

# Who Says **Wise** Guys? Can't Be **Nice**

Frank Vincent guides us on cigars, The Sopranos, and being a real man

by Tom Zarzecki

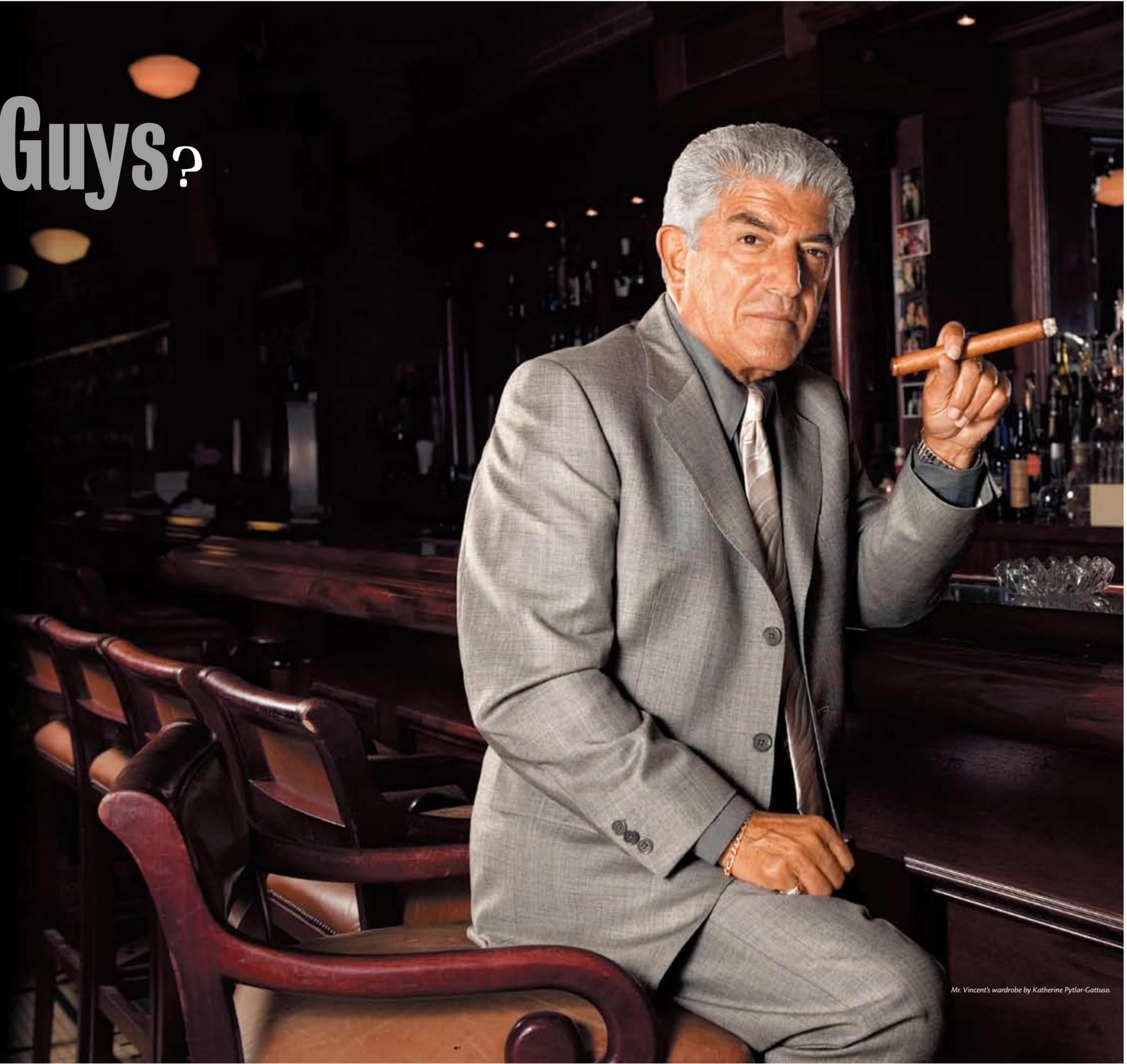
*"Go home and get your f#@kin' shine box."*

Those were the immortal words of "made" man Billy Batts as he made the critical mistake of dissing Tommy DeVito in gangster classic *Goodfellas*. And, if you remember, Tommy, played by Joe Pesci, did go home... only to return later, beat poor Billy into a bloodied pulp, and then bury his lime-covered remains on the side of some dark highway.

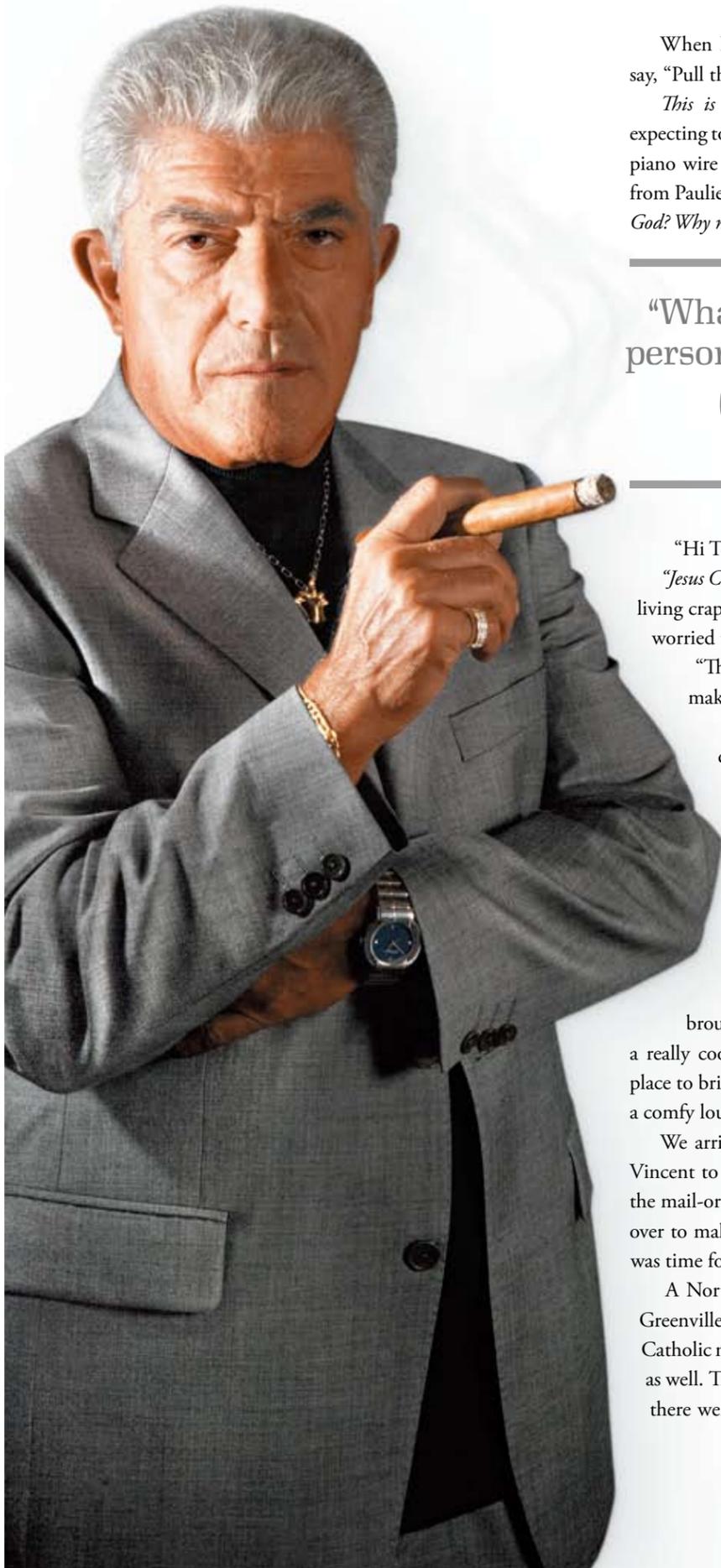
Unfortunately, these images were all I could think of as I drove in my car to pick up the "package." As I pulled the tollbooth ticket and entered the New Jersey Turnpike - smack-dab in the middle of Soprano-land - my heart began to race as dime-sized beads of sweat rolled down my forehead. What in the name of God had I gotten myself into?

Now, we're not talking about guns, booze, drugs, or even smuggled Cuban cigars. *This* package stood at around five-foot-nine, 175 pounds, and went by the name of Frank Vincent. At first, I'd thought it was a good idea to pick the man up in person so I could get to know him a little better on the way to our interview venue, but now I began to second-guess my decision. *Just great*, I thought, *I'm going to have psycho-bastard Phil Leotardo, Johnny Sack's second-in-command, sitting in my car...* the same wiseguy degenerate who rearranged Nicky Santoro's face with an aluminum bat in *Casino*.

Shit.



*Mr. Vincent's wardrobe by Katherine Pytlar-Gattuso.*



When I arrived, I heard an ominous monotone voice say, "Pull the car around the back."

*This is it*, I thought as I peered around the corner expecting to find Christopher Moltisanti ready to wrap some piano wire around my neck, or a vintage "how ya doin'?" from Paulie Walnuts brandishing a rusty metal shovel. *Why, God? Why me...*

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"What **cigars** say about me personally is that I just really **enjoy smoking** a cigar. It's pretty simple."

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"Hi Tom, Frank Vincent – great to meet you!"  
*"Jesus Christ!"* I screeched like a little girl. "You scared the living crap out of me!" Positive that I was visibly shaken, I worried that fresh trousers were in order.

"That was very nice of you to pick me up, Tom. This makes it a lot easier on me."

Easier for what? To use me as a human shield down Rt. 287? To hold a phonebook to my chest just to see what letter of the alphabet the bullet will reach?

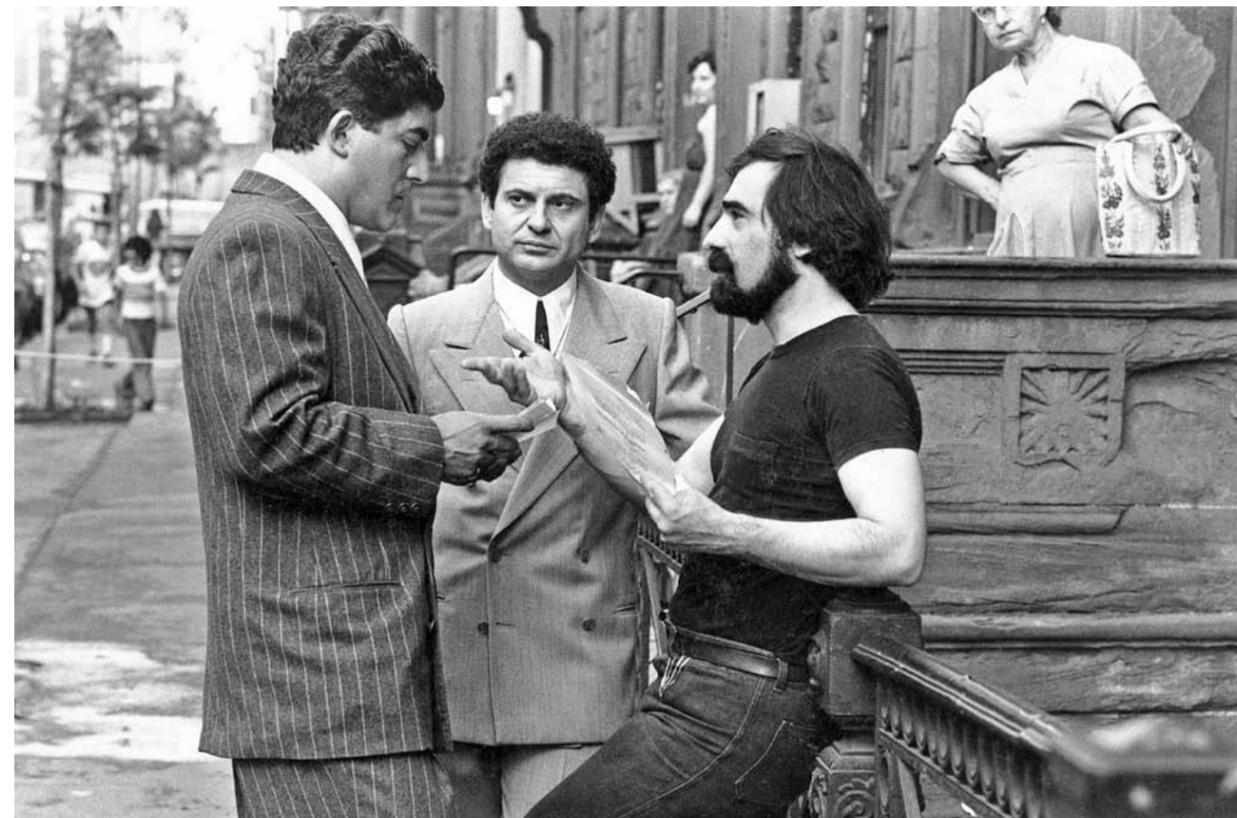
"Usually a limo driver will come," he continued, "but this will work nice."

"Nice"? Nice, how? So you can duct tape my entire body and stuff me in the trunk? *That* kind of "nice"? *Wait a minute*, I thought.

The realization that I drive a Jeep (*no trunk!*) brought me back to reality, and to the matter at hand: a really cool article for *Cigar Magazine*. And what better place to bring Mr. Vincent, a guy who loves his cigars, than a comfy lounge in Whippany, New Jersey?

We arrived without incident and, as I introduced Mr. Vincent to the *CM* staff, Lew Rothman, a major player in the mail-order cigar business who also writes for *CM*, came over to make nice. Once the photo shoot was complete, it was time for the interview, which Lew asked to sit in on.

A North Jersey native, Frank Vincent grew up in the Greenville section of Jersey City, a predominantly Irish-Catholic neighborhood with a smattering of Polish families as well. Though the area was known as a true melting pot, there were only about three Italian families in total and



Frank's inimitable style in 1976's *The Death Collector* caught the eye of director Martin Scorsese (right), landing him a role in 1980's *Raging Bull* with fellow wiseguy Joe Pesci (center).

there was lots of fighting among the neighborhood kids. "The Irish kids beat up the Italian kids, the Polish kids would beat up the Irish kids, the Italian kids beat up the Jewish kids. Everybody was defending their turf," he recalls. On top of all that, he had to look out for the Irish nuns, who, according to Frank, were not above administering beatings of their own. "You had to be tough back then," he noted.

But growing up for Vincent was not all fat lips and bruised knuckles. He vividly remembers his dad and grandfather smoking cigars at home on special occasions – and in an Italian family, there were *always* special occasions. Sweet, blue smoke wafting from room to room, as family and close friends gathered at his house. Brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, in-laws, you name it – they were all there a couple times a month, as Mom cooked a ton of food, and the wine and stories flowed. "The men all played penny-anti poker and smoked cigars," he recalled. "We took pictures, the women talked and played with the babies. It was a very different time back then." Frank's dad smoked small, thin cigars that came five to a box and Frank, as a young man, started smoking them too, because

he thought it made him look older.

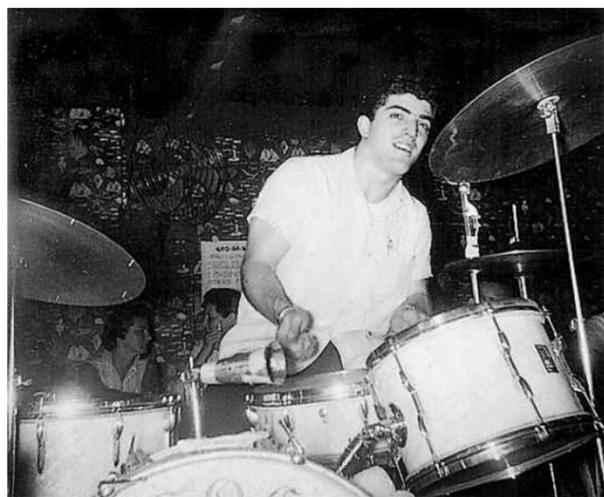
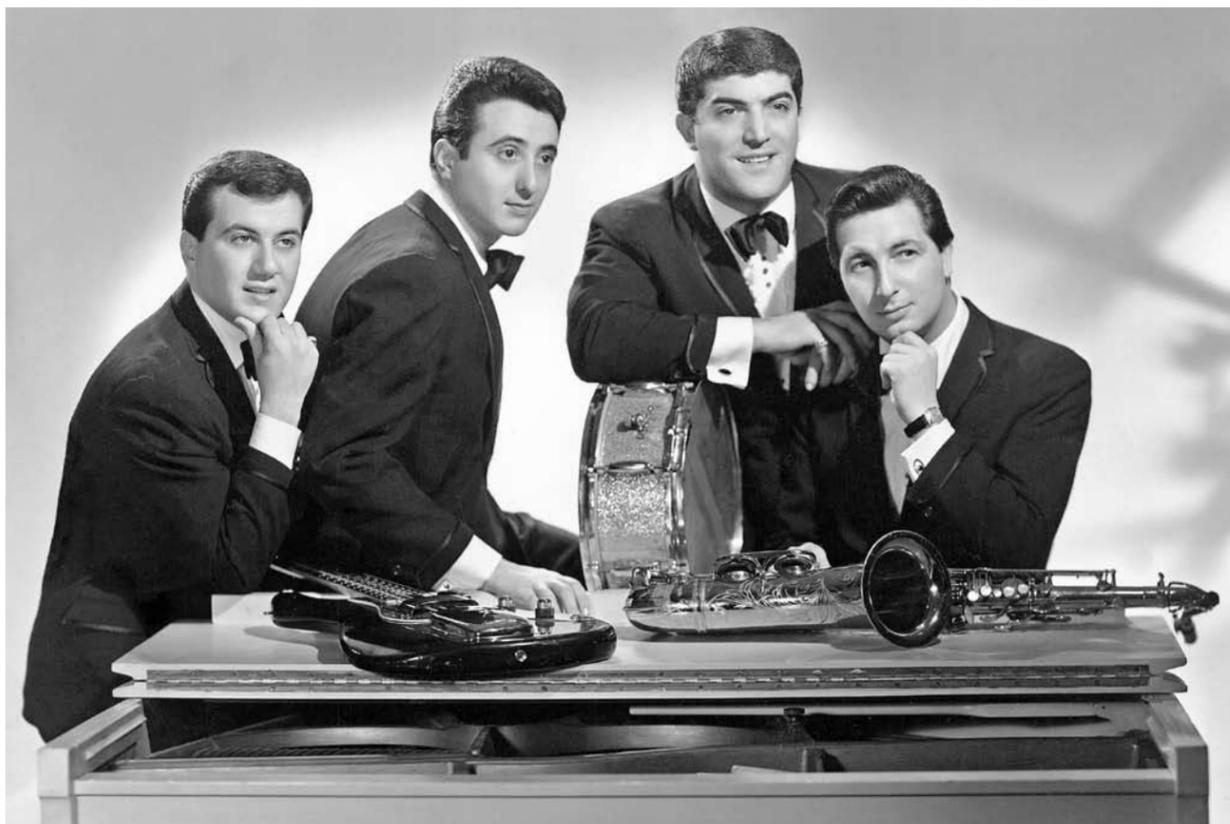
As he matured and began to make some real money, he found himself associating with more accomplished people, many of whom smoked premium cigars. And *that's* the time he remembers first actually enjoying a good cigar. This was the music industry, where Frank lived out his first love: playing

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"While in character, you can look at somebody, raise your eyebrow, then **take a draw on the cigar** – it gives a little more meaning to the moment."

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the drums. A proficient studio musician with his own club band, his weeks were booked solid as he spent his daytimes recording, and performed live during the nights.



Frank, whose first love is music, was a prolific studio drummer throughout the sixties, performing with big names like Paul Anka and Don Costa, in addition to his band, The Arist-O-Cats (top).

While he did most of his recording – including a number of advertising jingles – at studios in New York, he also played at one in Newark, New Jersey, with his mentor, Bill Ramal, an arranger and producer who worked with greats like Del Shannon, Johnny and the Hurricanes, and Don and Juan. Frank lugged his drums in every Saturday for no pay, other than the learning experience and the possibility of getting

noticed – which he did. His break came and he recorded with Paul Anka, Don Costa, and sixty professional musicians.

“Hey,” Lew chimed in. “Did you know a guy named Vinnie Bell?”

“Sure, I know Vinnie Bell! I made a million records with that guy,” said Vincent. “He was one of the hottest guys around.”

“How about Al Caiola?”

“Oh yeah, of course I know Al – forget about it! Al worked with Sinatra and a lot of the big names. I recorded with these guys back in the sixties. How do you know them?”

“They’ve both been regular cigar smokers for years,” Lew told him. “Vinnie smokes Macanudos and Al is a Don Diego smoker.”

Now, this was all a little before my time, but it was fun as hell smoking my cigar and watching these two do the memory-lane thing. But, now it was time to focus on the man’s acting career.

For years, Frank Vincent’s been known as what you might refer to as a “cult actor.” His first on-screen appearance was in 1976 – a movie called *The Death Collector*, also starring long-time pal Joe Pesci. Martin Scorsese clearly liked what he saw and subsequently cast Frank as Salvy in *Raging*

*Bull*. From there, he took roles in numerous television appearances and dozens of films, just about always playing the wiseguy type: *NYPD Blue*, *Law & Order*, *Gotti*, *Casino*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the one that always gets the most recognition, 1990’s *Goodfellas*. Why is his role as Billy Batts so universally popular? What is it about that goddamned shine-box scene that has become immortal?

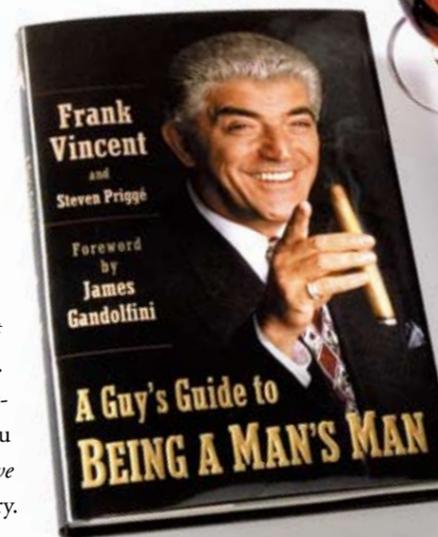
“I can’t tell you that,” said Frank. “I just *can’t* figure that out! On my Web site [www.frankvincent.com], I sell ‘Go Home and Get Your Shine Box’ t-shirts with a picture of Billy Batts. And I’ll tell you what – in the last three months, we sold, like, *five thousand shirts!* I get orders from all over the country. It’s just amazing. I honestly can’t explain it.”

Sure, we all know that Frank Vincent is an accomplished actor: he was awarded the Italian American Entertainer of the Year award, presented by the Italian Tribune, in 2002; a lifetime achievement award from the Back East Picture Show, also in 2002; and earned honors from the Garden State Film Festival in 2005 and 2006, and the New Jersey Film and Screenplay Festival in 2006. What you might *not* know is that he’s also got one of the most eclectic resumes there is. On top of acting and music, he’s produced, written a screenplay, performed stand-up comedy, done a lot of charity work, appeared in a number of rap music videos, and done

**“If there’s a place where people smoke cigars and you don’t like cigars, then just don’t go in there.”**

voiceover work in various genres, including the animated movie *Shark Tale*, and, most interestingly, the smash-hit video game series *Grand Theft Auto* as mob boss Don Salvatore. All three *Grand Theft* games have brought Frank Vincent an entirely new audience that would otherwise never have known of his work.

About that screenplay... this is something he really hopes to turn into a feature film. *Sinking Springs*, a story about the Amish, drugs, and the Philadelphia mob, was written by Frank and his friend Lou Silver based on a story by Jack Englehard, who wrote *Indecent Proposal*. (Any of you cigar-smoking



Treating a lady right, dressing to impress, music, movies, food, and, of course, smoking a cigar... *like a man*. It’s all right here in Frank’s humorous new book.

investors out there who want to put your money into a bona fide Frank Vincent film, here’s your chance!

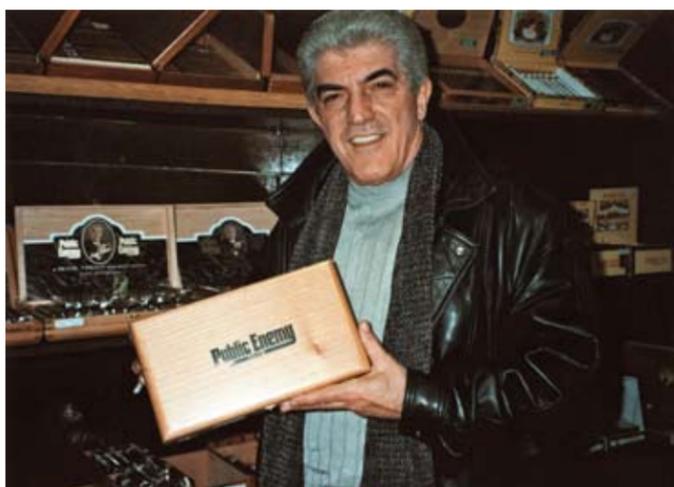
And, let’s not forget the world of book publishing. With coauthor Steven Priggé, Frank recently wrote *A Guy’s Guide to Being a Man’s Man*, published by Berkley Books. This tongue-in-cheek backlash against the recent phenomenon of metrosexuality humorously shows “real men” how to take some pride again and show some self-respect. This book covers all the bases – treating a lady right, how to dress, music and movies, great food, and, best of all, an in-depth look at how to smoke a cigar... *like a man*.

But Frank Vincent smokes cigars not because he’s the quintessential man’s man, but because it’s a passion. He’s no addict, and prefers to smoke only when the occasion is *just right*. We all know what it’s like trying to explain to someone who just doesn’t get it that the smoking of fine cigars is not a habit; it’s a rite of passage. When the passion runs deep, it’s easy to get annoyed trying to justify a love of the leaf, and Frank knows this all too well.

“I’m sure that people have a passion about other things,” he muses. “But I don’t think it’s an easy thing to recruit people to enjoy cigars. I think a lot of people are afraid of cigars.”

“You see seven hundred people at a banquet smoking cigarettes,” Lew jumps in. “*Nobody* is going up to the guy next to him and asking, ‘What brand are you smoking?’ But if it’s cigars, people start to bond instantly. It’s like a club.”

“You could go into the cigar lounge tomorrow night and



The creation of Frank's Public Enemy cigar, crafted at the tail end of the Boom by Nick Perdomo (top right) inspired Frank and investor Brad Freezman (top center) to make a trip to the factory. Unfortunately, the brand became one of the Boom's many casualties. But stay tuned; seems that Mr. Vincent is looking to get back in the game...

find a doctor, a bus driver, a lawyer, or a schoolteacher, and, all of a sudden, they're best friends!" adds Frank. "Cigars are the ultimate bonding tool and I don't think defending them is necessary. I'm glad I smoke cigars. I wish I could smoke more but it's hard to do. First off, you need the time, and secondly, with all the damned smoking laws now, you have to find the right place, too."

So what *about* the new smoking laws, Frank?

"If people want to smoke cigarettes or cigars, they should be allowed to smoke in certain places where people who don't like the idea *shouldn't* go," he simply states. "Maybe you don't like Howard Stern – he has the right to broadcast, but don't turn the dial to his show. So, if there's a place where people smoke cigars and *you* don't like cigars, then just don't go in there."

Frank Vincent prefers big-ass smokes – those Churchills and double coronas with wide ring gauges that seem to

perfectly punctuate his on-screen persona. "I want to pick the right moment – sit, enjoy, and savor the experience," he explained. "That's why I like the larger sizes."

A fan of mild-to-medium body and flavor, he lists some of his faves. "I really like the Davidoff Double Rs. And the Ashton Cabinet is really nice too." For you government officials out there, you'll be glad to know that Frank Vincent does not care for cigars from the island south of Miami, as he finds them a bit too heavy and harsh – just generally not to his liking. So, relax, Mr. Bush; Frankie V. is a law-abiding, Connecticut-shade-puffing American.

We smokers know very well that cigars can be an extremely personal thing, a fact that nonsmokers, or even cigarette smokers, might not understand. The relaxing ritual that often goes with selecting a smoke and finding the right time, the right place, and the right beverage to accompany it... To us, a cigar is not merely a prop, but a reward. But, in the entertainment biz, *is* the cigar sometimes just a prop?

"Well, you look at George Burns; he loved to smoke, but the cigar was certainly a prop for him. As an entertainer or a performer, sometimes you're required to use it as a prop," Frank explains. "I've used it in films and it becomes something that's an extension of the personality; I've often used it for that purpose. While in character, you can look at somebody, raise your eyebrow, then take a draw on the cigar – it gives a little more meaning to the moment. So, it's not always primarily a prop, but used in conjunction with

a certain character, it becomes a part of the persona. A puff on a cigar can also give a nice pause for the character while he's thinking of what to say next." (Or in Frank's typical character's case, before he kicks the livin' Shinola outta somebody.)

So what do cigars say about *Frank Vincent*?

"Wow," he paused in reflection. "I don't know what they say about me, but I think I'll take a puff right now before I answer this question."

"In some of the roles I've played, the cigar has helped the character become more serious or notorious," he continued. "But, like I said, those are just characters. What they say about me *personally* is that I just really enjoy smoking a cigar. It's pretty simple."

"I think the cigar really exudes masculinity for a character – or anyone for that matter," adds Lew. "But I guess, as Freud said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."



From left: Scorsese, Vincent, and Pesci on the set of *Casino*. Perhaps the merciless and fatal beating Frank suffered at the hands (and feet!) of Pesci's character in 1990's *Goodfellas* made it easier to turn the tables on his longtime, real-life friend just five years later in *Casino*.

"People often ask me on my Web site, 'Do I *have to* smoke cigars to be considered a man's man?' No, of course you don't, but, again, it just adds to the persona," Frank says. "And, like Lew said, it's a masculine thing to do. I think every guy should at least know something about it."

Remember the aforementioned illustrious resume? Add cigarmaker to it. During the Cigar Boom, Frank Vincent had his very own brand named Public Enemy, which started when Lou Silver, a New Jersey tobacconist and now Frank's dear friend, asked Frank to make an appearance at his store. "He called me for three whole weeks before I agreed to appear," says Frank. "I finally sat and had lunch, and, of course, a cigar. One thing led to another, and then he asked if I wanted to make a cigar with him – just like that! A couple months later we had our own brand. Nick Perdomo [of Tabacalera Perdomo] made it for us and, let me tell you, it was one hell of a great smoke."

Being new to cigar crafting and not one to do anything halfway, Frank visited the factory to witness the creation of the cigars. "I was completely amazed at what went into making a premium cigar," he recalls. "It's just incredible how the product starts as seeds planted in a field, right down to twenty-five of them being placed in the cedar boxes."

Unfortunately, at ten- and twelve-dollar price points, their baby was born just a little too late in the nineties, and became yet another victim of the infamous Boom. A lot of money

was spent promoting it at venues like the annual RTDA convention, but sadly, the timing was off – by maybe only as little as a year. But all was not lost, as Frank found the entire experience quite rewarding in other ways.

"I'd be someplace in public, and people would approach me and say that they just loved my cigar. To think that I was reaching people that way was a fantastic new experience for me," he said. "For years, I've been so used to people

"I just want to **have fun**  
doing **what I'm doing**. I'd  
really like to **stay here**  
for a while more."

appreciating my TV and movie work, but to have a guy say he loved my cigar was just a big thrill to me. It became very personal."

Glancing Lew's way during this conversation, I began to notice – and then plainly see – the floating halogen light bulb scorching brightly above his head. The man had an idea brewing and nobody was going to stop it from making itself known.

"You want to get back in the cigar business?" he suddenly asked.

"Yeah... you wanna make it for me?"

Lew thought for a split second, and simply said, "Yeah, sure."

"Terrific! We have a deal!" And that was it – no contract, no quibbling... just a handshake between two regular guys.

I couldn't believe I was sitting there as this awesome business deal came out of the wild blue and happened right before my very eyes. Just... wow. (Now, Lew, I don't expect a cut of the action or anything, but how about a picture on the inside lid of the box of Frank pistol-whipping me, or maybe stuffing me in the trunk of a car? That would be really cool. Yeah, yeah, I know: you'll get back to me.)

The timing this time around for the Frank Vincent cigar couldn't be more perfect. With the final season of *The Sopranos*, Frank Vincent will have, without

question, his most mainstream public visibility ever, possibly making "cult status" a thing of the past. With this exposure, a cigar with his name on it is going to kill. (Oofah, pardon the pun.)

Just to brush up, I'd rented *Goodfellas* the day before – a film that I hadn't seen in about ten years. What blew me away was how many people in that movie ended up on *The Sopranos* at one time or another – among them Lorraine Bracco, Michael Imperioli, and, of course, Frank. Sure, we know *why* he was cast for the role of Phil Leotardo, *but what the hell took so long?* With his background and fame from the Billy Batts character, you'd figure the guy was a natural from day one. But, ironically, it was his role as Batts that actually kept him off *The Sopranos*; seems that the show's creator, David Chase, wanted a cast of unknowns for the HBO series. Unfortunately for Frank, Billy Batts had become a cult hero because of that shine-box quote, and Chase felt Vincent was just too recognizable.

But, as they say, good things come to those who wait. Frank made his *Sopranos* debut in season five, as Phil Leotardo, right-hand man to New York kingpin Johnny Sack. Phil, who had just gotten out of the can, wanted back in the game. And what a game it turned out to be when Tony Soprano's cousin, also recently out of prison and played by Steve Buscemi,

committed a vengeance killing on none other than Phil's brother. Leotardo went on the warpath against Tony and the Jersey family – a warpath that was only supposed to last three episodes. But Frank Vincent made such an impression on the audience that Chase decided to not only keep Leotardo, but to evolve the character.

Even with dozens of bad-guy roles under Frank's belt, Phil Leotardo stands out as an outright rotten prick; the man is just pure evil, and I admit that I hate him so goddamned much when I'm watching the show.

"That's good!" Frank replied, obviously pleased. "When I can reach the audience on an emotional level and make them

either love me or hate me, then I've done my job."

Yeah, it *is* his job, but does that make it any less strange that such a nice, down-to-earth guy can portray such evil with what seems like absolute ease? How does he find that evil within himself, and evolve it so it becomes

almost bigger than life?

"It's really very simple: it comes from the writing. On *The Sopranos*, you have to cross every *t* and dot every *i*. You cannot change *one* syllable or *one* word; there is no improvisation," he explains. "When you're on the set, the writers are there with you. If you want to have your character say 'uh' instead of 'um,' you have to ask the writers, and then they will call David Chase to ask for permission. Everyone – including Gandolfini – has to adhere to the rules. So, it's the writing where all the wizardry is."

At this point, both Lew and I were listening intently. This was some seriously good stuff.

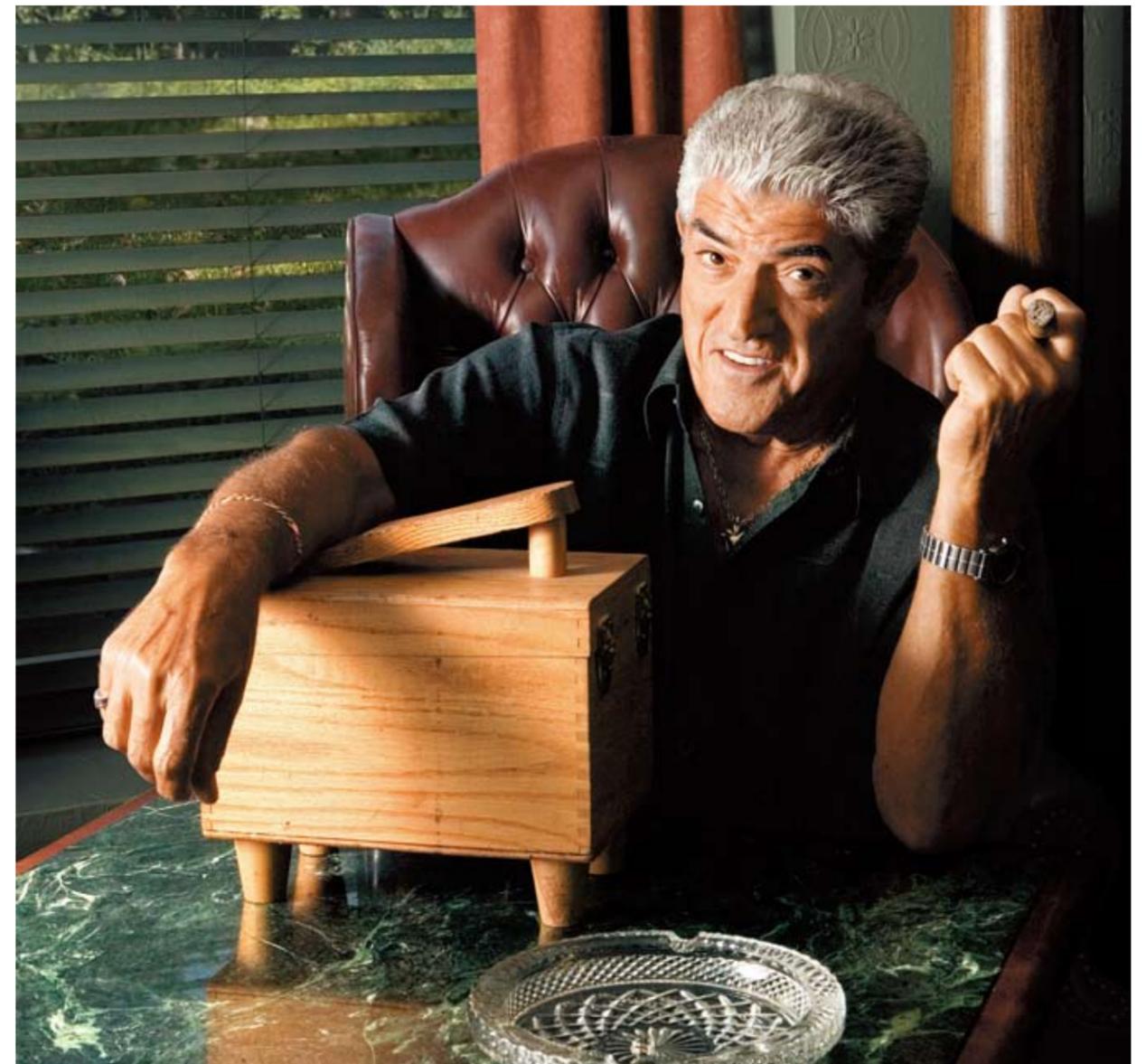
"When the script says to say to a kid, who is perhaps a gay guy who just got beaten, 'You're a filthy fuckin' disgrace,' you just say it; it can't help but come out mean," he goes on. "David Chase sits down at every meeting and writes the script with his people, and he says what's going to happen and what's not going to happen. That's the way the *Sopranos* ship runs – smooth as silk. And it's been running that way for six solid years."

With eight episodes left for the seventh and final season, Frank looks forward to having a bigger role than ever. Though closemouthed about the details, he does say that Phil Leotardo will be bumping heads with the New Jersey crime family like

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Joking around, posing for photos with the *CM* staff, and even offering gambling tips to those of us heading to Vegas the next morning for the RTDA convention, Frank Vincent displayed not a trace of *Sopranos* all-around bad guy Phil Leotardo. We don't want to spoil the fun for anyone, but this wiseguy is one hell of a *nice* guy.

never before. And you wanna know the real killer? Waiting until 2007 for them to hit the air.

With his relatively recent *Sopranos* fame, Frank gets recognized by old friends all the time... except Frank doesn't always recognize *them*. "People come up to me and say, 'Hey, Frankie, don't you remember me?' I ask when I last saw them, and the guy will say something like 1972! I'm thinking, jeez, they gained sixty pounds and lost all their hair, and they want me to remember them," he laughs. "Then they get all insulted because they were just telling their friend, 'Oh yeah, that's Frank Vincent from *The Sopranos*. I know him real good, just watch.' Now some poor guy is embarrassed in front of his friend, and I can't lie and act like I know him because if he starts bringing up crap I don't remember, then *I* look like a bad guy!"

Reviewing Frank's list of accomplishments, it appears that

a list of what he *hasn't* done may actually be shorter than the list of what he has. So what's left for the man?

"Well, I want to make my cigar again. Hopefully we've got that off to a start. And, I'd like to play music again too. That's really my first love," he reveals. "But I just want to have fun doing what I'm doing. I'd really like to stay here for a while more."

Frank, you've got a lot of fans and friends that feel the same way. After spending the day with this Renaissance man – the guy I loathe on *The Sopranos* – it's incredible the appreciation I have for him as an actor and performer. A wonderful, warm family man who obviously loves life, this guy tries to get the most out of it every single day.

Wiseguy? Nah. Sorry to be the spoiler, people, but Frank Vincent is one hell of a *nice* guy. *CM*