

XS All Areas:

The Status Quo Autobiography

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With Mick Wall

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ONE



Even though my roots are Italian-Irish, I have always thought of myself as a South London boy, through and through. It's where I was born, where I grew up and where I still live today. As far as I'm concerned, whenever I'm anywhere in South London, I'm home.

In reality, however, my family origins are more complicated than that. Born on 29 May 1949, I was the first of two sons to an English-born Italian father, Dominic Rossi, and Anglo-Irish mother, Anne – or Nancy, to her friends. There had been a daughter, Arselia, who had died a couple of years before I was born because of a hole in the heart. Consequently my mother, a staunch Catholic, swore that if she ever had another baby she would name it Francis – after St Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Catholic Franciscan order. Just to make sure, she also threw in the names of every other saint she could think of that day and I ended up as Francis Dominic Nicholas Michael Rossi. I was two when my brother Dominic was born, by which point they'd obviously given up trying to think of new names. He's my accountant now and he's a pain in the arse, as the best accountants are wont to be from time to time.

It sounds ancient now, but believe it or not, being born in 1949 sounded young once. Even the world back then seemed to be young – to be starting out again. Four years after the end of the Second World War, rationing was still in place and money and food were in pitifully short supply for most working-class people. We always did all right though, because of the family business, which was primarily ice-cream. Rossi's ice-cream vans were well-known in that part of London in the fifties.

Both my parents were Catholic, which meant I was Catholic too – Holy Communion, confirmation, confession, the full monty. Boys and girls always had their first Holy Communion separately, but I missed my first Communion for some reason – I think I had a cold – and ended up having my big day out with all the girls from the local convent instead. It was great! We used to go to mass every Sunday at the church of Our Lady and St Philip Neri in Forest Hill. People I meet in the music biz often look at you a little bit strangely if you tell them something like that, and I understand why, but of course it wasn't at all strange to me as a child. I had never known any different, so as far as I was concerned it was all perfectly normal. Just something we all did, the same way we all ate breakfast.

I had a wobbly period, in terms of my Catholicism, when the band first took off in the seventies. I was always away on the road and had all the excuses I needed to stay away from church. But it never left my mind – nor did the Catholic guilt in various weird forms – and I started going again in my thirties and became a regular attendee at Sunday mass at my local church in Purley, John the Baptist, until I was nearly fifty. I even went as far as having my own kids confirmed into the church as well, poor blighters! I only finally managed to

shrug the whole thing off, in fact, just a few years ago when I read a very interesting book called *Conversations with God*. But we'll get to that later . . .

My mother was born in England but her family were among the millions of Irish who emigrated to Liverpool before and after the war. They lived in a place called Crosby, and we used to go there sometimes for family holidays. I can't say I liked it much. Getting from London to Liverpool in those days was like getting to America is now. There was no motorway you could take, no direct trains, and it would take a whole day just to get there. So it wasn't a journey we made often – thank God. My main memory was that it was all gaslights and darkness. My dad used to enjoy swimming in the nearby canal in Birkenhead until we found out it was a sewage outlet! Talk about swimming in your own shit . . .

Mainly we stayed at home in South London. My parents didn't really go out a lot because they were always working, and any socializing they did was usually at the house. My dad was never a drinker, but people often used to think he was drunk because he was one of those real life-and-soul-of-the-party types; never down, always had something to say for himself. He was also a great cook and a horny little git. Many years later he told me how he would get my mother to dress in stockings and suspenders and put lipstick on her nipples. But then the man was Italian, what could he do? It was in his genes. He was a wonderful family man, though. He had this sort of Italian-cockney accent, and one of his expressions when he got annoyed was 'Arseholes' Except the way he said it in his mangled Italian-cockney it always sounded more comical than threatening. He died a few years ago and I find myself imitating him sometimes, walking round the house going 'Arseholes' at everything in that same funny voice.

For some convoluted reason we called my paternal grandmother Mummy. Even people that weren't strictly family but who had become part of the larger extended family through working for them called her Mummy. Mummy was originally from a small Italian island called Atina. She was a Coppola; very good stock, apparently. I think my Italian grandfather, whom we called Pop, was the rabble element. As a result, my father, even though he was born in London, was supremely Italian in his ways. Family and business were inextricably linked. Part of the family seemed to own most of Deptford at the time, through the ice-cream business. Apart from the vans, there was also a shop on Catford Broadway called Rossi's Ice Cream, which the family still owns and now rents out to a betting shop.

There was my dad and all his brothers and their wives, then all the grandparents and children. When one of my uncles died, I remember being at the funeral and all the men talking afterwards about different ice-cream routes, saying this street now belonged to this one, and that street now belonged to that one. He'd barely been in the ground five minutes and they were already divvying up the parts of the business he'd left behind.

Because of that, people tend to assume that I come from quite an affluent background. But while it's true that I don't remember us ever being poor, there were certainly enough times over the years when money was tight. It was a large extended family, a lot of hungry mouths to feed, and all anybody did was work. My parents did own their own house, and that made a big difference in those days. It still does now, but back then it was like the difference between the haves and have-nots. In those terms then, even though we were never rich, I was definitely from a family of haves.

Whatever my family had, though, you could be sure they'd worked hard for it. My mother and father used to be out on the ice-cream van all day. Then in the evenings they used to turn it into a mobile fish-and-chip shop and go out on another round. Times were tough after the war, but plenty of people still managed to fork out for ice-cream and chips; it was like their one treat amid all the doom and gloom. My dad would get to my grandmother's to load up at six every morning. He'd get home a couple of hours later and have breakfast with my mother and then they would go off in the van together. They would come home at about six o'clock and my mother would make us all a meal, and afterwards they would go out again on the fish-and-chip round. I'd be in bed by the time they came home again that night. It was a long day, but that was just the way they were – very enterprising. You see it with a lot of immigrant communities.

It was Mummy who actually owned the ice-cream business. Pop was a parquet-floor layer, and my dad had originally learned that as a trade too. It all came to a bad end, though, when he had an accident in which he nearly lost his hand. They were somewhere up north, doing a job. Pop had stayed in London, working on another job, and had sent my dad and his younger brother, Albert – or Chas, as he was always known. Unfortunately my dad decided to let Chas drive, to give him some practice, and the next thing he knew the car had jumped a crossroads and collided with a bus! My dad, who was in the back seat, went flying out of the window and the bus ran over his hand and crushed it. They had to pull bits of his fingers out of the road and he ended up having nearly forty different operations on the hand to try to save it. It was in the pioneering days of surgery, and when I went to visit him in hospital one day I couldn't believe my eyes –

they'd sown his hand inside his stomach! To help it heal, they said. For a while it left him with this big pouch on his stomach, like a kangaroo. They tried all sorts of stuff. He ended up with this ugly-looking thing for a hand. I was about five at the time and just accepted it, the way kids do. He got used to it pretty quick too. It was no big deal until, years later, I suddenly noticed he had become self-conscious about it for some reason. I think someone must have said something unkind, or something had happened that made him feel differently about it. Which was strange after so many years. He used to show it off to us when we were kids but he wouldn't let his grandchildren look at it at all.

To begin with, we lived in a large house in Mayow Road, in Forest Hill. My main memory is that it was always full of people – uncles, aunties, cousins, grandparents and a whole host of extended family members. I was encouraged early on to take part in the business, too. I would go out on the van with my dad in the school holidays. It must have seemed like the dream job for a school kid, but it was just what my dad did, so it was no big deal. It's like with my kids now: their friends think it must be great having a famous dad, but my kids have never known it any other way, so it's totally unremarkable to them.

As a result, my whole sphere of reference as a small child was essentially Italian. Not that I knew it then. It wasn't until I started going to school and getting singled out by the other kids as 'different' that I began to appreciate that not everybody was the same; a fact I now cherish, but something that I didn't like one little bit back then. No kid wants to be different. So from that point on I did everything I could to play down the Italian side of my character, right down to the way I walked and talked. Now I'm proud of it, but as a kid,

and for a while as an adult too, I now admit, I was almost ashamed to be Italian.

When we were growing up, the rule was that everyone in the house had to speak English. Nevertheless, the older members of the family did slip back into Italian quite often. I could understand a fair bit of it as a child but it's all lost on me now, which is a shame, because I would love to be able to speak and read Italian. The aggro I used to get in the school playground could be merciless, and so for years I tried to completely bury anything to do with being Italian. I had a messed-up accent, which got picked up on immediately – a mixture of my mother's sing-song Liverpudlian and my father's broad Italian-cockney. And they said I ate worms – that's what they called spaghetti – and that I stank of garlic. It was like that for me, my brother and our two cousins. We all grew up together at about the same time, and as far as the other kids were concerned we all stank of garlic, ate worms and talked funny...

The other thing I got picked on about was my name – everybody kept taunting me about 'Francis' being a girl's name. Which it is, as well as being a boy's name. Try telling that, though, to a gang of snot-nosed hoodlums intent on ritual humiliation. I could lose the funny accent and hide my worm-eating ways, but I couldn't do anything about my name, though that didn't stop me trying. At different times I tried to get people to call me Frank, or Franny, or even just Fran. I never liked any of those either, but anything was better than Francis. In the end, most of my school mates ended up calling me 'Ross', short for Rossi. And when Status Quo first started I was known for the first few years as 'Mike' Rossi. Even today I get called all sorts of things other than Francis. Rick, for example, always calls me Frame. (Because

I'm so skinny I look like the wire frame of a coathanger, apparently.)

I learned quickly, though, as kids do if they want to survive at school, and from then on I tried to turn myself into more of what I thought of as a real English kid – which meant being very cor-blimey-guvnor. I realized the transformation was complete a few years later when I was round at original Quo bassist Alan Lancaster's house one day: we were watching TV with his family when an obvious 'spick' came on and started speaking with the same sort of jingle-jangle Italian-cockney accent I'd once had. Alan came from a tough old South London family in Peckham – they had a black cat called Nigger – and his dad laughed and said, 'He talks funny, like Ross.' Alan's mum went, 'Naw, Ross is one of us now.' That made me so proud, to be accepted like that. 'One of us!' It was like the ultimate accolade. Better than 'stinks of garlic', anyway...

The odd thing was that to my own family I was definitely English. Or at least, not really Italian. Mummy used to call me Sangu-Bianco – white blood. She'd say in Italian: 'Here comes White Blood, watch what you say, he's like his mother.' Meaning that I could understand Italian better than they realized, but I wasn't really Italian and was therefore not to be totally trusted. She was a funny old woman like that. My brother was darker-skinned and more Italian-looking, so he and my cousins would get pasta to eat while I would be given a tomato sandwich – English 'white blood' food. But that's just how it was when I was a kid. I didn't know any better and so I just accepted it. I certainly wasn't unhappy. I was a bit weedy and cowardly as a teenager and that bothered me a bit, but most of my childhood memories are basically happy ones.