



HE WOMAN RESPONSIBLE FOR MUCH of America's pop music soundtrack in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with such hits as "Stupid Cupid" and "Where the Boys Are," is in her dressing room amid a throng of admirers, talking, signing autographs, and posing for pictures. She has just gotten offstage after giving a performance of old favorites at Resorts Atlantic City. Sitting on a small couch, she relaxes with legs crossed, revealing a thigh-high slit in the black skirt that she's matched with a low-cut sparkling top and large diamond earrings. With full, wellstyled hair and heavy stage make-up, she looks every bit the diva. But her actions are genuine as she embraces fans, some of

whom have come from as far away as Europe. A few hand her teddy bears, others recordings of Bobby Darin, another a large straw hat, and many wave photographs and pens. She'll see every one of them before she leaves town, even promising to meet a group of fans who have been attending her shows since 1985 for breakfast the next morning. Why does she go out of her way like this? "I appreciate them appreciating me," she says.

A few months later, Francis is taking a break from her busy schedule; between touring and television appearances, she's writing a screenplay of her life story with singer Gloria Estefan, who will play her, and fitting in a few interviews. "I think it should be great," she says about the movie. For sure, the stuff of a great tale is there: A talented, Italian-American singer/accordionist from New Jersey becomes a world-renowned, best-selling performer.

GROWING UP WITH A MUSIC-LOVING FAMILY IN a working-class neighborhood in Newark, Francis developed an early feeling for song. Friends and neighbors often spent evenings on their stoops singing Neapolitan melodies, accompanying themselves on mandolins or accordions. "It was a great childhood. We didn't have any money, but it didn't matter," she says. When her father, George, whom Francis describes as domineering, recognized her talent, he saw to it that his little girl had

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everything she needed to succeed, including an accordion, lessons, and trips to New York City. He later ran her record-production company.

At four, Concetta Maria Franconero later changed to Connie Francis by Arthur Godfrey when she appeared on his show

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at twelve-gave her first concert at Olympic Amusement Park in Irvington. Lugging an instrument almost as big as she was, she gleefully let go of her mother, Ida's, hand to climb onto the stage to sing "Anchors Aweigh." She continued to play church functions, hospitals—Halloran Veterans in East Orange was a favoriteand parties, "anyplace that would listen to a little, fat Italian kid play the accordion," she says. Considering how unusual a life this must have been for a little girl, I ask whether she had felt odd compared with other children. "No, I felt better among other children," she says. "I felt I had something more than they had and that it was a gift." Without a doubt, she's never taken her gift for granted, recording a noteworthy 50 albums for MGM during the 1960s and triumphing over tragedyrape in 1974, her brother's murder in 1981, a botched nasal surgery that temporarily ended her concert career, four failed marriages, a nervous breakdown, and an ongoing suit against her record label for its using her music in films Francis deems offensive. Something her mother, now deceased, said to her years ago accurately reflects the woman on the other end of the telephone today: "Your life is God's present to you. What you do with that life is your present to God."

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CREATIVELY AND ACADEMICALLY, FRANCIS flourished in Newark and Belleville. At Bergen Street Grammar School she had a teacher "who made a tremendous contribution to my life." Always eager to sing new songs, the gutsy third-grader asked the teacher if the class could sing "America the Beautiful" instead of "The Star Spangled Banner," believing the former to be a better song. Agreeing, the teacher stood behind the young Francis as she sang, and when she finished, told her she had the most beautiful voice she had ever heard. Soon enough, she attended Arts High School in Newark, which had a rigorous music curriculum that prepared her for professional studio work. Though

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she enjoyed it, she yearned for a more traditional high school experience, and transferring to Belleville High School after her sophomore year provided just that. "I loved all the extracurricular activities, the cheerleading team, the glee club, dramatics club, the debating club," she says. Francis went on to New York University on a scholarship, but her short stint in Greenwich Village—she studied screenwriting for six months—didn't prepare her for the wild ride to come.

When she met Bobby Darin and his friends one day at her manager's office in New York City, she didn't fit in, feeling "so Belleville, New Jersey." "They were so hip," she laughs, "I mean, just his opening line: 'Are you looking for a hit?' I said, 'I'm dying for a hit.' He said, 'I dig.' And I said, 'For what company?' " She fell in love with him, but her father crushed the romance after a year and a half by brandishing a gun at Darin in the studio. "[My father] did a terrible thing. It's something

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Yet despite his overprotective nature, her father knew how to pick pop hits. He chose, among others, her most crucial one, the first-"Who's Sorry Now?" which she didn't want to record-after nine flops. Oddly enough, muses Francis, her success never threatened her father. "I was so family-oriented," she says. "When I started making big money, when I was 19, I did not move into an apartment in New York. I lived with my parents until I was 28 years old. My family always came first." After that, Francis moved around the area, settling for several years in Essex Fells. After her father died in 1996, she moved to Florida for its warmer climate.

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LONG BEFORE HEADING SOUTH, SHE MARRIED four times without much luck, practically living out the songs of heartbreak that made her famous. Her first two husbands-one an alleged wife-beater, the other a drunk-were from Las Vegas, and each marriage lasted less than a year. Her third marriage, to a successful businessman with whom she adopted her son, Joey, fell apart after eight years when she fell into a depression after mishandled nasal surgery. Her fourth marriage, to a Hollywood producer, lasted 81 days. It's unlikely she'll marry again. "Now, what do I need—a plane to hit me in the head to let me know it's all wrong for me?" she

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says. "I break out in a cold sweat when I pass a bridal shop."

Truly, no one could accuse Connie Francis of living an unexamined life. She has an enormous capacity for self-scrutiny that is surprising for a pop icon who

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helped define the decade of conformity, the adorable, petite brunette who followed the boys but never got in trouble. Her hard-earned wisdom comes from tough life experience, motherhood, books, and therapy. She has weekly phone sessions with a psychiatrist in Glen Ridge, whom she consults, she says, "any time that something's bothering me or when I need counseling."

When asked for her impressions of the Garden State today, she immediately mentions her hometown, which she visits every trip home. "I'm glad for the changes Newark's been making," says Francis. "The Ironbound section, where I come from—all the Portuguese people moved in there and refurbished their houses. It looks like a beautiful place to live. I love the Spanish and Italian restaurants. I love walking down Ferry Street and seeing the little stands."

After all these years, Connie Francis is still the wholesome, down-to-earth Jersey Girl who sang about first love and, from her parents' house on Belmont Avenue, dreamed of stardom.

Elizabeth Primamore wrote about David Chase in April 2002.