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PHILADELPHIA



Frank Tartaglia, South Philly filmmaker and co-owner of Connie's Ric Rac club, dies at 45

He was celebrated as much for his endless originality, sweet nature, and out-going personality as for his openness about the struggles of living a creative life, and his encouragement for others.



Frank Tartaglia, 45, South Philly writer, director, artist and musician, died suddenly at home on Thanksgiving Day.

David Zitin

Frank Joseph Tartaglia was a true son of the Italian Market. His father had a bustling fruit business in the iconic market. But he and his older brother, Joseph Frank Tartaglia, realized young that they weren't content slinging produce.

Together, the Tartaglia Brothers created a grungy, glorious haven for South Philadelphia musicians, artists, and dreamers nestled amid Ninth's Street's storefronts and grocery stalls in Connie's Ric Rac club.

On Thanksgiving Day, just weeks after his first major film headlined the Philadelphia Festival to positive reviews, Frank Tartaglia died suddenly in his sleep at his family home in South Philadelphia. He was 45. The family said they did not yet know the cause of death. Family members said they were shocked — and that he had been in good health and excited about the success of his film.

His family and friends will host a celebration of his life at the Casa Mexico restaurant on Ninth Street — formerly Connie's Ric Rac space — this Saturday, starting at noon.



A still from Frank Tartaglia and Tim Dowlin's "Not for Nothing." The film, which headlined the Philadelphia Film Festival in October, was Tartaglia's first major release.

Courtesy of Philadelphia Film Festival

The death of the writer, filmmaker, comedian, painter, singer, and arts enthusiast, who first found show business success as a childhood performer, prompted an outpouring of grief and remembrances online. He was celebrated as much for his endless originality, sweet nature, and outgoing personality as for his openness about the struggles of living a creative life, and his unflagging encouragement for those who chose the same path.

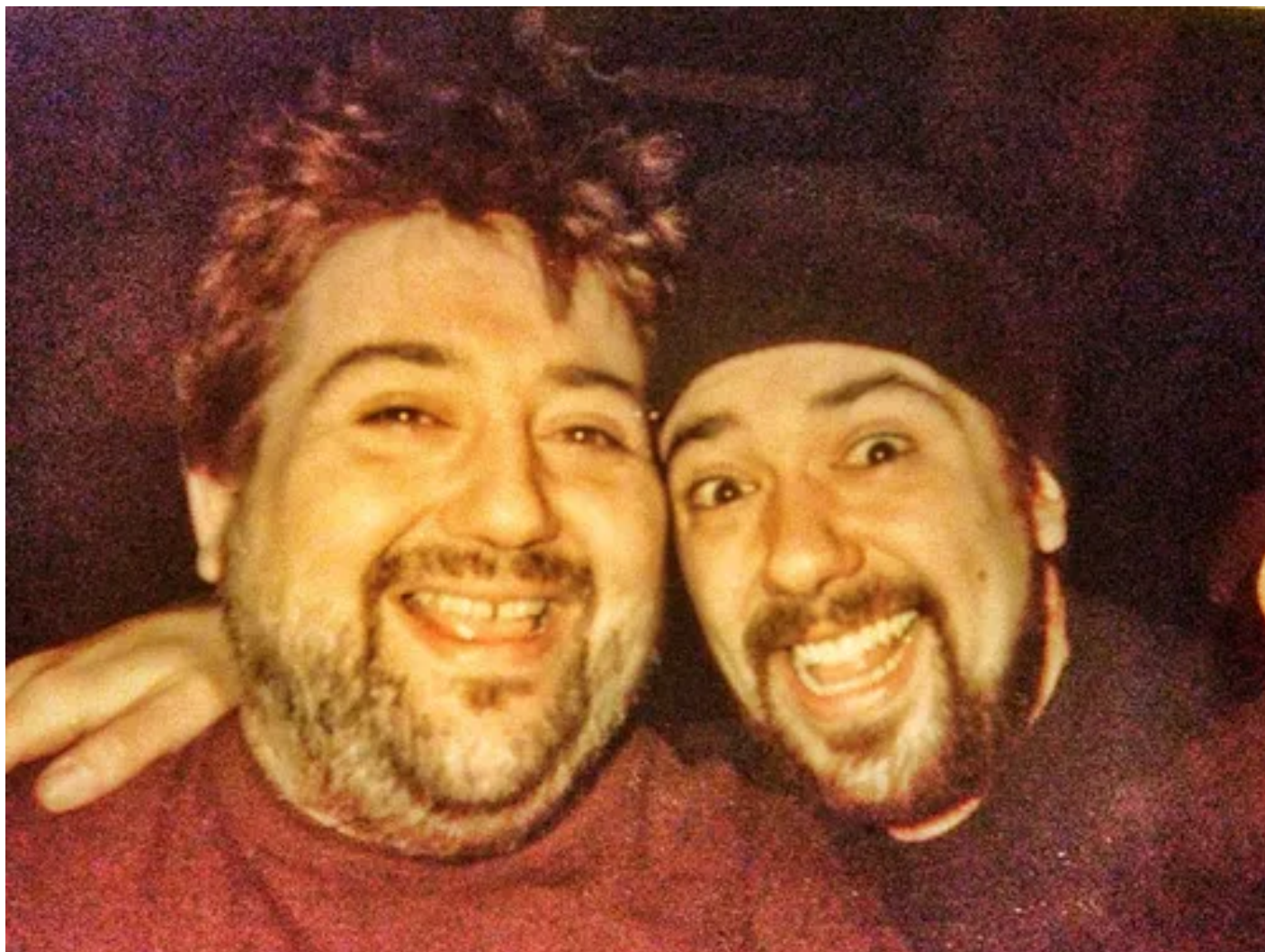
His passing comes after the [death of his brother](#), Joseph Tartaglia, who died in 2013, at 44, after a six-month battle with an aggressive form of brain cancer.

The death of Frankie, as he was known to countless friends and collaborators, leaves a painful hole on Ninth Street — and represents the loss of a rising talent just making his mark on the larger Philadelphia arts scene.

“That spirit, that energy, the color they brought to the entire neighborhood —it’s irreplaceable,” said Peter Pelullo, who co-owned the Ric Rac with Frank and Joseph Tartaglia. The club closed permanently in 2021 during the pandemic. “There is never going to be another Frankie — his whole spirit was creative.”

Frank Tartaglia found the stage early, attending a local dance school at age 5. By 11, he had won a spot on an HBO kids comedian contest, telling jokes about being Italian and chubby. By 15, he and a friend won the \$10,000 grand prize on *America’s Funniest People*, performing a song from his comedy album.

Still in his teens, he wrote for the MTV comedy show, *Squirt TV*. In 1998, Frank and Joseph made an independent movie together: *Punctuality*, which was filmed in South Philly and shown at film festivals.



Frank Tartaglia co-owned Connie's Ric Rac performance space with his older brother, Joseph (left), who died in 2013 from an aggressive form of brain cancer.

The fruit stand itself became a stage, when Frank Tartaglia went home to haul tomatoes, while struggling to find success — and brought a documentary filmmaker along. The film — *The Last Stand* — is an intimate, poignant, and often hilarious, portrayal of the tough-love relationship between Frankie and his father, market-fixture Joe “Brown” Tartaglia.”

In 2006, Joe Sr. gave his sons a storefront he owned near Ninth and Washington. They called it “Connie’s Ric Rac” — after the knickknack shop their mother, Connie, herself a [talented painter](#), once operated in the space — and built a bar and stage and opened the doors.

Soon, a community formed.

“It really did become a sort of public living room on Ninth Street for artists,” remembered improv comedian PK Kelly. “If there was a crack in the door, I would pop in to find something special happening behind the doors.”

That could be [punk show](#), an art installation, or folk performance, or just a family poker game, with Frank Tartaglia endlessly spitballing ideas, like one late-night when he proposed putting on a stage performance of the movie, *Goodfellas* (which made it all the way to casting calls).

While often on stage himself, whether it be as a member of the comedy troupe the Sixth Borough, or the rock band he fronted, The Discount Heroes — or even collaborating on neighborhood news projects with friends like myself — he remained, above all, a constant and contagious source of support and energy for other artists, friends said.

“He was endlessly fascinating, a Dickens character straight out of South Philly, full of droll self-awareness and a never-ending knack for helping to amplify the creative spark of hundreds of dreamers who wandered in and out of Connie’s Ric Rac over the years,” said James Doolittle, a Philly producer and longtime friend.

Added his oldest childhood friend, Jordan Shapiro, “He was everyone’s best audience.”

That’s just one more reason why friends and family were so thrilled over the recent successful release of Frankie Tartaglia’s first major film — *Not for Nothing*, a crime film based in South Philly and starring actor Mark Webber and praised by critics as a “gripping tale” infused with humor and heart — as the big break he had worked so hard for.

“It hadn’t happened yet, but he was going to be huge,” said Pelullo.

His family will greet relatives and friends on Friday, Dec. 2 from 6 to 9 p.m. at [The Pennsylvania Burial Company funeral home](#) at 1327 Broad St., and on Saturday afternoon from 12 to 3 p.m. at Casa Mexico at 1132 S. South 9th St. Interment private. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in his memory to St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, 501 St. Jude Place, Memphis, TN 38105.

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Mike Newall [✉](#) [🐦](#)

I write stories about the places where old Philadelphia meets new — and about people who define our city.
