

NIROSHINI

Interview



A FATHER'S LOVE

THE HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER
GIANNI RUSSO

Acclaimed Actor, Singer and Bestselling Author

www.niroshini360.com

MINI MAGAZINE



THE RESILIENT RISE OF GIANNI RUSSO FROM LITTLE ITALY TO HOLLYWOOD

Gianni Russo's life is a reflection of resilience and an unyielding drive to overcome whatever challenges life placed before him. Born in the heart of Little Italy, New York, Gianni faced adversity from an early age. Stricken with polio as a child, he endured years of illness that could have easily left him defeated. Yet, Gianni refused to be defined by his struggles. By the age of twelve, he was introduced into the world of organised crime, becoming an associate of the mafia – an environment fraught with complexity for someone so young, yet one that shaped his early life with lessons in both risk and survival.

As he grew older, Gianni's ambitions expanded. Fascinated by the craft of acting, he set his sights on Hollywood, despite having no formal training. In a bold leap, he auditioned for the role of Carlo Rizzi in *The Godfather* and against the odds, landed the part that would forever change his career. His portrayal of Rizzi, the ill-fated son-in-law of Don Corleone, became one of the defining moments of his life.

The Godfather however was only the beginning. Gianni went on to appear in several well-known films, including "Any given Sunday" with Al Pacino and "The Family Man" with Nicolas Cage. He continued to work steadily, building a career in the industry that he had once only dreamed of joining. With each role, Gianni further demonstrated his ability to adapt, to take on new challenges and to prove that his talent was just as formidable as his resilience.

What stands out about Gianni Russo's story is his ability to persist, regardless of the obstacles in his way. His life has never followed a conventional path, yet at every turn, he has embraced new challenges.

Gianni's journey stands as a powerful illustration that even when the odds seem stacked against us, a strong sense of purpose and the refusal to accept limitations can create unexpected opportunities. Gianni's life is a compelling example of persistence and adaptability, qualities that have helped him carve out not just a career but a remarkable and unconventional life.

New York's Little Italy

New York's Little Italy was shaped by waves of immigrants from Southern Italy, particularly from Sicily, where my family hails from, as well as Naples and Calabria. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Italian immigrants arrived in the U.S. in large numbers, with many coming from Sicilian fishing towns. They built Little Italy into a vibrant community, rich with the culture and traditions of their homeland.

The neighbourhood wasn't always just Italian, though. Over time, especially as I grew up, there was a noticeable arrival of Asian immigrants – they stayed on the East Side of Canal Street. Chinatown and Little Italy have always shared a common border but in the mid-20th century, more Asians arrived, many brought by human smugglers known as "snakeheads". After the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees also began to settle here. As new cultures moved in, the old Italian neighbourhood shrank – from covering 10 blocks to less than three today.

Growing up in the 1950s, I lived in an insular world centred around Mulberry Street, oblivious to what lay north of Houston Street. Little Italy was a community of old-school Italians, bound by strong traditions and deep family ties. Most immigrants stayed within the neighbourhood, living modest lives. Many however, returned to Southern Italy, realising the streets were not paved with gold. For those seeking fortune, some found it through the emerging American mafia. One of the most powerful crime families was the Gambino family, led by Carlo Gambino. By the 1960s and '70s, Gambino's influence was immense – his family had about 5000 made members (full members who had taken the mafia oath) and an even larger network of associates involved in various operations. Carlo Gambino practically ran the city during his peak.

As a child, I truly believed Carlo Gambino was my uncle. The community was so tight-knit that the lines between family, friends and neighbours blurred.

My great-uncle Angelo had a strong connection to Gambino – he had helped Carlo immigrate to the U.S. Gambino arrived alone at 19, with his parents joining him later. The bonds in our community were built on more than just blood – they were rooted in shared experience, loyalty and trust.

I was born on December 12, 1943 and raised in the heart of Little Italy. What stands out most from my childhood is the strong sense of camaraderie. We didn't lock our doors because there was no need – there was no crime – everyone knew each other and looked out for one another. Anyone over 21 was considered an aunt or uncle and respect was deeply ingrained in the way we lived. You'd never enter a home without first greeting and kissing the eldest family member. Those traditions, that respect, that's what's missing in the neighbourhood today.

Back then, the mafia ran on strict rules and involvement in drugs was forbidden. Gambling was their business but never drugs. When the next generation took over and began dealing in narcotics, it shattered what was left of the old code. The mafia that once controlled Little Italy is mostly gone now, with the old bosses either dead or serving long prison sentences. My great-uncle Angelo, a Sicilian mafioso from Palermo, was responsible for bringing many of the old mafia families to America. He met a tragic end though – hung by the state in 1968.

Little Italy today is a much different place than the one I grew up in. The camaraderie, traditions and unspoken rules that once defined the neighbourhood have faded over time. The strong sense of community, where respect was paramount and everyone looked out for one another, is no longer as prevalent. The old-world customs that were so integral to daily life have mostly disappeared, along with the mafia influence that once held sway. While the neighbourhood still holds on to pieces of its past, it has changed dramatically from the tight-knit community that once thrived here.

PORTRAIT OF CARLO GAMBINO, THE INFLUENTIAL SICILIAN CRIME BOSS AND HEAD OF THE GAMBINO CRIME FAMILY IN NEW YORK CITY



TAKEN DURING HIS YEARS OF POWER, GAMBINO IS SHOWN WITH A COMPOSED EXPRESSION THAT REFLECTS HIS DECADES-LONG COMMAND OVER ORGANISED CRIME. KNOWN FOR HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH THE AMERICAN MAFIA'S COMMISSION FOLLOWING THE APALACHIN MEETING IN 1957, GAMBINO PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN SHAPING ORGANISED CRIME ACROSS THE U.S. UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 1976.

CARLO GAMBINO AND GIANNI RUSSO



Ancestors

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Benito Mussolini launched a campaign to eliminate the Sicilian mafia, leading to a violent crackdown. Mafia leaders were publicly hanged in the streets as a stark message to the people. My grandfather, although from a strong Sicilian family, was never part of Cosa Nostra but other relatives were deeply involved. Genco Russo remained in power until the age of 79 and even today, at 98, one of my cousins still holds power. In 1949, my family faced a devastating loss – six members were hung.

Given my family's deep involvement in Cosa Nostra, people often think I was a “made man” but I never was. My great-grandfather, however, wielded a different kind of influence. He was a Knight of Malta in the Vatican which gave me unique access to certain circles and through him, I had the honour of meeting three popes.

St. John Paul II, who was canonized by Pope Francis on April 27, 2014, was the last saint. Born in Wadowice, Poland, he was the first Polish pope in history and adored by millions, especially in his homeland. In 1948, he placed a coat of arms around my neck, a symbol of heritage and status that I still proudly display on much of my clothing. I also wear a lapel pin with a watch fob that belonged to my great-grandfather.

In 1982, I received a great honour from the Vatican, once again from St. John Paul II. We built a strong relationship over the years and he had a profound impact on my life.

GENCO RUSSO



GIANNI RUSSO AND ST JOHN PAUL II, 1982 HONoured BY THE VATICAN



What's the fascination with the mafia?

What's the fascination with the mafia? As a kid, I always wondered why, especially when it came to women. Growing up in New York, I'd watch them walk into clubs, commanding attention like they owned the place. I think those women found the men mysterious, maybe even dangerous and that made them seem more attractive. It was the allure of a life that felt exciting, intriguing and forbidden. For a guy without his own clear path or purpose, the draw to that life was probably about belonging – being part of something bigger, part of a brotherhood.



Without my faith, I wouldn't have survived everything I've been through

My paternal grandparents raised me. My father was abusive toward my mother and even had her institutionalised for two years so I didn't see her until later. My grandmother gave me a small plastic St. Anthony statue and I carried it everywhere in my pocket. That little statue helped me survive a difficult childhood.

In their home, I always remember the sunlight streaming through the windows. I prayed with my grandmother every day, went to mass daily and by the time I was 6½, I became an altar boy. Therefore, when I got polio just before turning 7, I was confused. I couldn't understand why God would punish me like that. However, as I've gotten older, I've learned to take lessons from the hard times. Every challenge I've faced has only made me stronger, building a drive in me to keep moving forward.

That St. Anthony statue – due to all the sterilisation it went through at Bellevue Hospital's polio ward – has worn down to just a tiny piece of plastic. However, I still know what it is – and to this day, I still keep that little St Anthony statue in my pocket. I pray 10-15 times a day and have altars in my home with statues of patron saints and Mother Teresa. I see the Blessed Mother as my spiritual mother and God as my father. Without my faith, I wouldn't have survived everything I've been through.

GIANNI RUSSO'S GRANDPARENTS



Bellevue Hospital's polio ward

On August 7, 1949, just before my seventh birthday, I woke up unable to feel my arm – my entire left side was paralysed. An ambulance came and two men carried me down the stairs of our apartment building. My mother followed close behind with the attendants. She sat in the back with me, trying to reassure me but I was terrified. My faith in God gave me the courage to keep breathing and my little St. Anthony statue was my source of comfort.

The polio epidemic of 1949 hit hard. In the U.S., 42,173 cases were reported and 2,720 people died. Many survivors were left paralysed. At Bellevue's polio ward, I was separated from my mother and they took my St. Anthony statue away to be sterilised. That moment – being taken away from her – left a deep wound that I carry to this day. I remember clutching her hand, crying, as they wheeled me away from her. The pain of that separation still overwhelms me whenever I think about it. I can still feel the fear.

For five long years, I had no visitors and I never heard from my parents during that time. I couldn't understand why they had abandoned me. That feeling of rejection stayed with me, haunting me but those years also built an unshakable strength within me that still drives me today. Despite everything, I wouldn't change a single moment of my life, as hard as it was.

Inside the ward, we kids became each other's lifeline. None of us had much education so we were all on the same level, trying to find comfort in each other's company. I grew close to a boy named Robbie. Our beds were across from each other and we quickly became friends. Then one day, after returning from treatment, I noticed Robbie's bed had been sterilised. When a child passed away, the staff would pretend they were asleep to avoid upsetting the rest of us – but in the night the sound of the gurney – the squeak of its wheels – was unmistakable – you knew they were coming for someone who had died. It was a very morbid feeling. That sound still haunts me. Every time I heard it, I'd sit up in bed, fearing they were coming for me.

After Robbie's death, I stopped forming friendships. I couldn't bear the pain of losing another friend. To this day, I struggle with letting people get close to me – there's always that fear of losing someone I love. In a way, it's a form of protection in the world we live in.

I was a cute kid and eventually, I became the poster boy for polio in Franklin Roosevelt's March of Dimes campaign. One day, someone came into the ward and snapped a photo of me, full cast and all. The campaign helped raise a lot of money for the Salk vaccine which was licensed on April 12, 1955 and went on to eradicate polio in most countries.

BELLEVUE HOSPITAL



GIANNI RUSSO
BELLEVUE HOSPITAL'S POLIO WARD



Transistor Radio

As my 7th birthday approached, I remember asking my nurse, Dolores, "Isn't anyone going to come for my birthday?". She looked at me and said, "No, you're in quarantine because polio is highly contagious". I felt crushed but on my birthday, Dolores surprised me with a transistor radio. She smiled and said, "Uncle Carlo told me to tell you *"it fell off the back of a truck"* (he always said that!) and it's his gift for you". Her uncle, as it turned out, was Carlo Gambino.

That little radio changed everything for me. It wasn't just a gift – it was my connection to the outside world. The first time I turned it on, Frank Sinatra was singing. I'll never forget the moment I found out that Sinatra and I shared the same birthday – December 12. Here was this Italian-American from Hoboken, New Jersey who came from nothing and made it big. I thought, "If he can do it, I can too".

Sinatra became my inspiration. Years later, he became a friend – he even became godfather to my son, Luciano. Frank taught me how to sing later in life and I was with him during the last three days of his life. Today, I honour him in my one-man show, "The Gianni Russo Experience". At the end of every performance, I pay tribute to him and on stage with me, always, is that same little transistor radio. It transformed my life all those years ago and it still reminds me of where I came from – and who helped me get there.

FRANK SINATRA AND GIANNI RUSSO



I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse



After five years at Bellevue, I was finally released but I didn't want to stay at home. My grandfather's friend owned Magnoti's Bakery and I started working there. I chose to mix the 50-pound bags of flour by hand, to rebuild the strength in my left side. I slept in the storeroom, where the warmth from the ovens made it feel like home.

One day, I went with my grandfather to Delacey Street, where we visited a store owned by a Jewish man named Mr Robinawitz. He was selling ballpoint pens which were a big deal back then because everyone still used ink wells. I went back to the store on my own and with a grin, told him, "I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse". I asked if I could sell the pens for him, even though I was only 12½ years old. He agreed and I decided to head uptown to sell them near the Sherry-Netherland Hotel. The place was like a dream – I couldn't believe the beauty; everyone was dressed immaculately, like they were headed to church.

Every day, a man and his friend would pass by. He never bought a pen but he'd slip me \$5 – sometimes even \$10 which was a fortune back then – and always touch my shoulder, offering words of wisdom. This went on for months. I later learned that he went to the Sherry-Netherland for a shoeshine every day.

Before heading uptown each day, I'd stop by Ferarra's Bakery. Next door was a little religious store that sold artifacts people wore around their necks to ward off evil spirits. I noticed one with a hunchback figure and asked the owner what it meant. He explained it was an old Sicilian belief that touching a deformed person brought good luck. My heart sank and the blood drained from my hands.

Suddenly, I understood why that man was touching my shoulder every day – he wasn't interested in me, just my polio-induced physical condition. I was devastated. I stormed into a shop near the train station and bought a pink rabbit's foot.

The next time he came to touch me, I pulled away. He tried again and I dodged him. Confused, he asked, "What are you doing?" I shot back, "No, what are you doing? I thought you liked me but you're treating me like a good luck charm". I handed him the pink rabbit's foot and said, "Here, take this instead".

He looked at me and asked, "Do you know who I am?" I replied, "I don't know and I don't care – just don't touch me". He then asked, "What's your name?" and then continued, "and who is Angelo Russo to you?". Suspicious, I told him, "I never met him – he was hanged during the Cosa Nostra cleanups that started in the '40s but he was my great-uncle". His friend, Blackie, pulled out a wad of cash and handed me three hundred-dollar bills, saying, "Give him the pens".

That's when I realised I had just disrespected Frank Costello, the most powerful gangster in America – head of the Genovese family. He explained that my great-uncle Angelo had helped bring his parents to the United States and he was forever indebted to my family. Costello looked at me, smiled and said, "I like you, kid – you'll be running errands for me".

Frank Costello became my mentor. He was old-school, respected by both cops and politicians and earned the nickname "Prime Minister of the Underworld". I remained close to him until the day he died on February 18, 1973. From him, I learned the value of respect – a lesson that has stayed with me ever since.

FRANK "THE PRIME MINISTER" COSTELLO



COSTELLO WAS THE ACTING BOSS WHO LED THE GENOVESE CRIME FAMILY FROM 1946 TO 1957. COSTELLO ROSE TO GREAT POWER IN THE AMERICAN MAFIA, BOLSTERED BY STRONG POLITICAL CONNECTIONS, CONTROL OVER EXTENSIVE GAMBLING OPERATIONS IN BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND CUBA AND A FORMIDABLE REPUTATION IN THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD. COSTELLO STOOD OUT AMONG MOB BOSSES IN THREE KEY WAYS: HE CHOSE NOT TO CARRY A GUN, HE TESTIFIED IN A SENATE INVESTIGATION ON ORGANISED CRIME AND DESPITE NUMEROUS ARRESTS AND AN ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION, HE DIED A FREE MAN AT 82. WIDELY REGARDED AS ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL GANGSTERS OF HIS TIME, COSTELLO'S INFLUENCE AND LEGACY WERE SO POWERFUL THAT HE SERVED AS THE INSPIRATION FOR DON VITO CORLEONE, THE LEGENDARY CHARACTER IN THE GODFATHER.

FRANK COSTELLO



IN 1957, VITO GENOVESE ARRANGED FOR A HITMAN TO ASSASSINATE FRANK COSTELLO. THOUGH COSTELLO SURVIVED THE ATTACK, HE CHOSE TO STEP DOWN, ALLOWING GENOVESE TO ASSUME CONTROL.

FRANK COSTELLO



[FRANK COSTELLO, HALF-LENGTH PORTRAIT,
SEATED, BEHIND MICROPHONE, TESTIFYING BEFORE
THE KEFAUVER COMMITTEE INVESTIGATING
ORGANISED CRIME] / WORLD TELEGRAM & SUN
PHOTO BY AL AUMULLER (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

RAVENITE SOCIAL CLUB: AN ITALIAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE LANDMARK AND NOTORIOUS MOB HANGOUT ON MULBERRY STREET



THE CLUB, FOUNDED IN 1926 AS THE ALTO KNIGHTS SOCIAL CLUB (NAMED AFTER THE ORDER OF SAINT JAMES OF ALTOPASCIO), BEGAN AS A GATHERING SPOT FOR MOB FIGURES LIKE CHARLIE LUCIANO. IN 1957, CARLO GAMBINO RENAMED IT "THE RAVENITE" AFTER POE'S "THE RAVEN", THOUGH HE DISTANCED HIMSELF ONCE POLICE SURVEILLANCE INCREASED. ANIELLO DELLACROCE THEN TOOK OVER MANAGEMENT.

ANIELLO DELLACROCE: UNDERBOSS OF
THE GAMBINO CRIME FAMILY OF NEW
YORK CITY



My daughter

There were times I'd find myself sleeping in St. Patrick's Cathedral and I can still picture that church pew: 1-12. Though 12 is "my number", the reason I chose that spot was that it sat right in front of St. Anthony, my patron. I spent countless nights there. While I have faith in neurology, my true belief lies in Catholicism. I was born just seven minutes before midnight on December 12th – so the numbers 1212 and 7 hold a special significance for me – they tend to appear in my life quite frequently. Interestingly, many of the business deals I finalise happen on the 12th.

During that time, I developed a passion for motion pictures and the acting craft, often visiting the Paramount Theatre which was open 24/7. At 15, I watched "Some Like It Hot" with Marilyn Monroe – who could resist falling in love with her?

One day, after leaving Lindy's, a man in a brown suit approached me and asked my age. I thought he was a dog catcher; he turned out to be a Truant Officer. I told him I was 15 and a half and he asked why I wasn't in school. At that moment, I had \$5,000 in my pocket and was dressed in Brioni! He handed me a ticket that stated I must be in school. I took it to Mr Costello and said, "I don't want to go to school". He directed me to Wilford Beauty Academy, just above Lindy's, telling me I only had to sign in and then could leave. I learned I could officially drop out at 16. When I arrived, I saw 20 or 30 girls washing and setting hair and decided to stick around!

A month later, Mr Kenneth (Kenneth Battelle) and Marc Sinclair from Lilly Dashay Beauty Salon, came to the school looking for shampoo boys. Mr Kenneth was a renowned hairdresser to the stars. I began my internship there, washing hair for an elite clientele. One day, as I prepped to wash a woman's hair, I ran the water and tested the temperature on her wrist. Then I realised it was Marilyn Monroe! She visited the salon often and always requested "her shampoo boy".

We eventually developed a romantic relationship filled with innocence and genuine connection. We found solace in one another, sharing moments where all we needed were hugs and comfort.

Both of us had faced abandonment and rejection – me the polio ward and her the orphanage. We truly understood each other; I could feel her emotions.

Whenever Marilyn came to New York, we would meet. She loved escaping the pressures of Hollywood, enjoying the simple pleasures of life. Despite our age difference, it never seemed to matter; we just clicked. I was surprised, however, by her low self-esteem. She often wore disguises – dark wigs and sunglasses – and loved walking over the Brooklyn Bridge, captivated by the view of Manhattan at night. There was a dive bar called the Subway Inn on the East Side that she loved, along with Gino's, an Italian restaurant on Lexington. We would stroll through the park for hours, cherishing the freedom of being ordinary.

During our time together, Marilyn was still involved with Joe DiMaggio but I continued to see her. To maintain her sex symbol status, she had a weight clause in her contract. When she gained weight, rumours circulated that it was a ploy to escape her contract.

Frank Costello kept Marilyn at the Waldorf for a year. After his passing, his lawyer, George McCarthy, approached me with a deed for a piece of property that had my name and a girl's name on it. That's when I discovered Marilyn had a daughter, something Costello had known all along.

I had no idea Marilyn had given birth. She was living with Lee Strasberg, a prominent acting teacher, at the time. When she became pregnant, Strasberg's daughter moved in with them and she claimed the baby as her own.

Years later, I learned that I had a daughter with Marilyn after her death. Our daughter sought to know who her father was and took a DNA test with Joe DiMaggio, only to find out it wasn't him. I was the only person Marilyn had been involved with during that time.

We eventually met. She has brown hair, is happily married with two daughters in Westchester and prefers to remain out of the spotlight. Knowing that my daughter is happy is what brings me the most contentment – having a daughter with Marilyn is a special part of my life.

MARILYN MONROE AND MR KENNETH



GIANNI RUSSO AND MARILYN MONROE



The Godfather

I would never admit that anything I went after was unreasonable... even when it seemed like it. I had big dreams – like becoming an actor. Back in 1969, when Mario Puzo's "The Godfather" was published, I couldn't even read it myself because I'm illiterate – never went to school. Someone kindly read it to me, though. Right away, I could tell that Don Corleone was based on Frank Costello and Jonny Fontaine? That was Frank Sinatra, no question.

Then, in 1971, I saw an ad that said Hollywood was turning The Godfather into a movie and casting unknown actors for major roles. I jumped on it. I made a screen test where I acted as Michael, Sonny and Carlo – though I hated playing Carlo because he reminded me of my father who used to brutalise my mother but I knew this was my shot.

Al Ruddy was the producer and I needed to get his attention. I hired a stunning Chinese woman named China to be my chauffeur. We pulled up to Paramount in my detailed Bentley, her dressed in a revealing chauffeur outfit with a little cap. She hand-delivered my screen test, wrapped in the book cover of The Godfather. I could see the people inside peeking through the blinds, watching us. It was a scene in itself.

Soon after, I got a call from Al Ruddy. He thanked me for my efforts but said I had been misled – they were looking for union actors with some experience. I was crushed.

Meanwhile, Joe Colombo, a major figure in the Colombo crime family, was on a mission to stop the film. He had founded the Italian-American Civil Rights League in 1970, claiming that films like The Godfather were spreading negative stereotypes about Italian-Americans. He tried to pressure Paramount to cancel the production but they ignored him. Therefore, his crew sent a stronger message – someone blew up the iconic steel gates at Paramount lot with dynamite.

The irony wasn't lost on me. Colombo was trying to erase the mafia myth but blowing up studio gates? Not exactly the way to go about it.

There was a mob book out at the time entitled "The gang that couldn't shoot straight" – I called the league, "The gang that couldn't think straight!".

After the bombing, the big mob bosses were incensed. Tony Accardo had been running Hollywood for years and didn't want any trouble. A meeting was set between Paramount's top brass and Barry Slotnick, the lawyer for Colombo's league. Bettye McCartt told me about it and I knew this was my chance. I told Al Ruddy I could bring everyone together. I'd appeal to the mob's greed, get them on board.

At the meeting, Colombo showed up with his muscle – his lieutenant Fat Anthony and two copos, Butterass De Chico and his brother Boozy Chico. When we walked in, the Paramount execs looked terrified, like we were going to kill them. It was tense.

The negotiations dragged on but eventually, I pulled Colombo aside and said, "Joe, you're in control here. You can make this movie and go down in history as a great American. I'll even make sure you get prints ahead of time so you can run private screenings and make a fortune". That did the trick.

We hammered out a deal: Colombo would get to see the script to ensure it was fair to Italian heritage. Some wise guys would get roles but the director would decide which parts. There would also be roles for professional actors connected to the mob through blood, marriage or friendship – and Colombo would get advance prints. I even arranged for a screening on Staten Island for the Down Syndrome charity, a cause close to me because of my sister's involvement in research. Back then, people with Down syndrome had a life expectancy of just 20 years. Now, it has doubled but there's a new challenge – they're outliving their caregivers. I've since built a home for them.

Just as everyone was getting ready to leave, I stood up and said, "No one's going anywhere until I decide here and now what part I'm getting". Michael and Sonny were already cast so I said, "There's Carlo Rizzi...".

Joe backed me up. He told them, "The kid gets the part or you'll be shooting this fucking movie on the moon". Two hours later, I had my Screen Actors Guild card in hand.

Table read

At the pre-production table read for The Godfather, we were at Patsy's restaurant on 199th Street in Harlem. I showed up in a suit, lines memorised, ready to go – since I couldn't read, I had to learn them by heart. I walk in and see legends like Sterling Hayden, Richard Conte and Marlon Brando. Then the up-and-comers: James Caan, Al Pacino, Diane Keaton. They all just sat there, reading their lines (which is what a table read is meant to be), dressed like they were coming off the street. My gardener was better dressed than those guys.

Francis Ford Coppola, the director, had all the Italians in the room exaggerate mannerisms – hand gestures, body language – so the non-Italians could pick it up. Brando was Polish, James Caan was Jewish so Coppola wanted to help them feel more “authentic” in their roles. We were practically putting on a masterclass in how to talk with your hands.

During a break, Brando comes up to me and says, “You’re a big TV actor, right?” I said no. “You’ve got a big movie coming out?” again, I said no. “You didn’t do Broadway because I know everyone who did Broadway...” I said, “What is this, a quiz show?”.

Then he asks me, “Who did you study with?” I’m like, “Study what?”. At that point, Brando gets Coppola and says, “This guy’s playing my son-in-law and he’s not even a professional actor”. Coppola just rolls his eyes. I thought, this guy’s going to get me fired.

I shooed Coppola away and pulled Brando aside. I didn’t raise my voice, didn’t make a scene. I just looked him in the eye and said, “I don’t give a fuck who you are, I’m in this fucking movie. I’ve already told my friends I’m in this movie. If you mess this up for me, I’ll cut your heart out”. Brando leans back, wide-eyed, gasps and says, “That was amazing!”. I couldn’t believe it, he thought I was *acting*!

That moment sealed it. I got the part of Carlo Rizzi and the rest is history.

Marlon Brando

Dick Smith, the makeup genius, took three hours to transform Brando into Don Corleone. During that time, Brando sent for me to go over scenes together. Imagine that – being summoned by Marlon Brando himself while he's getting into character – it was an amazing experience. We must have rehearsed the final scene more times than I can count.

On the day we were set to shoot the end scene, Brando wasn't even supposed to be there but he showed up, determined to help me. He told me that I had to convey genuine fear in that moment and he essentially directed the whole thing. He gave me all these little details – like when I sit down, my hands should be shaking. Then when Michael hands me the envelope with the airline ticket, I'm supposed to open it, check that the ticket's there and at that moment, let my mood shift slightly, as if there's a glimmer of hope.

To find that genuine fear, I had to dig deep. I thought back to being alone in bed at Bellevue's polio ward as a kid – that feeling of isolation and helplessness. That's what I channelled to get the right emotion. With all the different camera angles and close-ups, I had to keep doing it over and over but thanks to Brando's guidance, I managed to cry on cue. That scene – it's one of the moments I truly treasure.

Pacino's a great actor, no question but I'll always be remembered by for that scene. I poured everything into it and it became iconic. All because Brando took the time to make sure I delivered it perfectly.

GIANNI RUSSO AS CARLO RIZZI AND
MARLON BRANDO AS DON VITO
CORLEONE IN THE GODFATHER



A father's love

I opened my club in 1981 and it was a hotspot from the start. Celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Paul Anka, Louis Prima and Wayne Newton were regulars. Politicians, high-rollers, tourists – they all came through. My doorman? Steve Schirripa who would later play Bobby Baccalieri on *The Sopranos*.

One night, October 28, 1988, a guy came in – a big player, sent over by Caesars Palace. These guys would drop \$100 tips like it was nothing, sometimes picking up the whole cheque for the night. I sent over a bottle of Cristal, the usual for a guest of that calibre. Not ten minutes go by and I hear screaming. The guy had smashed the bottle and stabbed his date in the face with it.

I told Steve Schirripa to get to table 7 and he said, “no, that guy is nuts”. I go over and need to get her medical attention. She was bleeding profusely – he had luckily missed her eye. I told him to get out of my club and he kept saying, “no man”. I said she needs to go to hospital.

He started to fake that he was going to leave with her and unbeknown to me, he still had the neck of the bottle on him. He goes for my throat with the bottle. Luckily, I was agile enough to lean back but he cut me along my chin line. My whole chin was hanging. I was bleeding on my Brioni (*Melissa, I had to wait 6 months for that cotton shirt*). I've gone through a lot in my lifetime, being an associate of the mafia since 12 years old – shot several times, stabbed, even run over but fuck with my wardrobe and you've got a fucking problem! I was armed with 2 gold-plated custom-made calibre revolvers licensed by the state. I shot him between his eyes. He just stood there and swatted his forehead as if he'd been bitten by a mosquito. That's when I made a mental note to myself to buy a bigger gun! I shot him again and also in his heart and he dropped dead to the ground.

The shooting was classified as self-defence however, I learnt that I had just killed Lorenzo Morales. He was in town to conduct business and had flown in from Colombia to set up a supply chain for Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel. I had just killed his highly placed emissary.

Very soon after, I came home to find blood, dead chickens and salamanders with pins through their heads. An anthropology professor told me it was a Colombian death warning.

Within the artwork laid out on my floor were photos of me and my daughter. They weren't just off the shelf – they were surveillance pictures.

The anthropologist said that they will kill your pets, your children and then torture you in the most painful way in public.

My daughter was my life. I would do anything to protect her. I couldn't let this stand so found a way to organise a face-to-face meeting with Pablo Escobar to explain what happened.

A father's love

The meeting was planned in a church. I walked in and Pablo Escobar is on his knees, his henchmen motion to me with their guns to walk forward and the next thing I know, I'm in Pablo Escobar's self-made prison in his house. I was shackled in a chair, nude and in and out of consciousness over two days.

Someone walks into the room and I can see they have well pressed slacks and polished shoes and they were holding *The Godfather* book. I thought I was hallucinating. It was Pablo Escobar. He said, "*Why didn't you tell me you were in The Godfather, that's my favourite book*".

I'm unshackled and invited to dinner and there I told him what happened in the club. Before I went to Columbia, I did my homework and found out he had a daughter the same age as mine... Pablo Escobar said, "Why did you come here". I replied, you're a father, if someone was going to kill your daughter, wouldn't you do the same?". He walked from the dining table, there were henchmen all around the room and then he hugged and kissed me and said, "there's few men like you and I".

He then said, "after dinner, I want you to do a favour". I replied, "whatever you want me to do". He said, "I want you to do the closing scene of the movie with me". At this point I thought I was definitely going to die, as Carlo is killed in his last scene of *The Godfather*.

Pablo Escobar said he knew the lines and so he proceeded to play Michael and the henchmen were there... I was even handed a plane ticket, like in my last scene. We get in the car and his henchmen are in the backseat – I hear, "Hello Carlo". I took my last breath and thought of my daughter. Then they all burst out laughing and Pablo Escobar gives me a hug and a kiss and tells me to have a safe trip. A Colombian sense of humour I guess!

I came back home to my daughter and that was all that mattered.





GIANNI'S NEW BOOK
"MAFIA SECRETS",
PUBLISHED BY
KENSINGTON
PUBLISHING CORP.
WILL BE AVAILABLE
ON AMAZON AND
ALL MAJOR
BOOKSTORES IN
2025.

If there's one thing I want to leave people with...

Since *The Godfather*, I've been in 46 films that won 9 Oscar's, as well as 200 hours of dramatic television. I've worked behind the scenes as a producer and writer.

If there's one thing I want to leave people with, it's this: be a dreamer, be a visionary. If you've got a dream, go after it with everything you've got. I mean, look at me – where I came from.

I learned acting from Marlon Brando and singing from Frank Sinatra. Now, I'm releasing my new book, "*Mafia Secrets*" next year, written with Michael Benson.

I feel incredibly accomplished but I owe it all to the mentors who helped me along the way. Without them – and without God – I wouldn't be where I am today.



EXCLUSIVE CHARITY EVENING WITH
GIANNI RUSSO IN LONDON – SATURDAY,
5TH APRIL 2025

JOIN US FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY
NIGHT, ALL IN SUPPORT OF A WORTHY
CAUSE!



STEP INTO THE WORLD OF
THE GODFATHER
FOR AN UNFORGETTABLE NIGHT!

INFO@NIROSHINI.COM

JOIN US FOR AN EXCLUSIVE, ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EVENT WITH LEGENDARY ACTOR AND STORYTELLER GIANNI RUSSO ON SATURDAY, 5TH APRIL 2025, AT A SECRET LONDON VENUE. THIS INTIMATE GATHERING IS STRICTLY LIMITED TO ONLY 20 GUESTS – A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO HEAR TALES STRAIGHT FROM THE MAN WHO LIVED THEM.

DRESS THE PART IN "GODFATHER-THEMED ATTIRE" AND INDULGE IN A SPECIALLY CRAFTED "THREE-COURSE MEAL" FEATURING GIANNI'S SIGNATURE PASTA DISH. AS THE EVENING UNFOLDS, HE WILL PERFORM SONGS FROM HIS HIT SHOW, ADAPTED FROM HIS MEMOIR "HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER: MY LIFE IN THE MOVIES AND THE MOB". HE'LL SHARE ASTONISHING BEHIND-THE-SCENES STORIES FROM THE GODFATHER, HIS POLIO BATTLE, HIS UNIQUE ROLE AS A MESSENGER FOR THE MOB AND HIS FRIENDSHIPS WITH LEGENDS LIKE MARLON BRANDO AND FRANK SINATRA.

BE CAPTIVATED AS GIANNI RECALLS MOMENTS WITH MARILYN MONROE, A DEAR FRIEND IN THE FINAL YEARS OF HER LIFE.

THE EVENING WILL CULMINATE IN AN EXCLUSIVE AUCTION FEATURING ONE-OF-A-KIND PRIZES.

TIME: 4PM – 8PM
PRICE: £1,000

PRAISE FOR GIANNI RUSSO:

"GIANNI RUSSO HAS SEEN A LOT, DONE A LOT AND TELLS IT ALL. AMAZING!"
– NICK PILEGGI, ACADEMY AWARD-NOMINATED SCREENWRITER OF GOODFELLAS

"GIANNI RUSSO IS A TRUE CHARACTER WHO HAS LED A MOST COLOURFUL LIFE".
– GAY TALESE, JOURNALIST AND NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER BOOK REVIEW:
"GIANNI RUSSO WALKS THE WALK AND TALKS THE TALK. WHAT A LIFE. A WORTHY READ".
– ROBERT DE NIRO

SECURE YOUR PLACE NOW – A JOURNEY INTO THE STORIES BEHIND THE SCREEN, THE MOB AND HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN AGE!

BOOKINGS: INFO@NIROSHINI.COM



Note from founder of Niroshini Mini Magazine, Melissa Day...

Well, Mr Russo, what can I say? This has truly been an unforgettable experience.

First of all, I want to thank you for treating me with such respect and as an equal. You are, without a doubt, special and one of a kind. In today's world, many seem to forget the significant role the mafia played in shaping history so to speak with you and learn about its roots, way of life and your family's legacy has been absolutely fascinating.

To me, part of the intrigue surrounding the mafia comes from the fact that people often root for the underdog, especially when they feel disillusioned with how society operates. The mafia, in my eyes, represents survival.

Your life has been nothing short of extraordinary, from being a mafia associate to your successful transition into Hollywood. Without you, *The Godfather* – arguably the most iconic film ever made (and in my opinion, *the best*) – wouldn't have existed. Your exceptional negotiation skills, bridging Paramount and the mob, were pivotal.

What I admire most is your unwavering drive – your refusal to see any dream or vision as unattainable. That's a spirit I deeply respect.

I also want to acknowledge your courage as a father. What you did in confronting Pablo Escobar to protect your daughter, is something few men would have dared to do. It speaks volumes about your strength and devotion.

Gianni, most of all, I want to thank you for entrusting me with your story and for sharing the personal connection between you, your daughter and Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn has played a significant role in my life, too. I never had any family photos growing up and the only picture I had on my wall was a canvas of Marilyn – I felt a connection to her. Later, I even studied her films as part of my degree. I understand family dynamics are never straightforward which is why I'm so happy to know you have been reunited with your daughter.

There has always been a sense that the public believes they "own" certain celebrities, that they know everything about them inside and out. Marilyn was no exception – everyone wanted a piece of her. What brings me personal joy is knowing that this incredibly iconic woman had the gift of a child and the world never knew.

I love that your daughter has chosen to remain anonymous and I send her all my love.

Gianni, as I said, you are truly one of a kind and I'll hold our conversations close to my heart for a lifetime. Thank you.

God Bless.

The Serenity Suit



Discover inner peace and
radiant living with The
Serenity Suit: your guide to
mental health, well-being
and holistic beauty.

With the endorsement of Botox by heavyweight influencers, prospects for the next generation seem bleak. Melissa Day explains why Gen Z is, in fact, ageing faster.

Melissa Day, a cosmetic acupuncturist, laments that we are experiencing a pandemic of self-loathing rather than self-love. Day raises an important question about the influence of popular figures who share their preference for Botox with young female followers on Instagram. She says, "It is disheartening to witness figures of such stature and influence promoting such a practice. Consider this: how would you feel if you saw someone preparing to inject Botox into a baby's face? The mere thought is horrifying, not only because it involves a baby but also because we instinctively recognise the harm that is about to be inflicted. Why, then, are we so willing to subject ourselves to this?". Day explains that the Gen Z population has increasingly embraced "tweakments" like Botox and fillers but paradoxically experiences accelerated ageing.

- 1) Did you know that the secondary ingredient in Botox is human albumin – a protein from human blood?
- 2) Are you aware that using Botox as a preventative means to ageing, prior to visible wrinkles, is not FDA approved?
- 3) Did you know that Botox injected over a long period for fine lines and wrinkles causes facial muscle loss?
- 4) Did you know that to evaluate the Lethal Dose of each batch, Botox is tested on animals?

In the UK, Botox use among people under 30 has surged. Reportedly, one million pounds is spent annually on corrective surgery as a result of these injections.

Day has observed a rise in clients who have experienced negative consequences from Botox and now seek natural alternatives. For example, one client in her late 20s expressed concern about a complete loss of movement around one eye after receiving Botox injections, with no improvement over time. Another client experienced an allergic reaction that resulted in temporary difficulties with speech and swallowing for several weeks following treatment.

In April 2002, the FDA approved Botulinum Toxin-A injections (Botox) for cosmetic use on existing wrinkles in three facial areas: frown lines between the eyes, forehead and crow's feet. It does not address sagging skin, muscle tone or facial contour (like Day's signature "Niroshini Cosmetic Acupuncture Ritual"). Botox works by paralysing facial muscles but it needs to be repeated every 3 to 4 months. Made from a toxin produced by the Clostridium bacterium, Botox blocks nerve signals to facial muscles, temporarily relaxing wrinkles.

In today's society, people are increasingly mindful of what they use and consume. For those following a vegan lifestyle, it is noteworthy that Botox is incompatible with vegan principles due to the inclusion of human albumin, along with the fact that Botox is tested on animals.

Botox is also unsuitable for pregnant or breastfeeding women. In animal tests, Botox caused low birth weight, premature births and developmental issues. Although the same risks "may not" occur in human babies, the lack of evidence warrants caution. With Botox potentially travelling from the injection site to other parts of the body, its long-term effects remain largely unknown.

Using Botox as a preventative measure against ageing is not FDA-approved. Preventative use can lead to premature ageing, causing facial muscle loss and the overlying skin to thin over time. Long-term Botox use for fine lines and wrinkles has been shown to cause facial muscle loss which can worsen wrinkles as nearby muscles try to compensate, resulting in more fine lines, wrinkles and even protruding veins.

Some potential risks of Botox include:

- Loss of bladder control - Upset stomach - Trouble breathing - Difficulty speaking or swallowing - Drooling - Vision problems
- Flu-like symptoms - Droopy eyelids or asymmetrical eyebrows - Crooked smile - Eye dryness or excessive tearing - Muscle weakness - Reduced cortical brain activity in hands - Inflammatory immune response

Here are some natural alternatives that Day argues can be more effective than Botox:

One of the most popular natural alternatives to Botox is cosmetic acupuncture, a centuries-old technique involving tiny needles inserted into the face to stimulate collagen production, improve skin texture and enhance muscle tone. Many find it to be a relaxing, rejuvenating experience that leaves their skin looking more youthful.

Another option is Gua Sha, an ancient Chinese ritual using a smooth tool to massage the face and neck. This technique increases circulation, reduces inflammation and improves lymphatic drainage, resulting in firmer, toned skin.

Active skincare ingredients like retinol, vitamin C and hyaluronic acid are known for their anti-ageing properties and are widely available in skincare products.

Whether you're interested in cosmetic acupuncture, Gua Sha or natural skincare ingredients, there are many alternatives to Botox. These options can help you achieve a youthful appearance while caring for your skin, health and the environment.

To book Melissa for her Niroshini Cosmetic Acupuncture Ritual, email: info@niroshini.com



NIROSHINI

www.niroshini360.com
