



Mario Lanza: A Biographical Timeline by Derek McGovern

1921: Alfred Arnold Coccozza is born in South Philadelphia on January 31st to Italian immigrants Antonio Coccozza (1894-1975) and Maria Lanza Coccozza (1902-1970). Alfred becomes known to his family and friends as "Freddie".

1928: By the age of seven, Freddie's interest in operatic voices is already apparent; on one occasion, he famously plays Caruso's recording of *Cielo e Mar* 27 times – to the delight of his opera-loving father.

1933: At the age of 12, Freddie attends his first opera (Verdi's *Aida*), and is entranced by the experience.

1937: Freddie declares to his startled parents that he intends to become a professional singer. The elder Coccozzas seek the opinion of retired baritone Antonio Scarduzzo regarding their son's potential. Scarduzzo is greatly impressed by what he hears and recommends that the 16-year-old Freddie begin studying *solfeggio* (sight-reading) and Italian. Freddie subsequently fails at the former, but excels at the latter. Around this time, he also receives some coaching from Rodolfo Pili, head of the musical curriculum of the YMCA Opera Company. Pili subsequently casts him in a number of operatic productions with this company, including the seldom-heard *Crispino e la Comare* (1850) by Frederico and Luigi Ricci.

1940: At the age of 19, Freddie makes a series of private recordings for his parents. These reveal an impressive, natural *lirico spinto* tenor voice.

1940: He begins repertoire study with the former soprano Irene Williams. Over the next 18 months, he learns two operatic roles and 20 songs.

1942: Freddie auditions for Dr. Serge Koussevitzky, famed conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Koussevitzky immediately awards him a scholarship to study at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Here, he studies with conductors Leonard Bernstein, Lukas Foss, and Boris Goldovsky, and, with Koussevitzky's encouragement, begins using the name "Mario Lanza" – the masculine version of his mother's maiden name.

1942: At Tanglewood on August 7th, Lanza makes his operatic debut, singing the part of Fenton in Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Reviewing the performance, Noel Straus, music critic of *The New York Times*, writes that Lanza's "superb natural voice has few equals among tenors of the day in quality, warmth, and power." Lanza sings Fenton again on August 13th, and also appears as Rodolfo in a specially staged presentation of Act III of Puccini's *La Bohème* with Irma Gonzalez and James Pease.

- 1942:** Lanza sings in concert in Union City, New Jersey.
- 1942:** Lanza receives notice from the Philadelphia Draft Board that he must report for a medical examination in preparation for induction into the Army.
- 1943:** He begins army training in Miami, and later in Marfa, Texas.
- 1943:** Lanza auditions for entertainer Peter Lind Hayes, who is looking for suitable talent to appear in an army air force show entitled *On the Beam* by Frank Loesser. Lanza is accepted and tours with the show. He later appears on Broadway and elsewhere in the chorus of Moss Hart's *Winged Victory*.
- 1944:** Lanza meets and begins dating Betty Hicks, the sister of army friend and *Winged Victory* performer Bert Hicks.
- 1945:** RCA signs Lanza to an exclusive recording contract with its prestigious Red Seal division, paying him an unprecedented bonus of \$3000 as an incentive.
- 1945:** Lanza is discharged from the Army and marries Betty Hicks.
- 1945:** Basing himself in New York, Lanza resumes his fledgling singing career, working closely with conductor Peter Herman Adler and commencing vocal studies with coach Polly Robinson. He also makes his first test recordings for RCA. At the instigation of his friend the Metropolitan Opera baritone Robert Weede, Lanza is hired as a temporary replacement for tenor Jan Peerce on the live radio series *Great Moments in Music*.
- 1946:** Lanza appoints realtor Sam Weiler as his manager. Weiler also acts as Lanza's sponsor, paying him a weekly allowance and paying off his already considerable debts.
- 1946:** Lanza begins 15 months of intensive vocal study with famed teacher Enrico Rosati, one-time coach to tenor Beniamino Gigli. He also performs the occasional concert, including one with soprano Frances Yeend at Chicago's Grant Park in front of an audience of 25,000, receiving excellent reviews for his singing from such respected critics as Claudia Cassidy of the *Chicago Herald Tribune*.
- 1947:** His studies with Rosati completed, Lanza returns to regular live performing. He meets pianist Constantine Callinicos in April when the latter is assigned to accompany him at a concert in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. Callinicos goes on to become his principal conductor and accompanist.
- 1947:** Lanza embarks on an 86-concert tour across the United States and also in Canada and Mexico with Frances Yeend and bass-baritone George London. The three singers are promoted as the Bel Canto Trio, and receive glowing reviews for their efforts. Their regular program is a demanding one, and includes duets and trios from such operas as Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Verdi's *I Lombardi*, and Gounod's *Faust*.
- 1947:** Lanza appears at the Hollywood Bowl, substituting for tenor Ferruccio Tagliavini. His singing (together with that of Frances Yeend, who joins him on three duets) receives standing ovations from an audience that includes MGM studio mogul Louis B. Mayer. Several days later, Lanza is invited to the MGM studios and offered a lucrative seven-year movie contract. Enticed by generous conditions that will supposedly commit him to the studio for only six months of each year, Lanza – on the advice of his manager – signs a seven-year contract with MGM. Filming of his first motion picture will begin later the following year.

1948: Continuing with the Bel Canto Trio tour, Lanza also makes his professional operatic debut. On April 8th and 10th, he appears in the role of Pinkerton in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* with the New Orleans Opera Association. Music critic Laurence Odel, writing in the *St. Louis News*, hails Lanza as a "superbly romantic leading tenor" with an "exceptionally beautiful voice".

1948: Lanza makes a second appearance at the Hollywood Bowl. He sings Bizet's *Agnus Dei* and Puccini's *Nessun Dorma*, and is also accompanied in two duets by Kathryn Grayson.

1948: Lanza begins work on his first film, subsequently released as *That Midnight Kiss*, with Kathryn Grayson. His vocal preparation for the movie brings him into contact with Giacomo Spadoni, one-time coach to Enrico Caruso and former chorus master at the Metropolitan Opera. Lanza enjoys an immediate rapport with the much-respected Spadoni, and the two men go on to work closely together over the next eight and a half years.

1948: Betty Lanza gives birth to the couple's first child, Colleen.

1949: With filming of *That Midnight Kiss* completed, Lanza embarks on a recital tour across the United States with accompanist Constantine Callinicos, and also performs in concert with the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra and with the Marshall Field and Company Choral Society. In August, he makes his third and final appearance at the Hollywood Bowl, singing *Celeste Aida* and (with soprano Mary Jane Smith) *E' il Sol dell'Anima* – together with the *Addio, Addio* – from *Rigoletto*.

1949: On May 5th, Lanza makes his first commercial recordings for RCA. One of the four selections he sings that day – *Che Gelida Manina* from Puccini's *La Bohème* – is subsequently voted Operatic Recording of the Year by the National Record Critics Association of America.

1949: *That Midnight Kiss* is released and becomes a solid box-office success. Lanza begins work on his second film, *The Toast of New Orleans* – again with Kathryn Grayson as his co-star.

1950: Lanza turns down offers from Victor De Sabata of La Scala and Gaetano Merola of the San Francisco Opera to sing the role of *Andrea Chénier* at their respective opera houses.

1950: Filming on *The Toast of New Orleans* completed, Lanza travels to Hawaii and performs three concerts there.

1950: Lanza makes a number of operatic recordings for RCA, including memorable renditions of arias from *Andrea Chénier* and *Tosca*. Eight of his renditions – drawn from three sessions in May – although not actual soundtrack recordings, later form the basis of his "official" *Great Caruso* album. The album subsequently becomes the first and only all-operatic album by any artist to reach the Number 1 position on the popular charts. In June, Lanza also records his first million-selling single, *Be My Love*.

1950: Working closely with conductor Peter Herman Adler and a number of singers from the Metropolitan Opera, Lanza records the vocal selections for *The Great Caruso*. Filming begins shortly afterwards, and is completed that same year. *The Toast of New Orleans* is released in September, and becomes a box-office success.

1950: Betty Lanza gives birth to the couple's second child, Ellisa.

1951: Lanza records his second million-selling single, *The Loveliest Night of the Year*.

1951: In anticipation of the release of *The Great Caruso*, Lanza embarks on a sell-out concert tour across the United States. Important venues include Philadelphia's Academy of Music.

1951: *The Great Caruso* is released to enormous box-office success.

1951: The Mario Lanza Show, a weekly radio program sponsored by the Coca-Cola Corporation, begins on June 6th. Over the next 11 months, Lanza records 156 songs and arias for the show.

1951: Lanza appears on the cover of the August 6th edition of *Time* magazine. However, the anonymously penned article, entitled "Million Dollar Voice," is highly critical of the tenor.

1951: With considerable reluctance, Lanza begins work on his fourth film, *Because You're Mine*. He dislikes the script and regards it as an unworthy successor to *The Great Caruso*. Lanza's weight varies drastically in the movie from scene to scene as a result of crash-dieting undertaken during filming.

1952: *Because You're Mine* is released and is a solid box-office success. To Lanza's amazement, in the United Kingdom it is chosen as the first Royal Command Performance film of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II.

1952: Lanza records his third million-selling single, *Because You're Mine*.

1952: After discovering that he is in debt to the IRS for the amount of \$250,000 in back taxes, and that Sam Weiler has made some dubious financial investments on his behalf, Lanza dismisses his manager. He subsequently sues Weiler, and an out-of-court settlement is reached two years later.

1952: Lanza records the vocal selections for his next scheduled film, *The Student Prince*. He is splendid voice at the recording sessions and produces some of the best singing of his career. Highlights include *Serenade*, *Drink! Drink! Drink!*, and *I'll Walk With God*. However, after disagreements with director Curtis Bernhardt and MGM Studio Head Dore Schary, Lanza walks off the set and is eventually suspended by MGM.

1952: MGM sues Lanza, imposing an injunction against him that prevents him from making any recordings or performing in public until the original period of his film contract ends in 1954. As a result, Lanza's radio show is terminated in September.

1952: Betty Lanza gives birth to their third child, Damon.

1953: An agreement is reached with MGM under which Lanza allows the studio to use his pre-recordings for *The Student Prince* in return for the dropping of the studio's lawsuit against him. He also agrees to re-record one song, *Beloved*, for the film.

1953: Lanza makes his first RCA recordings in 10 months, singing four numbers. These include an outstanding rendition of *Song of India*.

1953: Still in financial difficulties, Lanza increasingly seeks refuge in alcohol. At this stage, he becomes a virtual recluse.

1954: Lanza appoints a new manager, furrier Al Teitelbaum.

1954: Betty Lanza gives birth to their fourth child, Marc.

1954: MGM releases *The Student Prince*, starring Ann Blyth and Edmund Purdom – the latter lip-synching to Lanza's recordings. While the film is only moderately successful at the box

office, the RCA soundtrack album reaches number 1 on Billboard's pop album charts in August, remaining on the charts for 151 weeks, including 42 weeks in the number 1 position.

1954: Lanza agrees to perform on a CBS television show sponsored by the Chrysler Corporation entitled *Shower of Stars*. He appears on the show on September 30, but chooses only to lip-synch to old recordings. The press condemn his decision, with some journalists implying that he has lost his voice.

1954: Four weeks later, Lanza returns to the *Shower of Stars*, on this occasion singing live. He receives a glowing review for his efforts from top music critic and former tenor Max De Schauensee of the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*.

1954: Lanza signs a contract with Warner Bros. to make the film *Serenade*, an adaptation of the James M. Cain novel of the same name.

1955: While preparing for the vocal selections in *Serenade*, Lanza agrees to sing at the New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. His subsequent non-appearance at the New Frontier brings him devastating publicity.

1955: Lanza begins recording the selections for *Serenade*. Among the items recorded are outstanding renditions of the arias O Paradiso, Di Rigori Armato, Amor Ti Vieta, and the *Otello* Monologue. Lanza subsequently records the Act III duet from *Otello* (Dio Ti Giocondi) with Metropolitan Opera soprano Licia Albanese; a small portion of this recording is later included in the movie.

1955: Filming of *Serenade* takes place in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and in Los Angeles. Lanza's co-stars are Sarita Montiel, Joan Fontaine, and Vincent Price.

1956: *Serenade* is released, but despite its strong musical content fails to record a profit.

1956: Al Teitelbaum is convicted of fraud after faking a robbery in his fur shop. He later serves one year in jail.

1956: Lanza records his worst album, *Lanza on Broadway*, over three sessions in May.

1956: Lanza returns to the recording studios in August to begin work on his next album, *A Cavalcade of Show Tunes*. His singing on this occasion marks a major return to vocal form.

1957: Together with his wife and children, Lanza moves to Rome, Italy, where he begins making his sixth film, *Seven Hills of Rome* (Italian title: *Arrivederci, Roma*). He will not return to the United States. The Lanza family move into the palatial Villa Badoglio in Rome.

1957: Filming of *Seven Hills of Rome* completed, Lanza and wife Betty are interviewed in the Vatican for a television program made by The Christophers, a religious organization. He sings three songs live.

1957: Lanza travels to London in November for a Royal Command Performance at the London Palladium. He sings one aria and two songs, and receives excellent reviews from the popular press. Eight days later, he sings the same program on the televised Sunday Night at the London Palladium.

1958: Lanza embarks on his final concert tour – his first in seven years – performing a total of 22 recitals. The tour takes him to England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany, and includes two recitals at London's Royal Albert Hall. Although

Lanza is well received by the critics, the tour is marked by frequent cancellations and bouts of illness, including a severe case of phlebitis. A furore erupts in Hamburg in April after Lanza fails to sing there for the second consecutive time.

1958: *Seven Hills of Rome* is released and performs well at the box office – particularly in Italy, where it becomes the fourth highest-grossing film released that year.

1958: Overweight and plagued by illness, Lanza travels to Walchensee, a sanatorium in the Bavarian Alps, ostensibly to get himself into shape for his next film, *For the First Time*. He spends three months at the clinic, and leaves in somewhat better condition at the end of August. There are worrying signs, however, of serious liver damage, and Lanza is warned by doctors at the sanatorium that he must curb his excessive drinking.

1958: Lanza records the operatic selections to be featured in *For the First Time* at the Rome Opera House. These include E Voi Ridete from *Così Fan Tutte*, Vesti la Giubba from *Pagliacci*, and the *Otello* Death Scene. He is joined by the orchestra, chorus, and assorted soloists from the Rome Opera, and receives high praise from its Artistic Director, Riccardo Vitale, who promptly invites Lanza to sing there, offering him *carte blanche* regarding his choice of roles. Lanza eventually agrees to sing Canio in *Pagliacci* in the 1960/61 season. He receives similar offers from the management of both San Carlo in Naples and La Scala in Milan.

1958: Filming of *For the First Time* takes place on the island of Capri, and in Rome and Berlin, between September and late November.

1958: In December, Lanza records a stereo album of Neapolitan songs (many of them arranged by Ennio Morricone) with noted conductor Franco Ferrara. The two men enjoy an excellent rapport, and the album – subsequently entitled *Mario!* – becomes widely regarded as one of Lanza's finest achievements. Highlights include Voce 'e Notte, 'Na Sera 'e Maggio, and Passione.

1959: Lanza suffers a minor heart attack in April. His health by now is in a precarious state. That same month, he re-records *The Student Prince* in stereo with conductor Paul Baron. The soprano on this occasion is Norma Giusti, whose contributions are recorded some months later in New York.

1959: In May, an obviously ailing Lanza records a second stereo album with Baron entitled *Lanza Sings Christmas Carols*. The album is generally regarded as his worst since the disastrous *Lanza on Broadway* three years earlier.

1959: In June, Lanza records his third and final album with Baron, *Mario Lanza Sings Caruso Favorites*. Although he sounds tired on some of the selections, his singing is generally of a high standard. Highlights include moving renditions of Tosti's Ideale and Pour un Baiser. The album is released posthumously in 1960 and subsequently becomes one of Lanza's best-selling LPs, reaching number 4 on Billboard's Top Ten.

1959: Lanza reunites with Constantine Callinicos in July to record an album of the operetta *The Vagabond King* in a single six-hour session. The soprano on this occasion is Judith Raskin, who records her contributions in New York in 1960. The poorly recorded album is released posthumously in 1961.

1959: Lanza begins recording Romberg's *The Desert Song* with Callinicos and orchestra in August, but the sessions are interrupted when the tenor is hospitalized with double pneumonia. He returns to the studios in late August and completes the album to a pre-recorded accompaniment. The album is released posthumously in 1960, with soprano Judith Raskin again recording her contributions that same year. Highlights of this album, which proves to be Lanza's final disc, include One Flower Grows Alone in Your Garden and the haunting One Alone.

1959: *For the First Time* is released in August and performs well at the box office. Critic Howard Thompson of *The New York Times* hails it as Lanza's "most disarming [screen] vehicle in years." The soundtrack album eventually reaches number 5 on the Billboard Top Ten, and is also nominated for a Grammy.

1959: On September 25th, Lanza enters the Valle Giulia clinic to undergo a weight-loss program in anticipation of his next scheduled film, *Laugh Clown Laugh*. He agrees to undertake a controversial treatment known colloquially as the Twilight Sleep treatment. This is known to be dangerous because of the possibility of deep vein thrombosis occurring as a result of the patient being immobile for long periods. Nevertheless, the clinic proceeds with the treatment.

1959: On October 7th – one day before he is due to be discharged from the clinic – Lanza suffers a fatal pulmonary embolism at the age of 38. His devastated wife outlives him by just five months.

-Derek McGovern

My thanks to David Weaver, whose essay "Mario Lanza: For the Record" in the October 2007 issue of *The Legacy of Mario Lanza* newsletter was a valuable source of information regarding Lanza's record sales. – D.M.