

Original teen idol and 'Teen Angel' Frankie Avalon to perform at Riviera

Singer, actor, spokesman performs April 24

BY JOSHUA MALONI

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What is the shelf life of a TikTok star?

Or, put another way, in 50 years, will we remember the myriad overnight performers thrust upon us since the advent of reality television, YouTube and social media?

It's unlikely the current crop of "stars" will attain the level of success Frankie Avalon has had over the past eight – count them, eight – decades as a singer and actor.

"The Big Kahuna" first became a big deal at the end of the 1950s, with the release of singles "Dede Dinah" and "Venus." With a string of hits in the 1960s, Hollywood came calling, and this teen idol started to land on-screen roles alongside the likes of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Robert Wagner, Lucille Ball and Bing Crosby. He also starred in a trio of beach-based romantic comedies with "The Mickey Mouse Club" standout Annette Funicello.

With the 1970s came appearances in classic TV series "Love, American Style," "Police Story" and "The Love Boat." Avalon closed the decade with perhaps his most iconic performance, appearing as "Teen Angel" in "Grease." He sings "Beauty School Dropout" to Didi Conn's pink-haired Frenchie.

In the 1980s and '90s, Avalon would show up in Shelley Long's cult classic "Troop Beverly Hills," drop in on "Full House," and guest on "Sabrina the Teenage Witch." More significantly, he went back to the beach in, well, "Back to the Beach," a tongue-in-cheek take on his past performances that also starred Funicello – with special appearances by Connie Stevens, Paul Reubens (Pee-wee Herman), Dick Dale and Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jerry Mathers and Barbara Billingsley, and Bob Denver and Alan Hale Jr. Avalon also had a cameo in Martin Scorsese's "Casino," alongside Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci and Sharon Stone.

Since then, Avalon has toured steadily, both solo and alongside fellow 1950s-'60s vocalists Bobbie Rydell and Fabian.

He returns to the historic Riviera Theatre for a 3 p.m. concert Sunday, April 24.

The affable entertainer and California resident chatted about his

career, his costars, and his live show during a recent interview.

"I'm coming into the area again, which I love," Avalon said.

"I love going back to the Buffalo area. I've got a lot of friends there. And I can't wait to see them."

An edited Q&A follows.

Q: For the people who haven't seen you perform, how would you describe your live show?

Frankie Avalon: My live show is mainly very entertaining; I will say that. And I think it pleases the people that really want to come in to see me, because I don't do anything that's going to be different. They come to hear songs, they come to relive their feelings with me all these years, and I give that to the audience, and it really works out. And I must say, honestly, I cannot remember walking off stage where they're not standing and yelling. So, it works.

Q: You grew up, of course, a very acclaimed singer, musician. You had specific training in that from a very early age. We know you have a musical background. What made you decide to get into acting? How did that opportunity come along, and what appealed to you about doing something like that?

Frankie Avalon: Well, it really wasn't my decision, Josh.

What happened was, when I started singing and recording and becoming successful with hit songs, I started to generate a lot of activity from fans – and they were usually all the young kids. And mostly being a teen idol in those days, there was a tremendous amount of fan mail, and an excitement of the fans. And Hollywood recognized that.

So, they called my agency – it was Warner Bros. – and they were doing a film, and there was a role that would fit a young actor, who possibly could sing. And Warner Bros. brought me into Hollywood, because they said we've got a major star, Alan Ladd, let's bring this young boy in who's got a great following of young people, so we'll enhance our ticket sales by bringing in this boy, Frankie Avalon, with his fans. And they did that, and it worked. So, because of that, I started getting more offers of filmmaking, and wound up doing over 40 motion pictures.

Q: Tell me about how the role in "Grease" came to be.

Frankie Avalon: Well, actually,



I was playing golf, as a matter of fact, and I played nine holes, and I came off, and my manager was in the clubhouse. I came in to get a soft drink, and he was there with a script. And he said, "Paramount wants you for this picture." And I said, "What is it?" He said, "'Grease.'" I said, "What character?" And he said, "The 'Teen Angel.'" And I said, "Pass," and I went back out and played the backside nine holes.

Came back in, and he was still there, and he said, "I talked to the producers and director, they will not take 'No.' They at least would like you to have a meeting." So, I went, "OK," and I went to Paramount, and we sat around the desk of one of the producers. And they said, "Why don't you want to do this?" And I said, "Well, back in 1973, I was playing the Copacabana, and they were doing a promotion on a Broadway show called 'Grease.'" And I went to see the show. And I remember the character, which was really an extension of Elvis, because the character came off of a rope and all in a black leather jacket, and long sideburns, and did kind of a doo-wop version of the song "Beauty School Dropout." And I said, "That's not me." I said, "I have a style, and I don't get away from what I do. So, I'm sorry." They said, "Well, we'll change it" (laughs). They said, "We'll put you all in white, and we'll do this, and then you sing it your style." I said, "If that's the case, you got

it." And that's how I got it.

Q: I've chatted with Olivia Newton-John before, and I've seen her on stage, and I think she still is very surprised at how popular those songs are this many years later. Does that film's iconic status still surprise you? Did you have any idea that film would be as successful as it was?

Frankie Avalon: Never. Never. You know, Josh, when you make a motion picture, or when you do a recording – whatever you may do – you never know what it's going to do. You do it from your heart, and you do what you do. And you walk away from it. And then it's out there. And then you wait and see what the response is.

I never thought that "Grease" would be this iconic movie. It is the highest-grossing musical of all time. I'm talking about from "Singing in the Rain" on, with great musicals. This one has lasted for 40-some years around the world. I don't mean just in our country. I mean, I can go to Spain; I can go to Italy; I can go to Germany; I can go anywhere and get recognized by that film alone.

Q: Of course, as you said, you've been in so many different movies. I have to ask you about "Back to the Beach," because that was one of the first films that I ever saw. I was actually in Virginia Beach seeing that movie. How much fun was that film to make?

Frankie Avalon: Well, it was a lot of fun – and gratifying, too, because I produced that, you know.

And I knocked on doors in this city, here, of Hollywood, to different producers and different studios, and it was rejected, rejected, rejected – until my agent that I've been with for so many years took me into Paramount. And I gave a synopsis to the president – Ned Tanen was his name. And I told him, and my agent said, "We can get Jimmy Komack to write this, and Jimmy Komack did "(Welcome Back,) Kotter." He created "Kotter" and "Chico and the Man." And the president of the studio said, "If you get him, and with Frankie's ideas, let's put it in development." And we did.

So, it took me about five years to get that picture on the screen. And it was fun. It was great.

Annette was beautiful and wonderful. That's when we realized and recognized that she wasn't well. She was really diagnosed after that picture. We were doing some reading and some cue cards, because we're doing some promos, and she couldn't see. She went to an optometrist and they said, "You've got MS." So, good and bad came out of that picture.

Q: I'm wondering if you watched the Oscars? I look at the cast of characters that you've worked with over the years, not just actors, but people like Dick Clark, Bing Crosby, Lucille Ball, John Wayne, Robert De Niro. I'm wondering if you keep tabs on what's going on in current Hollywood, and if you see people that you think are going to have the longevity, or the career, that some of the people you worked with have had?

Frankie Avalon: No, I don't have that magic ball. I know that there's so many talented young people. That's wonderful. Singers included, and actors included.

Longevity? I don't know how that happens, Josh. I really don't know. I think it's the kind of material that you do.

The man who taught me, his name is Nick Castle. And he was my mentor. And he always said to me, "What you do on that stage, or in the film, make sure that you do it, and make sure that that audience feels it, and takes you home. If they take you home with them, then you've made a career."

As an example, if you're on stage and you say something – never use anything that's foul language or this or that – but if you say something that's poignant, as they're waiting for their car, to get into the car and go home, they'll say to one another, "Oh, Geez, remember when he did this? Remember what he said that?" The next morning, they'll get up around the coffee table, and they'll say, "Geez, I loved when he did this." If they take you home, that's longevity.

•Read the full Q&A online at www.wnypapers.com

ON STAGE

Live music at Isle View

The Isle View Restaurant has live music in April at 791 Niagara St., Tonawanda. The Saturday schedule includes:

- ✓ April 2: Nuthin But Time
- ✓ April 9: Mid Life Crisis
- ✓ April 16: Slim Chance & Can't hardly Playboys
- ✓ April 23: Sue and Doug

✓ April 30: Greg Sansone

All shows are scheduled to take place from 7-10 p.m.

Celtic music concert

The Celtic music duo Step in Time will perform at 7 p.m. Saturday, April 9, at First Presbyterian Church of Youngstown, 100 Church St.

Step in Time will present a repertoire of Scottish, Irish, seafaring and historic music, ranging from the 14th century to the present.

This event is free and open to the public. A free-will offering will be taken, and donations will be gratefully accepted.

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- June 19-25 - Myrtle Beach/Charleston, SC
- July 5-8 - Frankenmuth/Mackinac Island, MI
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