

Connie Francis was a 20th century star who found fame once again in the 21st century – via TikTok



The queen of Song

The inimitable Connie Francis sadly left us in July this year. *Vintage Rock* pays tribute to a shining light of the golden era and one of the most successful singers in chart history.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

In early 2025, one of the biggest female artists of the late 1950s and early 1960s found herself in the news for the first time in decades. It had been 63 years since Connie Francis had a single hit the US Top 10 and now, here she was once more, a surprise star of TikTok at the age of 87.

It's unlikely many of the baby-faced Gen Z-ers who recorded themselves lip-syncing to the singer's 1962 song *Pretty Little Baby* knew much of Francis' discography or that she was among the best-selling music artists of all time, yet that song has featured in over 22.5 million videos on the social media platform, amassing more than – at the time of writing – 45.5 billion views.

Sadly, Francis was too ill at the time to capitalise on *Pretty Little Baby*'s newfound popularity. Though she released a statement saying she was “flabbergasted and amazed” at the song's shock

reemergence, her failing health meant she was forced to turn down invitations to appear on TV and radio. She died a few months later.

Yet what was truly amazing about *Pretty Little Baby* going viral 63 years after it was recorded was that it wasn't even one of Francis' best-known numbers – it was simply a hastily knocked-off B-side to the single *I'm Gonna Be Warm*



Connie Francis's debut album *Who's Sorry Now* made her a star, its title track her first Top 10 hit

This Winter, a No.18 hit for the singer in 1962. “To tell you the truth, I didn't even remember the song!” Francis told *People* magazine in May 2025. “I had to listen to it to remember.”

Before this surprise late-career surge, Francis' most popular track was either her cover of the 1923 standard *Who's Sorry Now?* or her 1958 hit *Stupid Cupid*. It's that latter song that trails *Pretty Little Baby* as Spotify's most streamed Connie song and which also informs the title of her 2023 Best Of collection.

For Francis' fanbase, who'd remained loyal through the years even when the rest of the world's interest had drifted, it was vindication for staying true to their hero. It wasn't as if she'd totally laid low since her early 1960s heyday, but – before her TikTok revival – she'd been in a form of semi-retirement, her mental health shattered by a series of personal tragedies.

The darkness that seemed to envelop Francis' later life was, however, in stark contrast to the image she projected at the beginning of her career. When she

➔ broke through with *Who's Sorry Now?* in early 1958, she was marketed as the spotless girl-next-door, an unthreatening, white-bread entertainer in the mold of a Ricky Nelson, Patti Page or her own teenage boyfriend, Bobby Darin. Yet that simplistic branding masked a fierce intelligence – born Concetta Franconero in New Jersey in 1937, she'd contemplated enrolling in a pre-med scholarship at New York University before the success of *Who's Sorry Now?* propelled her into the big time. Born to Italian-American parents, Francis (she was advised to drop her birth name on the suggestion of talent scout Arthur Godfrey) was fluent in Italian, Yiddish and Hebrew, and indeed would record several albums in other languages (1959's *Connie Francis Sings Italian Favorites* peaked at No.4). Medicine's loss would be music's gain, however, and by 1967, the artist that would be called "the Queen of Song" had amassed 35 Top 40 hits in the States and sold 35 million records worldwide.

Though it was *Who's Sorry Now?* that blasted the 20-year-old to stardom, she was initially unsure of the song. "My father wanted me to record *Who's Sorry Now?*, and I didn't wanna do it," the singer told *People* earlier this year. "I said, 'When was that thing written, anyway?' and he said, '1923.' I said, '1923! The kids will laugh me off *American Bandstand!*'"

Her father's instincts were proved right, however, and the song shot into the Billboard Top 10, shifting a million copies, while topping the UK charts.

Other hits soon followed – *Stupid Cupid* (which reached No.14 in the US and No.1 in the UK), *My Happiness*, *Lipstick On Your Collar*, *Among My Souvenirs* and *Mama* among them. In fact, Francis' fame was so immense at the end of the 50s she even made the move to the big screen. Like Elvis' movie career, though, this was mostly feather-light fare – 1960's *Where The Boys Are* was a forgettable coming-of-age drama,

where she was cast as a virginal teen who finds herself in a relationship with a young jazz musician, played by Frank Gorshin (later to find fame as the Riddler in *Batman*), while 1963's *Follow The Boys* had her front-and-centre in a film *Variety* dismissed as "a lackluster romantic comedy." 1964's *Looking For Love*, meanwhile, was so notorious that talk show host Johnny Carson (who cameoed) would later joke that it should be transferred to flammable film stock.

Sadly for Francis, the 'British Invasion' of the 60s made her line of honeyed pop and wholesome balladry seem increasingly anachronistic, and as the decade wore on, the hits dried up. By the end of the decade, she was ploughing the nightclub and cabaret circuit, her chart-topping days long behind her. That she was also entertaining the troops in Vietnam, while the artists that replaced her were protesting the war, only served to highlight how culturally out-of-step she was.

"It didn't matter what I recorded," Francis told *Medium* in 2024, reflecting on her loss of status in the later 1960s. "The industry was held hostage by The Beatles and the Dave Clark Five and all of those groups."

A series of tragedies around this time only served to aggravate her already precarious mental health. In 1967, her aunt was killed in a mugging attack and her father, claiming his daughter had become unstable as a result of her grief, committed her to a psychiatric institution. A worse ordeal was to

Francis also had a short film career through the late 50s and 60s

come in 1974, when the singer was raped at knife-point in a hotel bedroom in Jericho, New York. Held for several hours by a masked man, she was discovered by police, naked and gagged and tied to an overturned chair. She later sued the hotel and was awarded \$2.5 million in compensation when the courts ruled that its management had been careless in leaving a broken lock and door unfixed. (Her assailant was never found.)

Suffering from what would now be understood as PTSD, Francis

"I didn't have the benefit of going to a support group because it would have been in the *National Enquirer* the following week"

CONNIE FRANCIS



Francis was multilingual, and *Connie Francis Sings Italian Favorites* reached No.4 in 1959



retreated from public life and sank into a depression. Reflecting on the effect the attack had on her, she told *Fox News* in 2018: "I didn't have the benefit of going to a support group for women who were raped because it would have been in the *National Enquirer* the following week. So I had to do that in the privacy of my own home. But it did take seven years out of my life. I didn't grant an interview for seven years. I didn't sing for seven years. It was a horrible experience."

Her mental health struggles were compounded in 1981 when her brother, George Franconero Jr, was murdered in a Mafia-related hit. George, a lawyer with ties to organised crime figures, was gunned down outside his home, an event that plunged Francis into deeper despair. She was committed to psychiatric facilities several times throughout the 1980s, battling bipolar disorder and undergoing electroconvulsive therapy. Furthermore, a botched

operation on her nose damaged the singer's vocal cords, requiring years of therapy. In 1984, she attempted suicide, and was in a coma for several days.

Her sporadic live performances often made news due to her erratic behaviour. During a show at the London Palladium in 1989, her speech became slurred and the press accused her of being drunk

on stage (she denied the charge, and claimed that she was under the influence of the painkiller Cortisone), while in 1991 she appeared incoherent in an interview on an US chat show. The following year she collapsed on stage in New Jersey and was told that her use of lithium, which she'd been taking since the mid-1970s, was killing her. ➔

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Our pick of the must-hear tracks from Connie Francis' early catalogue...

Who's Sorry Now (1958)



This blues-infused cover of a 1923 Tin Pan Alley standard transformed Francis' career from struggling artist to star. Originally a waltz by Ted Snyder, Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, Francis' version features a slow-burning rhythm and emotive vocals that build to a defiant climax.

Stupid Cupid (1958)



Penned by Howard Greenfield and Neil Sedaka, this feisty rock'n'roller captures the frustrations of young love with Buddy Holly-esque twang and playful lyrics. Francis' energetic delivery, complete with sassy inflections, makes it irresistibly fun and eminently danceable.

Lipstick On Your Collar (1959)



A sprightly jukebox favourite about infidelity, this song boasts a dynamite guitar solo by George Barnes and Francis' robust, accusatory vocals. Its greatness stems from the upbeat tempo contrasting the betrayal theme, making it a true proto-feminist anthem.

Everybody's Somebody's Fool (1960)



This perky ballad opens with a seaside organ intro and features an irresistible chorus about unrequited love. Francis' performance elevates the lovelorn lyrics, blending country flavours with pop appeal. Historically, it was her first US No.1 and the first by a solo female artist on the Hot 100.

Where The Boys Are (1961)



A yearning widescreen ballad, this track from the film of the same name features impassioned vocals and epic orchestral swells. Co-written by Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield, it peaked at No.4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and No.5 in the UK.

Despite early chart-topping success, Francis' star fell through the later 1960s



➤ Cleaning up her act, Francis made a complete recovery and the 90s and 00s would see her make sporadic comebacks. She returned to performing in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, and in 2007, was inducted into the Hit Parade Hall of Fame.

There aren't many artists whose lives are so storied that they make for unputdownable autobiography, but Connie Francis' two books (excluding 1962's shallow cash-in *For Every Young Heart: Connie Francis Talks To Teenagers*) are amongst music's most essential memoirs. 1984's *Who's Sorry Now*, which recalled her 1974 rape in unflinching detail, became a *New York Times* bestseller, while 2017's *Among My Souvenirs* was widely acclaimed. Talking about writing the book to *Boomer* magazine, she said "[it] was an enormous amount of work – a real rollercoaster ride. One day I'd be laughing hysterically and the next be hysterical with tears."

Francis formally retired the year after *Among My Souvenirs*' publication, fully expecting to live the rest of her days in peace and quiet. Little could she have known that an obscure song from her youth would, just a few years later, revive interest in her work, and lead to invitations to appear on some of TV's biggest talk shows.

It must have been a relief for the now-octogenarian singer that the media finally wanted to talk to her about her songs and not her dramatic life. In the 1990s she told *The Daily Telegraph* that the "poor Connie Francis" line "gets nauseating after a while", and it delighted her that those

"It's hard to believe... But I think [*Pretty Little Baby*] has a ring of innocence in this chaotic time and it connects with people"

CONNIE FRANCIS

DREAM LOVER

If the media of the 1950s had been as invasive then as it is now, it's likely Connie Francis' relationship with fellow pop icon Bobby Darin would have been over the newspapers as much as Timothée Chalamet and Kylie Jenner's courtship is today.

They first met in 1956 when Darin, a budding songwriter, pitched a jingle at her office. "He played me this song and I made a couple of changes to it. Let's just say he wasn't happy," Francis recalled to Fox News in 2018. "He said, 'Me and this lady don't dance to the same tune. I'm outta here.' So he took his song and started to leave! But he came back with the changes I made. It was an instant dislike that turned into love."

Darin, plagued by rheumatic fever since childhood, was in a race against time. Francis admired his intensity: "He was an amazing human being," she told Fox. "The most interesting human being I've ever met in my life. He had a drive that I hadn't seen in anyone before. He said, 'I have to be a legend by the time I'm 25. Because that's when doctors said I'm supposed to die.'"

But Francis's controlling father opposed their relationship, even chasing Darin with a gun during a TV taping. "My manager saw it and screamed, 'Run, Bobby, Run.'"



Connie Francis described not marrying Bobby Darin, who she dated in the 50s, as the biggest mistake of her life

Bobby dashed through all of the seats and escaped through the men's bathroom window," she recounted.

Fearing for Darin's health, Francis ended the relationship. "He had a delicate heart," she told *Closer Weekly* in 2025. "I was scared something might happen to him because of the stress and my dad's hatred toward him."

Darin died in 1973, aged 37, but even in the final year of Francis' life, it was clear what her former boyfriend meant to her. "I think of him every single day and still play his music all the time," she explained. "Not a day goes by that I don't think of him."

young people who'd embraced this *Pretty Little Baby* knew nothing of her tragic past. That such modern-day celebrities such as Nara Smith, Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian posted videos of themselves lip-syncing to it only bolstered her and the track's popularity. Francis even joined TikTok herself.

"It's a cute song," Francis told *The New York Times* in one of her final interviews. "I couldn't imagine that it has the effect that it has worldwide on people – it's hard to believe. I wanted something for the B-side of a single and I chose something that wouldn't give my A-side any competition. I don't even know the name of the record that I put it on. But I think it has a ring of innocence in this chaotic time and it connects with people."

Connie Francis passed away of pneumonia on 16 July 2025, at the age of 87. One of the hottest talents of the late 50s died as a viral sensation. Though her work was often dismissed as lightweight and disposable, in 2025 that was proved to be far from the truth, when a song she barely remembered recording resonated with music fans born decades after her heyday. Testament to that is that even today's biggest artists came out to pay tribute on the singer's death: "Today, we lost a legend. Connie Francis and her music was a part of the soundtrack of my childhood," posted the Grammy Award-winning singer LeAnn Rimes on her Instagram account. "Her voice and the gift of her music will live on, forever." May she rest in peace. ★