

Frankie Valli: How Stapes Surgery Saved His Career

ABSTRACT

Francesco Stephen Castelluccio, better known by his stage name Frankie Valli, is an American singer who started his career as the front man of The Four Seasons. This pop group became one of the biggest pop acts of the 1960s. Valli is known for his unusually powerful lead falsetto voice. In the late 1960s, he developed otosclerosis. The hearing loss got so bad that Frankie could not hear himself on stage. He toured the national rounds of hearing specialists. And over and over again, he was told, "Can't help". The success of his group suffered. Finally, stapes surgery was performed, and this restored his hearing and brought the singer back to entertain us for a lifetime! Frankie Valli is now 89 and still touring!

Keywords: Hearing, otosclerosis, stapes



INTRODUCTION

Otosclerosis is one of the diseases that can have a great impact on the career of the person involved. Some well-known persons suffering from otosclerosis have recently been described in the text book entitled *A Treatise on Otosclerosis and Its Treatment*.¹ The hearing loss, for example, of Ludwig van Beethoven was most likely due to cochlear otosclerosis.^{2,3} His severe hearing impairment and subsequent deafness strongly influenced his later musical life. The introduction of the stapedectomy by John Shea in 1958⁴ made it possible to effectively treat otosclerosis. A successful stapes operation for otosclerosis has, for many patients, meant that their career did not have to be cut short. A good example of how stapes surgery has positively influenced the career of a pop star is presented in this publication.

Francesco Stephen Castelluccio

Francesco Stephen Castelluccio was born on May 3, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, United States (Figure 1). He was the eldest of 3 sons and was raised in an Italian working-class family. He lived in the Stephen Crane Village housing complex in Newark.⁵ His father, a barber, was Anthony Castelluccio, and his mother was Mary Rinaldi who was a homemaker and beer company employee. His mother was fond of popular music, and it was through her that Francesco Castelluccio came into contact with modern music at a young age. When he was 7 years old, his mother took him to see Frank Sinatra perform. That performance made such an impression that the young Francesco was determined to become a successful singer. At home, he imitated his favorite singers and practiced his singing talent. He soon realized that his Italian surname was not a real artist name. So he changed Castelluccio to "Frankie Valli," after country singer Texas Jean Valli. Beginning his solo career from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s was a limited success. In 1961, Frankie Valli formed the pop group "The Four Seasons" with keyboardist/songwriter Bob Gaudio, guitarist Tommy DeVito, and bassist Nick Massi (Figure 2). In 1962, Frankie Valli scored their first big hit single with The Four Seasons titled *Sherry*. It was a doo-wop genre song and hit number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Many hit singles followed, and The Four Seasons became one of the biggest pop acts of the 1960s in the United States.

Hearing Loss

The basis of the success of The Four Seasons was Valli's very high, celebrated falsetto and the songwriter talent of his friend and group member Bob Gaudio. In the late 1960s, Frankie noticed that his hearing in both ears was slowly declining. He had trouble following the group's music on stage. It got so bad that he couldn't hear himself on stage; it was like he was singing in a vacuum. The progression of his hearing change and reduction in both ears made live performances increasingly difficult. During record-recording sessions, the

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Figure 1. The Four Seasons in 1962. Frankie Valli, right below.

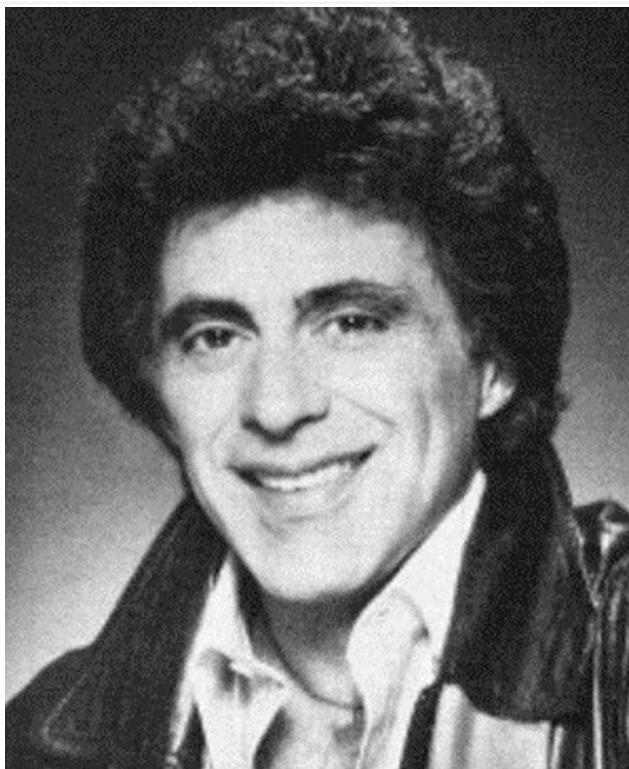


Figure 2. Frankie Valli.

volume on his headphones had to be set increasingly to a higher level. Valli's hearing problems also influenced the success of The Four Seasons. No more top 40 hits were scored. The diagnosis of otosclerosis was finally made, and Frankie received no treatment other than a hearing aid. Other adequate help was repeatedly rejected with "unfortunately, we can't help you." When the hearing problem became so big, Frankie Valli and his lifetime friend band member Bob Gaudio went looking for an ear specialist who could treat the otosclerosis optimally. Finally, Bob and Frankie found a renowned ear specialist in Dr. Victor Goodhill (Figure 3) at the University of Southern California. He performed a stapedectomy on both ears and a revision operation to improve the result of his first ear surgery. He brought the hearing from about 35% in 1 ear back to about 98%. A year later, the other ear was operated on and the hearing was brought up to 87%. The result was that Valli's hearing returned to almost normal, and the popularity of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons rose once more.

After the Ear Surgery

After the successful stapes operations, Valli went back to his singing career. Both with The Four Seasons and as a solo artist, he produced many successful albums and singles. For example, Valli once again topped the charts with the title song from the film *Grease*, written by Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees. Over the years, Valli has continued to tour with various ensembles of The Four Seasons and also tried his hand at acting, including an appearance on the TV series *The Sopranos*. This would never have been possible had Frankie's hearing not been restored by the stapes operations. In 1990, Frankie Valli was included in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The acclaimed Broadway musical entitled *The Jersey Boys* (2005) tells the story of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons. The musical won 4 Tony Awards, including Best Musical and has toured the world in several touring productions. The musical was adapted in 2014 into a movie directed by Clint Eastwood. In addition, Valli appeared in the 2014 movie *And So It Goes*. The 89-year-old Frankie Valli



Figure 3. Ear surgeon Dr. Victor Goodhill.



Figure 4. Frankie Valli on tour, 2022.

(Figure 4) is still going strong as a solo artist, now 50 years after the hearing-enhancing ear surgery for otosclerosis.^{6,7} In 2023, he will give no fewer than 23 shows in North America and then 5 more venues in the UK.⁸

CONCLUSION

John Shea's pioneering work in introducing stapes surgery as a hearing-improving procedure for otosclerosis in 1958 made it possible to restore the hearing of the hearing-impaired. This

treatment has improved millions of otosclerosis patients, and with it, their quality of life. The stapedectomy turned the "deaf patient" into a normal hearing person, and therefore their career path was not disrupted. The history of Frankie Valli, the famous lead singer of The Four Seasons, one of the biggest pop acts of the 1960s in the United States, is a good example of this. One might say that stapes surgery for otosclerosis saved the career of Frankie Valli.⁹

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