

Anthony Rocco Vitale (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by Farah Jeune, Jhonathan Garcia, and Ivan Richiez

My name is Antonio or Anthony Vitale, but you can call me Tony. I grew up in the North End with my mother, father, 3 brothers and 3 sisters. I was the youngest, the baby of the house. We had a big family. Unfortunately, they're all wiped out now. The whole family. I'm all alone now. I was born in 1912 which makes me 95 years old.

My parents were born in Italy. My mother's name was Anna and my father's name was Antonio. That's in Italian. In English, it's Anthony and his nickname was Tony like me. I spoke some Italian from the neighborhood and because my parents spoke Italian. My mother would say "*Mange?*" (Did you eat?). My parents were very nice. The only thing they were strict on was when we kids would hang on the back of trucks or doing dangerous things like that. Then they were strict, but other than that they were really nice. They fed me, clothed me, and took care of me, and they never beat me. In fact, my mother and father are the people I admire the most.

My oldest brother was named Joseph and my other brother's name was Michael. My oldest sister's name was Michelina but everyone called her Lina for short. My second sister was named Lucy, and my third sister was Angelina. I got along very nice with my sisters. The one I loved best was the one that was only about a year and a half older than I was, Angelina. We used to listen to the radio together. She died about a year and a half ago and now I'm the only one left in the family.

When my parents came from Italy, they were lucky if they had 20 dollars and then in this country there was nothing at all. No money! We were lucky if we had a nickel. Everything we bought was a penny. I mean you didn't go to your mother and say "*Hey Ma, I need a nickel or dime.*" She didn't have any money and we didn't think anything of it. Every once in a while, we used to go down to the market and rob bushels of orange cakes and sell them for 2 or 3 cents. And that's how we made a few pennies. We used to get the cakes and if they were in good condition we'd get 5 cents and if they were broken we'd get 2 or 3 cents. I never got caught because I was a good runner, so I ran away I did get into a little trouble, but nothing serious.

There was no social security. My family lived in a 3 room flat. The rooms were very small, and we slept 3 in a bed. I slept with my 2 brothers. My mother worked real hard in the house. In those days, there were no washing machines. There was just the scrubbing board, and, there was no hot water — none at all. There was a

bath house a quarter of a mile from the house, so that's where we had to go to take a bath. We boiled hot water and put it in the tub. There also wasn't any electricity. There wouldn't be light in any room, only the kitchen. My mother would say: "*We need some wood.*" So we'd have to go and get the wood. Sometimes we'd buy coal in sack bags to put in a coal stove, or, we'd go down to the trains to find coal on the ground and pick it up and bring it home.

It was tough my parents just speaking Italian. You worked 6 or 7 days a week and you never made any big money. I'll tell you that. You were lucky if you made 10 or 15 dollars. Everyone — all of my friends in the North End grew up in the same category— without much money. In Cleveland Place, the little alley where I lived, the houses were only 6 or 7 feet from each other. I got a job working for a gasoline station, and I had to pump gas by hand. I'm going way back now. There was no electricity there, so I had to pump the big trucks by hand.

My favorite holiday was Christmas. In December, we'd start cooking and getting ready for the holiday. It was a big time. I got a lot of presents because I was the youngest and I was born almost on Christmas — December 19th. I was very lucky to get presents for my birthday *and* on Christmas. The nicest thing that happened to me during Christmas time was we'd get things from Santa Claus. We used to write to The Boston Globe Santa, and say "*Mr. Santy, Please send me some toys.*" We used to get a box of toys worth about 10 cents apiece, and a little black board. So Christmas was the biggest thrill of my life. Then, later, there was Easter, another big holiday, and the whole family would be together, eating...the grandchildren would come...it would be a big celebration.

As a teenager, I played with other kids my age, and helped clean around the house. During the summer, there was the harbor with boats, and we used to go swimming. There was also a ball park where we played ball. In school, we mostly played baseball, and I was the pitcher. We never had any new balls. They were like lead, all taped up, and there was no grass...just sand, dirt, and pebbles.

Then, when I was a teenager, I had girlfriends. On a date, we just walked around in the streets. We didn't have any money to go to restaurants. So, you would take a walk in town with your girlfriend or you would sit down in a doorstep. I had a car after I was working in the gas station. I was around 17 or 18 when I learned to drive, and I bought a Ford. I needed to learn to drive so I could get a job parking cars in a garage. It was a big, big garage and I learned to drive all kinds of cars.

The scariest thing that ever happened to me was when I was run over by a car. It was a hit and run. I was only 8 or 9 years old, and I was very fortunate because I didn't get really hurt. I did have injuries but I could have been killed!

The hardest thing I had to do in my life was putting my whole heart into music and that was the only thing I did to make a living. I started to love music when I was around 11 or 12 years old. The reason I loved music was because my uncle played the clarinet. I was just a little kid. When he went to work, I took the clarinet out, put it together, and played it. I played when everyone was at work. I couldn't really play it. I made noise, a squeaky noise. That's how I learned to get going. Eventually, my uncle taught me how to play it. Then, I took lessons, studied. I loved music so much, that when I got out of high school, I was taking lessons from a fellow who lived in my district, who was a very fine clarinet player. Then I took lessons from another fellow from The Boston Symphony in Kenmore Square for 3 bucks a lesson. I studied the clarinet for 7 or 8 years. I was teaching music in different schools, and I was getting more and more involved in music.

When I was going to school, there were a few groups of fellows playing instruments. We formed a little band. There were about 4 or 5 of us. As we were growing up we began to play the saxophone, trumpet, guitar. In those days, there were more banjos than guitars. We used to rehearse, then we started doing little jobs like playing at a baptism at church. Or, when people would graduate from school, we'd play in their houses. People couldn't afford a big hall. In the houses, there'd be a spread (of food) in the kitchen, so we'd play there. The best job I ever had was playing music in a restaurant. They used to sell fish and lobsters, and I worked in that restaurant for 25 years making music for the customers.

I worked and played music at many restaurants and nightclubs, but the greatest accomplishment of my life was getting married. My wife's name was Maria and she was Italian too. She was from the same neighborhood. Her father left them, so she grew up just with her mother. I was very proud of her because she became a lawyer. She went to an all-girls' law school, but she didn't practice law much. When her father took off, she had to help her mother working in their little grocery store. She would have made a good lawyer. She was at the top of her class, very brilliant.

My son's name was Anthony, and I have a daughter, Donna. My son was a very brilliant boy. He went to three colleges and got his PhD. at Cornell. He spoke seven languages! Very brilliant boy. He became a good student because my wife and I moved to Pond Street in Jamaica Plain so he could hang around other kids who were going to college. They were a good influence. I lost him about a year

and a half ago to Lou Gehrig's disease. My God, that is one of the worst diseases. Your whole body becomes like iron. You can talk a little, but your whole body is like iron. Every week I used to go to visit him in Northborough where he lived.

My daughter, Donna, lives in the Berkshires. I have two grandchildren — girls named Allison and Lilly. They are the only ones I have left on this planet now. My daughter is my best friend. We get along very nice, and we still call each other 2 or 3 times a week. Also, I have a little bird, a parakeet named Angel. He is one of my best friends now, too. You say, "*Why best friend?*" I don't put him in a cage. He hangs around me on my shoulders, and he's with me practically all day. All the time, he flies up on my head and if I don't get up, he'll whack me. Sometimes he gets up on my shoulder and talks to me, but I don't know what he is talking about. Then, when I have breakfast, he wants to eat with me. He wants to eat whatever I have on my plate. He's my friend now because I have nobody left. The only one left is my daughter and my grandchildren. I am lonesome because I've lost all my friends.

I figured what good is it to be alone? So I sold my house and moved here to Farnsworth House two years ago. I'm living day by day, so I figured why squander the money and travel. At my age, I should settle down! So, I sold my house and gave my grandchildren the money so they could go to school. I think I did the right thing.

The thing I wish I had done differently when I was younger would be to go to school and learn more. I wish I had put more of my mind on school. Back then, nobody had any intention of going to school—nobody went to college. Everybody was in the same boat. We all quit after high school. If you put your mind to it, you can do whatever you want to do. Have your own ideas and don't follow anyone else! If someone doesn't want to go to school, don't follow him. There is opportunity if you want it. You've got to do it by yourself. There are things out there but you've got to make up your mind. You can't be fooling around with days passing by. One day, two days, then before you know it, here I am 95.

I never thought I would be this old in my life, but I've accomplished what I was doing. I met all kinds of people in all walks of life. By doing shows, playing in ballrooms, you get to meet all kinds of people. You start getting more and more education and your whole life turns around. It's all up to the individual. Nobody is going to come up and say "*Here's a couple thousand dollars*". You've got to make it happen yourself, and be happy about it. Do the best you can. There are going to be downfalls, nothing is going to be happy all the time. But you keep going. You start meeting nice people. You start learning even more. Just make the best of life.