

## Frank D. Laico 1918–2013



Frank Laico, longtime Columbia Records engineer and one of the preeminent studio craftsmen of the last century, passed away at his residence in Shore-

line, Washington on April 19. He was 94.

From 1946 until 1982, the New York-born Laico presided over scores of classic Columbia jazz sessions by Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Stan Getz, Bill Evans and others, while cutting pop hits for the likes of Tony Bennett ("I Left My Heart in San Francisco"), Bob Dylan ("Positively 4th Street") and Frank Sinatra ("Theme from New York, New York"), recorded mainly at New York's renowned 30th Street Studio. In the early '90s Laico reunited with his longtime friend Bennett for a string of projects that included Bennett's 1992 Grammy Award-winning comeback album, *Perfectly Frank*. The Audio Engineering Society honored Laico with its prestigious AES Honorary Member award in 2011.

The only engineer to begin recording on wax and end on digital multitracks, Laico came into the business with no formal training. One of seven children raised in Manhattan during the Depression, as a teenager Laico sacrificed schooling in order to help support his family. While working at a Bronx butcher shop in 1939, by chance Laico landed an apprenticeship at the World Broadcasting Corporation; by 1946, Laico had his first job at Columbia, wiring up microphones at the company's Studio A facility on 799 7th

Avenue. With three years of service to his credit, Laico was well positioned when Columbia transformed an old Armenian church on East 30th Street into its newest recording facility in the fall of 1949.

Over the next 30 years, the signature sound that Laico would help develop at the palatial 30th Street Studio would become his lasting legacy. With its 100-foot high ceilings and an equally massive floor space, the studio, like nearby Webster Hall and the Pythian Temple uptown, helped promote the bigger-is-better recording ethos of the 1950s. Harnessing the enormous ambiance was not for the faint of heart, yet Laico's ability to capture on tape the excitement of a large, live performance within such a vast setting—using few gadgets but endless ingenuity—made him one of the acknowledged masters of his trade. Decades later, the subtleties of Miles Davis' 1957 classic "Round About Midnight", Tony Bennett's pulsating rendition of the Broadway standard "Toot, Toot, Tootsie! (Goodbye)" (from 1961's *My Heart Sings*), as well as thousands of other pivotal recordings from the time are testament to Laico's engineering excellence.

"Frank was one of the all-time great mixers—no question about it," affirmed producer/engineer Roy Halee, a colleague of Laico's at Columbia. "At 30th Street, you could whisper at one end and hear it all the way across the room, and that scared a lot of people. But not Frank—he could take anyone in there and get a really fine sound. He had that studio in his back pocket."

In 1990 at the age of 72, Laico was lured out of retirement by his friend Tony Bennett, who tapped Laico to handle the re-mix work for the Columbia compilation *Forty Years: The Artistry Of Tony Bennett*. With Bennett on the rebound, in 1992 Laico found himself back in the control room for the making of Bennett's *Perfectly Frank*, the Sinatra tribute

album. More than 40 years had passed since Laico's first session with Bennett at 30th Street, making theirs the longest surviving artist-engineer relationship in history.

Though his name often went missing from album sleeves and liner notes over the years, Laico's skill as a studio craftsman was never lost on those who sought his services. Laico recalled a late '60s session with Frank Sinatra, who'd returned to New York for the making of the *Cycles* album with producer Don Costa. "After that first session, Sinatra came up to me and handed me this roll of bills, as a way of saying 'thank you,'" said Laico. "I told him, 'please, I can't accept the money—besides, it's more important that you just respect me the same way I do you.' He said, 'Well, I can appreciate that, but you're here most nights until midnight, and you probably don't get to see your wife and children that often as a result, right?' So he asked me if I would just give the money to my wife Colette, and have her pick out the best restaurant around so we could all go out and have a nice dinner, on him. I told him I could live with that—just this once!"

A U.S. Army veteran, Laico worked on the top-secret Bell Laboratories communications operation "SIGSALY" during World War II, and earned a Purple Heart.

He is survived by his wife Colette; his children, Frank (Joan) Laico and Annette Laico; and two grandchildren, Stephen Laico and Jennifer (Theran) Colwell.

The family would like to acknowledge Dan Mortensen and the Pacific Northwest Section of the Audio Engineering Society, as well as writer Dave Simons, whose book *Studio Stories* recalls Laico's remarkable career.

In lieu of flowers, please contribute to Paws, PO Box 1037, Lynnwood, WA 98046, [www.paws.org](http://www.paws.org).

Dan Mortensen