sneaking out after his grandfather had gone to bed, and ways of returning to the house, undetected, after a full night of partying. After dinner Freddy would map out his plans to escape for the evening. On this particular night Freddy said "Eddie, here's the plan. We'll go up to bed a little after grandpop goes so that he sees us. We'll say goodnight to him. Then you go in your room and I'll go into mine. At about 12 midnight I'll come and wake you up. Don't forget to change your clothes so that when we come back in the morning he won't see yesterdays clothes on us."

I was asleep in the bedroom I shared with his uncle, Bob Lanza. Like clockwork, Freddy woke me up at 12. I got changed very quietly, trying not to wake Uncle Bob. We were almost out of the room when out of the darkness we heard Uncle Bob say "Have fun, boys." We said, "OK, Uncle Bob. " We walked softly out of the house (sometimes we'd just climb out of the bedroom window if we heard any activity in another bedroom) and headed for the boardwalk where we met the other guys and cruised up and down the "boards" all night.

Throughout the summers many of the guys from South Philly would come down to Wildwood to join in the parties. They included Nick Ragni, (who later became a dentist) the Graziano twins, Gus DiPrimio, Joe Siciliano (the former curator of the Mario Lanza Museum) Phil Sciscione, Jack DiMio, Johnny Lombardi, Bucky Morelli and many others.

Freddy and I would meet girls and talk them into joining us on the celebrated "Cocozza Under The Boardwalk Tour." As you can imagine he was a very successful tour guide. We did this until 6 or 7 am. most everynight. On the way back to the house Freddy would stop and buy his grandfather the early morning edition of the newspaper. This was a masterful touch. Sometimes when the paper was unavailable Freddy had to improvise. Usually in the mornings Grandpop would be puttering in the garden but on this day we didn't see him and thought he might have overslept or gone out. We walked into the house only to be confronted by his grandfather's accusations. " You were out again all night," he'd yell. " No we weren't, Nonno," Freddy countered. "We got up early and went for a walk. Look , we're even wearing different clothes than yesterday. I walked by your room and said good morning to you but you were still asleep. Here is your paper!" His grandfather, realizing that he had lost again, would just look down and shake his head very slowly, muttering "No, No, No." It was simply no contest. Freddy's Aunts and Uncles knew we were out all night but they never told on us.

We would sit down, eat a big breakfast and go back to the beach to try to get some rest. Our sleep was usually interrupted, however, by the bite of green head flies. Freddy solved the problem by paying local kids 25 cents each to quietly fan the flies off of us while we slept. After a nap we walked along the beach looking for girls while talking over his future. He had never considered a career in the movies at this point, only opera and the concert stages. Our conversations always led to how great a tenor he would one day become. " Everybody will know Mario Lanza," he'd say. I'd tell him " Freddy, you're going to have the biggest orchestras playing in the biggest opera houses all over the world for you." His chest would swell proudly and he would cry "You're right Eddie, I know its going to happen! " He had the conviction of a man destined for certain success. Greatness was to be his, of course, but we had no way of knowing how the movies would alter his course.

His confidence was evidenced when Freddy and I were walking down the street. We met someone who asked, curiously, what we did to earn money. I said "I'm a drummer." He asked Freddy what he did. He responded "I sing." The fellow then asked "Oh, Where do you sing?" Freddy smiled, patted the guy's shoulder and said, "Don't worry, you'll hear about me!"

On those hot summer days in Wildwood Freddy might suggest "Lets go to the Gables for a swim." The Gables were located between Wildwood and Cape May, New Jersey. It was a very secluded area of beach with high sand dunes and tall, thick grass.

We'd jump in the car and meet a bunch of guys. Some drove down from South Philly and a few were friends Freddy had met during his summers there. We'd run into the water and have a game of wet volleyball. When I spotted Freddy swimming out to deeper water I knew the show was about to begin. Freddy yelled excitedly for us to watch him. His bathing suit was pulled over his head. He danced in the water, laughing and twirling the blue trunks proudly in the air. Turning to face the ocean he performed the famous Al Coke dive into the water. Something white and bright caught the sunlight. When we realized it was Freddy's cheeks we damn near busted a gut laughing. As if that were not enough he'd come running out of the water in his birthday suit, holding fast to his bathing suit.

His antics surprised even me. One summer day Freddy and I were walking down the main street when we passed a clothing store. He looked in the window and saw a nice pair of slacks on sale. He said "Boy, I like those pants. I need a new pair. Let's go in." So we went into the store and Freddy got the salesman to find the pants he liked in his size. He took them and went into the dressing room, returning with the new slacks already on. He looked at himself in the mirror. I said "Freddy, that looks like a nice fit." He said "Yea, I like them. Let's go." I wondered what he meant by "Let's Go". I followed him to the counter to pay for the pants. He paid the salesman.

The salesman asked "Where's the new pants?" Freddy said "I'm wearing them." The salesman asked "Where's the pants you came in with?" Freddy said "They're in the dressing room. I don't need them anymore."

I laughed, ran back to the dressing room and saw the pants lying on the floor in a heap just where he had dropped and stepped out of them. I walked back to the counter and saw that Freddy had left the store. The salesman stood by the window shaking his head as I walked out onto the street to rejoin my unpredictable friend.

We were getting ready for the summer of 1940. I was always borrowing my fathers car. (I was three years older than Freddy. I lived in Italy for two years and started school late due to childhood illnesses) Since I had the only drivers license between us, it was getting to be a problem so Freddy and I put our money together and bought our "own" car, a 1930 Ford coup. I held the owners card. He was very excited that now we could go anywhere we wanted to. I landed a job for the summer in Wildwood, New Jersey playing drums at the Gingham club. Freddy found out when I was going to start and said that he wanted to drive the car down the shore. I could meet him the following week. I thought to myself the car is in my name, Freddy doesn't have a drivers license, he has very bad vision in his right eye and he's Freddy!

NO WAY !!

I created some emergency engine problems, putting the car out of working order and safe in South Philadelphia for that summer. Freddy was upset but it was for the best.

That summer I had my own apartment and did not have to stay at Freddy's Grandfather's home. During the day we'd go to the beach, chase girls, play volleyball, chase girls, walk the boardwalk, clown around and chase girls.

In the evening, while I was playing at the club, Freddy used my apartment if and when he found it necessary. He'd run onto the bandstand while I was playing and plead "Eddie, I need the keys to your place." "Can't you wait until I get off the stage?," I'd generally ask. With Freddy, of course, it was always "An Emergency." I figured he would be safe at my place and would give the keys to him while letting him know what time I'd be finished... just in case.

For fun, in the summer of 1941, Freddy took a "job" with Anthony Graziano driving a trolley, 2 blocks from the beach, on Pacific Avenue in Wildwood. Anthony was the motorman and Freddy was the conductor, in charge of collecting fares. This he did according to his own unique pricing system. Friends of Freddy and pretty girls rode for free. Riders who were not acquainted with the conductor gained access to the trolley the old fashioned way. They had to pay. I was riding the trolley one day when Freddy unexpectedly jumped off the car.

Two trollies needed to be navigated through a single switch and Freddy was eager to assist. While "help" was Freddy's middle name, the dictionary may have quarreled with his definition. Of course, I guessed what he was up to. He was guiding each motorman, "safely" inching them forward to an inevitable crash. Tony and I knew Freddy but the other motorman made a near fatal error in judgement....he trusted our fun loving friend. Luckily he realized his mistake in time to prevent a collision. We all laughed. It was one of many memorable experiences shared by Freddy and Tony on that old trolley.

This was to be our last summer at the shore. Things were somehow quieter after that. The fun, the innocence of our boyhood was gone. Life would never be the same again. Wherever I was in the years that followed I always knew that things went better with Coke.

FREDDY AND WORK

Our single objective as boys was to enjoy ourselves and have fun. Freddy did and said whatever came naturally. We were able to generate fun and mischief out of any situation. While Freddy remained conservative in some things, never drinking or smoking as a young man, he could be completely uninhibited in his day to day behavior. This frequently created moments of excitement and hilarity. Freddy always knew that one day he'd be famous and reminded me of it often. Until that happened he avoided the company of boring or depressing people and situations and directed his energies largely toward the fulfillment of his personal entertainment.

Freddy never really worked. He didn't have to because his mother worked long hours to support the family. Press releases regarding " The Singing Truck Driver from South Philadelphia " were more a figment of a publicist's imagination than a statement of fact.

His father was disabled from his war injuries and unable to work. Even when Freddy attempted to work it never lasted. Such a position was his short lived factory job with Ralph Spina in the fall of 1940 at the Baldwin Locomotive Co. near Chester Pa. His mind was simply on too many other things. Listening to his master's voice (Enrico Caruso) and taking his vocal lessons were too important to jeopardize by the triviality of working.

Freddy and I came home to Mercy Street one afternoon and sensed instantly that he was in trouble. His mother had grown very upset with him. He had ignored repeated requests to paint the metal grates covering the basement window in front of their house. Mary was holding a flower pot as she scolded him. "You know, Fred," she said, "You're not too big for me to break this flower pot on your head. I asked you to do this for me." Freddy grabbed the flower pot out of her hands and gave Mary a big hug, Laughing.... " Now Mom, you don't want to do that. I am going to make you and Pop so happy someday, you won't have to work or worry about painting anything."

I thought "Boy, can he act. " Of course, while Mary may have felt frustrated over his apparent laziness at the time, Freddy proved to be one of the few children whose promise of success really did come true. To his credit he kept his word and shared his prosperity with his family, as he always said he would.

EDDIE, COME AND GET ME OUT !

Here was a scenario that would be repeated during these years over and over again. I'd get a phone call from Freddy. " Eddie, come and get me. My old man won't let me out. " I'd say "Ok, I'll be over." When I'd get to his home I'd find his father, Tony, running through the usual questions.

"Where are you going, where are you going after that and where are you going after that and what time will you be back? " Freddy would usually tell him. He was always very respectful of his parents, but on this particular occasion, upset by all of the questions, he banged his fists on the table and refused to cooperate. Everything on the table jumped into the air. He yelled at his father to stop with all of the questions. His father calmly listened to the outburst and, noting that I was there, relaxed the interrogation saying " Oh, You're going out with Durso. Ok."

Whenever we went out Freddy would usually wear one of his favorite sport jackets. One of these was green and the other tan. He'd always ask me which one looked better on him. I told him I liked the tan one. So, he'd put on the green one and I would give him a good punch on the arm. He would stand in front of the mirror in his living room, comb his thick black hair, check out his ammunition, and we'd be on our way. If we walked down 20th Street and passed by Nick Petrella's record shop at 20th and Mercy Sts. (Nick was the President of the Mario Lanza Institute in Philadelphia) Freddy would say "Eddie, hold it! I have to talk to Nick for a second about a record. Wait here, I'll be right out." I knew he would be there for a while so I'd run across the street to our friend Ralph Spina's house. I'd watch through the front window for Freddy.

When he came out, usually 15 or 20 minutes later, we'd be on our way again looking for entertainment. Petrellas was a regular haunt for Freddy.

Freddy's parents never questioned where he was going when he was with me. They knew that I would deliver him home on time, in one piece and out of trouble. They thanked me whenever I took him out. Even after his death, whenever I saw his parents, they reminisced about our friendship. They were very protective of Freddy. They did everything for him and lived their lives solely for him. All of their dreams, they knew, would someday be fulfilled through their son.

FREDDY, HIS MUSIC AND THE OPERA

Freddy would often call me up and ask "Eddie, do you want to go to the opera at the Academy of Music?" I usually did and so we would catch a bus and go. We'd put our money together and purchase one ticket. Freddy would go in first. Some ten minutes later he would sneak out onto the fire escape on Locust St. and throw down the ticket stub to me. Then I would go in and climb to the upper balcony. During the opera I'd try to talk to him, but he appeared lost in a trance. He seemed to hang on every note. A couple of days later he would discuss what he had seen in great detail with my father in our living room.

I took him occasionally to Victor's Cafe, a restaurant in South Philadelphia that had an extensive collection of operatic records and was frequented by the greatest opera stars of the period when they appeared at the Academy. I remember taking him one cold snowy evening to Victor's because he just had to listen to a certain record. He was looking for a particular Caruso pressing that he couldn't find anywhere but at Victor's. He wanted that record for his own collection. Luckily, I located the record at my Uncle Nick's house and got it for him. It was "O Paradiso." He was overjoyed and couldn't thank me enough. My Uncle Nick always bragged that he gave "The Great" Mario Lanza that record.

FREDDY, DON'T DO IT

Rodolpho Pili, the conductor/director of the YMCA opera company at Broad and Pine Sts. was helping Freddy with his vocal studies. A short time passed when I noticed Freddy growing more and more disturbed whenever I'd ask how Pili was doing with him. One day Freddy said to me " That guy Pili, he's ruining my voice. His type of training is ruining my voice!" He soon exhausted his ready repertoire of Neopolitan curses and said " Eddie, he's taking away my most prized possession from me, my voice. I am going to take HIS most prized possession, his violin." I saw how upset and angry he was and figured we were in for a bumpy night.

Freddy asked me to come over to his house that evening so that we could pay Pili a visit. I thought I'd better go with him and try, somehow, to stop him from doing something he'd regret. The Maestro would most certainly regret it. Freddy found out where Mr. Pili lived and we went over to his house. We walked around to the alley, and saw a seven foot high wooden fence. Freddy said "Eddie, you wait at the end of the alley. If you see anybody heading toward the alley, whistle and I'll come back." As he climbed up the fence, I whistled. When he came back down I told him it was a false alarm. I did the same thing once more and told him a policeman had driven by.

On his third climb he nearly scaled the fence when I whistled for him to come back. I told him "Let's forget it." After three attempts he reluctantly agreed. Of course, no one was there when I whistled for him to come back. I just couldn't let him get caught on Mr. Pili's property. Even though we were only juveniles, getting caught there would have shocked Freddy's parents, not to mention Rudolpho Pili. These adolescent pranks aside, Freddy was very diligent with his music studies, and in particular his vocal lessons with vocal coach, Irene Williams. Whenever he had a lesson he would leave immediately at 12 noon, no matter what we were doing, and return two hours later. We usually gathered at the corner of 17th Street and Snyder Avenue. There we'd wait until lessons were finished.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH SIGNOR MARTINELLI

It was the Eleventh of January, 1938, a snowy Tuesday evening. Freddy called me up to see if I wanted to go to the opera with him to see "Otello" with the great tenor, Giovanni Martinelli and baritone Lawrence Tibbet. I told him I couldn't make it but suggested that he call Nicky Ragni, a mutual friend. The next day I saw Freddy and asked if he had gone. He said "We didn't see the opera but me and Nicky went to the back stage entrance of the Academy on Locust St. As the musicians and cast came out we went in. In all the confusion the guards missed us.

We found the dressing room belonging to Mr. Martinelli. I knocked on the door. "Who is it ?," Mr. Martinelli asked. I said "It is I" and for some reason he opened the door. So we went in. I told him "Signor Martinelli, your performance tonight was sensational." He thanked me. "But, there is a boy who is even greater than you." Martinelli was startled and said "Who is this boy ?" I said "Signor, don't worry about it now, but his name is Mario Lanza and you will hear about him." If it was anyone but Freddy I would not have believed him. The next day I ran into Nicky and asked him if that was what happened. He said, "Every word was true but the reason they hadn't seen the opera was that they had gone to the Troc instead, a renowned burlesque house, and arrived at the concert too late to catch the performance. Again Freddy amazed me. Here was a boy, not yet 17 years old, telling veteran tenor Giovanni Martinelli, then 52 years old, that he was a greater artist. In Freddy's mind he was the best.

Whenever I learned of an appearance by a famous tenor, either live at the Academy or on the radio, I made sure that Freddy became aware of it. His reactions usually provided me with an afternoon of laughter. He would come over to my house and we'd listen to the radio. Throughout each performance Freddy would point out every deficiency, while critiquing the offending tenor's intonation, diction, dynamics and style. He'd shout "That S.O.B. can't sing. He could never sing like

Enrico." He loved Caruso and always talked about him. He'd say " Caruso could do this, Caruso could do that. Caruso ! Caruso ! Caruso ! " He absolutely idolized Enrico Caruso. Demeaning the talents of other tenors of the day, he grew more confident of his own ability to make it in show business. Freddy wasn't bragging, you understand . He simply knew that his voice was better than any tenor alive.

On Wednesday evening April 1, 1942 Freddy, now 21 years old, performed in a pre - Easter themed concert at John Wanamakers Department store in Center City Philadelphia. It was my birthday and I had other things planned for that evening so I could not attend. My sister Terry, however, had to hear him sing. " My God, what a voice Freddy has!," she said upon her return home. "I have never heard anything like it ." I laughed and said " I know , when he was made they threw away the mold. He's really got it."

I'll never forget the excitement in Freddy's voice when he was given the scholarship to Tanglewood, Ma. in the summer of 1942. He said to me " Eddie this is the break I needed. I'll be studying with the great Maestro Koussevitsky." I said "Break has nothing to do with it. You've been lucky all of your life." "Eddie," he said, "It isn't luck. I just happened to be planted in the right place at the right time by the right person." Upon returning from Tanglewood we saw each other only once or twice before the U.S. Army got us.

When I finished my tour of duty playing in the U.S. Army Band and came home, people would come up to me in Wildwood and South Philadelphia and ask " Whatever happened to your friend, Coccozza? " I would answer "He's trying to make it as a singer and he's calling himself Mario Lanza." I'd usually paraphrase Freddy by adding "Don't worry you'll hear about him!" Freddy had moved on to the beginnings of his career.

LIFE GOES ON

I had not seen Freddy since I went into the army in the fall of 1942. I managed to keep in touch with his mother and father, while my sister Terry worked with Hilda Lanza (his mother's sister) as a medical technician. So, I was able to keep up with his experiences even though we couldn't communicate directly. I knew he was trying to make a career of his singing and that he was doing radio shows. What really excited me, however, was the news that he was going to make a movie.

On Friday Sept. 2, 1949 I was working in Wildwood, N.J. Tony Graziano was with me at the shore when we got a phone call from Philly telling us that Freddy was coming home for a visit. I said "Let's drive up and surprise him." When we arrived home we heard that he was going to attend a reception in his honor that night at Palumbo's Restaurant. I read in the papers that he was in town to promote his first film, "That Midnight Kiss," co-starring Kathryn Grayson. That included personal appearances at the very theatres we frequented as boys. Additionally he rode in an open car in the gigantic Labor Day Parade through Center City Philadelphia. When we arrived at Palumbo's we were shocked to see the entire area blocked off and jammed with people. We couldn't get in through the front entrance, so we went around to the side entrance, the very same door Freddy and I used to see the shows at Palumbo's when we were young.

Tony and I climbed up the stairs. When we got into the upper banquet room we saw Freddy. What a transformation! Freddy looked like a Hollywood star! He was finely dressed, slim, sporting a new hairstyle and looking like a leading man. We inched our way behind him and overheard his conversation. Even his speech was perfect, his diction proper and polished. It was a dramatic change from the youthful jargon of South Philadelphia.

Freddy finally saw me, and yelled "Eddie!" He hugged me and we shook hands. Now, when Freddy and I shook hands as boys we would test each other's strength by squeezing until our knuckles turned white. He would usually drop to one knee and give up. Jolson couldn't have done it better. This occasion was no exception but we didn't take it to its painful conclusion. I said "You look great." He introduced me excitedly to his wife Betty, Kathryn Grayson, Johnnie Johnston (her husband), his vocal coach Mr. Spadoni and his wife. "Betty, Kathryn and everybody, this is my great friend I told you about, Eddie Durso, Eddie I remember when you used to kick the... (bleep)... out of me!" I said it was a pleasure to meet everyone but I felt embarrassed especially in the presence of such distinguished company. What an introduction! On the other hand, he did speak with perfect eloquence. I asked "What did you say that for, Freddy?" There was a chorus of laughter. We talked about his career and family.

He said he couldn't believe how everything was coming together for him. Concerts, Movies, Radio Shows and Recordings for RCA Victor. "It is unbelievable," he laughed. " I'm recording for the same record company as Caruso."

He asked me to come to his hotel suite at the Ritz Carlton but I couldn't , I had to go back to my job at the shore. I saw his mother and father briefly before we left, and spoke of when the world was young.

When I finally saw him in "That Midnight Kiss" and heard that sensational voice on the screen it really hit me that here was a talent that came along only once in a lifetime. It was very hard to believe that my boyhood friend was appearing before me, larger than life, on a movie screen.

I think it was his innate sense of acting and comedic timing, combined with an uncanny confidence in his own astonishing vocal ability, that carried him from birth through the years in the spotlight.

Everyone has to grow up somewhere. Luckily for me, Mario Lanza grew up in South Philadelphia.



Mario before his makeover for MGM.
Still of Mario Lanza courtesy of
Turner Entertainment Company

PERSONAL LETTERS

FROM

MARY COCOZZA

Freddy and I saw little of each other in the turbulent years that followed. I was able to keep up with his exploits through the warm and lovely letters of his mother, Mary. Of the correspondence we exchanged only a handful of letters remain. These letters were written at the beginning of his meteoric career. They were, however, the threads that forever linked the Cocozzas to their roots in South Philadelphia.

12/4/49

Dear Eddie,

We are still in New Canaan Conn. and it's cold here with a good bit of snow.

Hope you and your family are in good health, as for us we are feeling much better I guess the rest here is doing us both a lot of good.

My husband and I thank you so much for the help you've given us, and we will never forget it.

Heard from Fred today. They baptized the baby today. He started on his next picture this week. Let me hear from you once in a while. We will leave here around the 20th. Give our regards to all, our best to you from us.

*Yours sincerely,
Mary Cocozza*

Mail from:

*M. Cocozza c/o Dr. J. Bucciarelli
Bx. 895 New Canaan, Conn.*

Feb. 27, 1950

Dear Eddie,

Sorry that I didn't write to you sooner, but it really wasn't my fault. I guess you found out through your sister about Tony, that he was operated on. I've been so busy going to the hospital and then to the doctor, that I just had enough time to write a few lines to my family.

We often think of you, don't think we forgot how wonderful you have been to us and we certainly appreciate it. My son is working very hard he goes out in the morning at 7 am. and gets home about 8 pm. He will be finished with this picture next week. Then he is going to Honolulu on a concert tour for a month. When he gets back he starts to work on the Life of Caruso. My daughter-in-law still has to thank you for the babies radio, she said she will write to you personally. The baby had lots of fun with that. Let us hear from you and tell us what your doing now. Give our regards to your family and our very best to you from us.

Your friend,

Mary Cocozza

P.S. Eddie don't hand this address to anyone as this is a private address only for the family.

Next week I will be living in my place and my address will be:

204 S. Crescent Drive

Beverly Hills , California

By private address I mean the one I have on the return of this letter :

M. Cocozza

810 N. Whittier Drive Beverly Hills , California

Calif. Oct. 18, 1950

Dear Eddie,

We haven't heard from you in a long time. How are you and what are you doing now. How is your mother and dad and sister? We are feeling pretty good thank God. Have you seen the Toast of N. Orleans yet? How did you like it? I guess you know that Fred is going to be a father for the second time. The baby will be born sometime next month. Eddie if you happen to be in my neighborhood where I was living, I would like a favor of you. You know Joe Siciliano the cop, well I don't know his address but his mother-in-law lives on 21st and McKean. I think her address is 2002 So. 21st. Will you go there and find out where he lives, so that you will go to his home and get an old photograph of myself when I was a baby. He has it, he was supposed to make a copy of it, but he told me it was too worn out. I'll appreciate it very much if you will send me that picture back. I hope I'm not putting you into too much trouble. And write to us once in a while we like to hear from you. Regards to the family from us.

Our best to you.

Sincerely,

Mary Cocozza

mailed from:

204 S. Crescent Drive
Beverly Hills , Calif.

Nov. 29, 1950

Dear Eddie,

Thank you so much for the picture you got back for me. I hope I didn't inconvenience you too much. We are happy to hear that you are doing well and hope that someday you will close by to California and be able to visit us. You can give our address to Joe Siciliano he is a fine boy and we like to hear from him. I am so glad you liked *The Toast of N. Orleans*. Did you hear him sing over the air two Sundays ago on the Hedda Hopper Show? He was great. Fred will be leaving for his concert tour in January and will be away about 3 months.

Betty didn't get her baby yet, but it will be any day now. Colleen is getting big and she is so smart, she catches on to things so fast! Eddie, I don't have any pictures of all of us right now but soon as I have any pictures of all of us I will send them to you. Lots of luck to you and thank you again for this favor you did for me.

Give our regards to your family and our very best to you.

Sincerely yours,
Mary Coccozza

mailed from:

204 S. Crescent Drive
Beverly Hills, Calif.

THE GREAT LANZA

On Tuesday evening March 13, 1951 Mario Lanza returned to his roots to give his first and only formal recital at the Academy of Music. The concert was completely sold out 6 months in advance. On the evening of the concert my father and I took our seats in the Academy Parquet Circle. The crowded hall was filled to capacity and beyond, seating some 3000 people in the auditorium, 400 people on stage and others crowded S.R.O. in the rear. Our anticipation built to a near fever pitch when the announcer introduced him at last. Mario walked out on stage with his accompanist Constantine Callinicos, each dressed in black tuxedo's. Women screamed, while men applauded. It was deafening. During this ovation Freddy spotted my father and I in the audience and said "Hi, Mr. Durso, Hi, Eddie." We waved back, of course.

As he stood on stage under the bright spot light he looked like a super star. My thoughts raced back to that day in my room when he predicted that he'd become "The greatest, sensational, dramatic tenor that ever lived." This was the peak of his career. Now just 30 years old, he already had 3 MGM movies under his belt and a million seller hit record. Once the audience settled down he began the program. He surely needed no amplification for his voice filled every corner of the Academy.

He was sensational. After the first six selections, ending with "Vesti la Giubba," my father nudged me and said "Tonight we are listening to one of the greatest voices in the world." I took his praise as gospel since he had heard all of the great tenors. Mr. Callinicos took over and displayed his virtuosity with 6 piano selections. In all Mario performed 14 selections that evening; a diverse program of arias, American ballads and Neopolitan songs.

I was thrilled to hear the great Lanza voice but also happy to see my buddy, Freddy, again. The audience was enthralled by his performance, screaming for more and more from their favorite son. He tried to end the program finally, but stayed for three encores, including "Be My Love." Astonishingly, after hours of singing, his encores were blessed with the same clarity and quality of voice as had graced the earlier selections. When Mario emerged from behind the curtains for his final bow we were near the stage. He motioned to me to come to his hotel suite the following day and I gave him the "OK" sign.

The next day I went to the front desk in the lobby of the Ritz Carlton Hotel, which was across the street from the Academy. I asked the attendant to ring Mario Lanza's room for me. Mario answered the phone. I said "Freddy, it's Eddie." He said "Come up!" So I went to the room.

We greeted each other and I said hello to Betty, his wife, Terry Robinson, his friend, and Sam Weiler, his manager. I told him how much we enjoyed the concert. "Boy, you're a real powerhouse, Freddy!" I said. He thanked me. Mario asked me if I would please stay and have lunch with them. I accepted. I noticed a very small quantity of food on Freddy's plate. I asked "Freddy, are you feeling alright? I've never seen so little food in front of you." Freddy said "Eddie, the studio wants me thin. They got me doing everything to keep my weight down. You know how much I could eat. It is very hard for me to control my appetite when I'm staying in the best hotels and the best food is available." We were all seated at the table when Sam Weiler asked me to talk about Mario's school days. I related some funny stories from our wilder days together. They all laughed, but Mario laughed the loudest. He said it was great that I remembered them so well. After lunch he discussed the tour with his manager and I talked with Betty about the children and Mario's mother and father. We discussed his tremendous hit recording of "Be My Love." Mario said "Eddie, it is such a thrill for me to watch people's faces when I hit High "C" at the end of the song. As the end nears people nudge each other saying "Here it comes, Here it Comes!" When I hit the note they go nuts." I asked Mario where he was going next and he told me he was catching the train to New York, but he still had a lot of engagements left on this tour.

I asked him about the lawsuit from Irene Williams an early vocal coach who was suing him for breach of contract. He told me " I had that all taken care of." I said it was a shame that it had to happen. He agreed and said " Things will be all straightened out." We talked a little bit more about old times. Then Sam said it was time to go and Mario asked me to come to the train station with him. He put on a black overcoat. At that point a detective from the Philadelphia Police Department came into the suite and asked me to carefully watch for anyone in the mob outside of the hotel who might approach Mario, (after all, this was the concert tour promoting "The Great Caruso", which was opening in May, and it was at the peak of his career. Crowds were a big problem) and if I did not recognize them to let the detective know right away. Many people I did not know tried to get to him. I alerted the detective and they were stopped. When we arrived at 30th Street Station we exchanged goodbys and I said that I wished him good luck. He said "If you were with me I would have better luck." I told him that if I ever got to California he'd be the reason for the trip. We shook hands. I said goodbye to his wife and associates as they boarded the train.

Other than phone calls now and then, that was the last time I saw him before his untimely death eight years later in 1959. He was a good friend and a great star but I was to play no part in his Hollywood career.



Mario and Betty Lanza
Picture taken during the Great Caruso Tour 1951.

MARIO WHO ?

I didn't see Mario in the ensuing years. Whenever Mary and Tony came back to Philadelphia for a visit they would call me and I'd pick them up either at the train station or at the home of Salvatore Lanza at 636 Christian Street. I would drive them to see Mary's sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Al Gagliardi, in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. Freddy's parents always told me how well he was doing in his career and usually let me know when things were not going so well. The few times Mario called me himself (1952 - 1957) he'd reminisce about the crazy things we had done together and how he missed those simple pleasures of life in South Philadelphia. In one conversation in the summer of 1954 he said that he had to get active again. "Eddie," he said, "if I don't sing nobody eats." He asked me to come and visit him in California and I sensed a subtle sadness in his voice. It was difficult, however, to leave Philadelphia with a young family in my care. I regretfully declined. I could only imagine the festivities he would have planned for me had I gone.

Throughout his professional career he suffered more than his share of media bashing. Sometimes, when the press had been particularly cruel, Freddy would phone home. He'd call me, the Graziano's, Nicky Ragni or any other Philadelphia gang members to talk. It wasn't that he wanted to complain. He simply needed to know that he still had friends. Whenever Freddy called one of us, that person would notify the others of the latest news from California.

After Mario and his family moved to Italy in May of 1957 I assumed he was finally breaking free of Hollywood and turning his energy toward the operatic stage, fulfilling his boyhood prophecy of becoming "the greatest, sensational, dramatic tenor that ever lived." I realized that was not to be when MGM released the "Seven Hills of Rome" and "For the First Time." The movies and money continued to beckon and he succumbed to their allure. Who wouldn't? During the years Freddy lived in Rome we did not correspond. Seeing him on the Ed Sullivan Show, in the movies and hearing his records it seemed to me that everything was going well in his life.

However, none of us could have foreseen the events that would shortly follow and devastate the musical world.

FINALE

The days of youth are numbered, passing all too quickly. Our days were shattered one unforgettable moment in 1959.

Everyone in the entertainment world was shocked by the sudden death of Mario Lanza. To his family and friends, however, it was a nightmare from which we could never awaken. I found out about it by reading the late edition newspaper the day following that fateful day, October 7th 1959. I was stunned when I read those terrible words in the paper while riding home from work. How could it be? He was a person who loved life and had boundless vitality. When I arrived home I broke the news to my family. My mother, who adored Freddy, couldn't believe it and wept like a baby. It was so hard to believe that he had suffered a heart attack at 38 years of age. After an hour or two our telephone began ringing off the hook. Throughout the evening, each of our gang called to console one another. All of the radio and television stations broadcast the news of his death. In the days that ensued we read of the plans for multiple funerals. There would be three funerals for him, one in Rome, the second in Philadelphia and a third in California. I thought it was a remarkable tribute to a beloved performer. Mario Lanza was loved by his fans the world over. I can't recall any other personality before or since receiving three separate funerals; neither presidents, nor kings.

The day I read the particulars of Mario's Philadelphia funeral I got a call from Leonetti's Funeral Home. The family of Mario Lanza had requested that I be a pallbearer at the funeral. I accepted, of course. I arrived at the viewing for Mario on Friday October 16, 1959 at 6 pm. It was held at Leonetti's Funeral Home at 2223 South Broad Street in South Philadelphia. I could not believe the throngs of people waiting outside Leonetti's. The line, 6 across and stretched around an entire city block comprised thousands of people waiting since 4 o'clock. I entered through the rear entrance into the viewing room and saw the ornately carved European style wood coffin. Honor guards were posted on each side, standing at attention. On the coffin was a picture of Mario, a loving remembrance of his once startling vitality. He was dressed in a dark brown suit, white shirt and a light brown and white tie. The lower half of his body was covered with the American flag. His body was protected by a plate glass covering, as well. I was shocked by his physical appearance. His face and neck were distorted and swollen. A tiny bit of blood protruded from the corner of his mouth. His dark wavy hair was combed high in a pompadour. How could the undertakers in Rome leave him in such condition? I realized why his picture was on the coffin. It was meant to eradicate the distorted vision laying before us. The coffin was entirely too small for his large frame. I had to turn away and try to recollect the friend I had known.

I greeted his grandfather, aunts and uncles. Mario's wife, children, mother and father were in California preparing for the funeral there. I stayed for about an hour, left and came back only to hear of the additional tragedies of the two woman who had collapsed after seeing Mario. One of the women died. There seemed no end to the procession of mourners. At 11 pm. the funeral home tried to close its doors but people waiting outside vehemently protested. Leonetti's was forced to stay open until 1 or 2 am., due largely to the pleas of Mario's fans and Mario's grandfather. I spoke with Mr. Leonetti, the funeral director, about the condition of Mario's body and the need for the sealed glass top. He said that the body had to be enclosed due to the fact that no embalming had been performed in Italy. Now, eight days after his death, the condition of his body had not held up. Thus, the need for the sealed glass casket. A police officer friend was on duty that night. He said that he had been on many funeral details but had never seen as huge an attendance for any public figure in the city's history. In fact, Mr. Leonetti told me that he had stopped hand clocking the attendance that night at 20,000 people. I returned to the funeral home Saturday morning at 8:30 am. The pallbearers, Freddy's boyhood friends, assembled in a side room. They were: Myself, Eddie and Ritchie Capone, Anthony and Carmen Graziano, Gus DiPrimio, Dr. Nicky Ragni, Phil Maiorano, Sal Musumeci and a Leonetti pallbearer.

Saying goodbye to our friend was a terrible task, a dreadful moment frozen in time and in pain. Freddy had grown larger than life itself. Now his magical voice had been stilled forever.

Mr. Leonetti instructed us to pick up the coffin from the bottom, rather than by its handles, since they would not support his weight and were strictly ornamental.

We carried the coffin out of the funeral home into the street filled with Mario's grieving fans. The 10 o'clock funeral Mass was conducted at Saint Mary Magdalen de-Pazzi Church at 714 Montrose Street, the very same church where Mario had been an altar boy, and had sung his famous rendition of "Ave Maria" to a stunned congregation on Christmas morning just 18 years earlier. The Mass was an overwhelming pageant of pomp and emotion. Soprano Lee Canamucio was accompanied by her sister, Theresa, at the organ. They performed beautifully. Had the playing of Mario's religious recordings been permitted during the ceremony it would have been just too much to bear. After the Mass we carried the heavy coffin down the steep front steps of the church. As we descended to the street we heard the recorded voice of our departed friend singing a beautiful aria. We knew that, although Freddy was physically gone, his voice would eternally be within our grasp.

We placed the casket into the hearse and returned to Leonetti's. It was the last time that Mario's pals would ever congregate to reminisce about the boy we knew as Freddy. Mr Leonetti, realizing how close we had been to Mario, asked Gus DiPrimio and I if we'd like to accompany him on Sunday to the airport when he delivered Mario's remains for the flight to California. How could we turn him down ?

On Sunday October 18, we returned to the funeral home and met with Mr. Leonetti. He told us that he had never had a celebrity of Lanza's stature viewed in his funeral home. He was afraid to leave the body alone, so he slept in the hearse with a gun in order to protect it against any potential mischief. Tampering with celebrity corpses was prevalent at that time.

We left the undertakers and drove to the airport. Gus, my sons John, Frank and I were present, along with a few airport attendants. We placed our friend's casket on the conveyor belt and watched it roll onto the plane. As we walked back to our car Gus recalled that day so very long ago when he lifted Freddy on the barbell at the gym. How Freddy had roared with laughter.

As we watched the plane take off, the car radio was playing. Freddy was singing "I'll Walk with God." At that moment we turned and looked at each other through a mist of tears. Freddy was, we knew, walking with God.

Thirty-eight years later I still miss him .



Mario lies in state
Leonetti's Funeral Home
Friday, October 16, 1959

STEVE VERTLIEB

A seasoned journalist, lecturer, poet and broadcast professional, Steve Vertlieb has been writing about motion picture and entertainment history since 1967. His observations and commentaries have appeared in Home Viewer Magazine, L'Incroyable Cinema, Cinemacabre, Midnight Marquee and The Late Show while his scholarly series on the production of the 1933 film King Kong led off the popular Avon Books' anthology, The Girl in the Hairy Paw, selling twenty five thousand copies. His poetry has appeared in a wide range of books, journals and magazines, and his articles on symphonic music written for the screen have become a regular feature of a colorful Maryland film magazine. The author has appeared on numerous television and radio programs and has lectured at the prestigious Philadelphia Museum of Art. He is the recipient of M.A.F.C's "Best Writer of the Year" statuette. Steve worked for fourteen years in Philadelphia broadcasting as an editor, cameraman, floor director and announcer for a major independent television station, while serving additional duty as Assistant Music Director, announcer and newsman for a well known radio station. He has served as programming consultant for ABC Radio, appeared in voice-overs for a motion picture and been profiled annually in Who's Who in Entertainment in America. Actively engaged in volunteer efforts for the blind and spiritual communities, Vertlieb was presented with the internationally recognized Legion of Honor by the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in 1982 for his commitment to charitable endeavors.

BILL LEVERS

In 1984 noted local artist Bill Levers stumbled upon a volume on Photo Realism. That book was to be the beginning of his major artistic thrust. Indeed, these Photo Realism endeavors have begun earning Bill world wide recognition. By enhancing colors, adding subtle nuances of reflected light and patterns of shade, he brings his paintings vividly to life...to become, if you will, a window to the world. During the past two decades many have, indeed, peered through Levers' window to the world. Bill has won Honorable Mention at the Center for the Arts in South Jersey in 1992, been awarded First Place one year earlier for his oil painting, Fixens, and again placed First in 1990 for a work entitled Trolley at 12th Street in an open juried exhibition. Additionally his work has seen exhibition at the Camden County Cultural Commission in Cherry Hill, New Jersey; the Jun Gallery in Philadelphia, Pa; Sante Fe East in Moorestown, New Jersey; the Beach Gallery on the boardwalk in Ocean City, New Jersey and in the similarly named galleries at the Shore Mall in Pleasantville, New Jersey. His celebrity clientele includes the Governor of New Jersey, Jim Florio, "Night Court" star Harry Anderson, Neil Diamond, Merv Griffin, Ann and Lex DuPont, Julius Irving, Willard Scott and the Coca Cola Corporation (selling eight oil paintings to their corporate art collection.) Most recently Philadelphia Mayor, Ed Rendell, commissioned a limited edition print from Levers entitled City Hall of Philadelphia. Prints will be presented by the newly elected mayor to visiting dignitaries as their official gift from the City of Brotherly Love.

SOCIETIES , NEWSLETTERS AND FAN CLUBS

Mario Lanza Web Site
www.sightings.com

The British Mario Lanza Society
Golden Days (newsletter)
Paul Velda, Chairman
18 Langley Croft
Tile Hill
Coventry CV4 9RE (ENGLAND)

Mario Lanza Institute and Museum
Mary Papola, President
416 Queen Street
Philadelphia, PA 19147

U.S Mario Lanza Appreciation Society
Serenade (newsletter)
Robert Trumpler, President
734 Line Avenue
Langhorne, PA 19047-5925

Australian Mario Lanza Fan Club
Be My Love (Newsletter)
Mr. Stephen Cutler, President
20 Lagonda Drive
Ingleburn, NSW 2565 (AUSTRALIA)

Deutscher Mario Lanza Club
Mrs. Susanne Klee, President
Isselburger Str.6
D-50733 Koln (GERMANY) (W)

Friends of Mario Lanza
Ms Angela Moore, Secretary
16, Almond Close,
Barby,
Rugby, CV23 8TL (ENGLAND)

International Mario Lanza Music Society
Ms. Michelle Short, President
3430 Jasmine Avenue
Apt. 102
Los Angeles, CA 90034-3864

The Lanza Legend International Newsletter
Damon Lanza, President
P.O. Box 6742
San Pedro, CA 90732

Mario Lanza Benelux Society
Mario Lanza Belelux Society (newsletter)
Mr. Cees Kouwenberg, Secretary
Rostandzijde 24
2725 NK Zoetermeer HOLLAND (NEDERLAND)

Mario Lanza Fan Club Italiano
Mario! (newsletter)
Gigi Viciani, President
Via Italia 61, N.7
Ed Uniti (PV)
27010 S. Genesis (ITALY)

Society of Mario Lanza Admirers In Russia
Dr. Sergey Agapitov, Founder
143400 Moscow Region
Krasnogorsk, P.O. Box 45 (RUSSIA)



Mario Lanza makeover
Courtesy of Turner Entertainment



Grandmom Lanza, Mario and Eddie Durso
Wednesday, March 14, 1951
Photo courtesy of Joe Siciliano



John, Eddie and Steve Vertlieb