

The Steve Schirripa Phone Interview – 07-30-2015, Thursday 4:00 P.M.

SS: Hi John, this is Steve Schirripa.

JE: Hi Steve. Thanks so much for the call. It's a pleasure to speak with you. How is the weather by you? We've had some wicked thunderstorms this past hour here in New Jersey.

SS: The same here. I'm in Manhattan.

JE: Before we talk further, I would like to begin by asking your permission to record our conversation today so that I can quote you accurately for the piece I will be preparing.

SS: Sure...thanks.

JE: Depending upon which online biography I've read about you is correct, should I be wishing you an early happy birthday today for the big day coming two days from now (August 1), or a slightly later pre-birthday greeting for one month from now on September 3?

SS: (laughs) No, my birthday is September 3rd.

JE: Well, come the big day in September, enjoy it to the fullest. I've got about five years on you and can honestly say the days are just flying by.

So let's begin by talking about your younger days. Tell me about your upbringing. You're a Brooklyn guy, who grew up in Bensonhurst. Do you still have ties to the old neighborhood?

SS: I don't have any relatives there anymore but I have friends that I grew up with that still live there. There are a few people, who haven't left their block, never left their house. So I go back once in a blue moon. I'm around. My daughters both went to Poly Prep (Poly Prep Country Day School) which wasn't far from where I grew up. So that took me to Brooklyn quite a bit. I live in Manhattan, but I'm still in Brooklyn now and then. I also used to live in Vegas too, for many years.

JE: I understand that your dad is Italian American and your mom is Jewish. Describe what it was like at the Sunday dinner table at the Schirripa household growing up when you were a boy.

SS: Yes, my father's family came from Calabria. My grandmother and grandfather on his side were from the same town, and my mom is Jewish. My parents had gotten married fairly young. My mother was adopted and raised more or less by Italians. She, and my grandmother, who lived around the corner from us, did most of the cooking. In those days you woke up to the smell of fried meatballs. It was the whole Sunday thing of eating. Dinner was either at my house, with five kids in the family, the seven of us, shoved into our small, tiny apartment, with no air conditioning, or we would go to my grandmother's house, which was literally around the corner and we would eat there. She lived above a butcher shop. My grandmother was a cook among

cooks, you know, in that neighborhood where everyone is a great cook. She was extraordinary. And my mother was also a good cook and my father, believe it or not, was a good cook. My grandmother ate at one o'clock. We ate later in my house... three o'clock. When we went to her house, she made the homemade pasta... laid out literally on a big wooden board on the bed, in one of the bedrooms. We would start at one o'clock. She had the fried meatballs, then came the antipasto and the macaroni, then a roasted chicken or a roast beef or whatever, then dessert. Then come six or seven o'clock, it all comes out again. It was quite amazing, these marathons of food. People don't eat like that so much these days. It's pretty incredible. This was every single Sunday. And that's what it was. You ate macaroni a few nights a week. And Friday night was pizza, but Sunday was a big deal.

Fortunately or unfortunately today, in most families the mom and dad are both working. They don't have the luxury and everything is so expensive. It's either that or people want too much so they both work, and they don't have time to sit there and make pasta all day on a Sunday. The kids are playing soccer, the kids got this, got that, you're running them around, so it's a different deal. My immediate family is kind of small. And everybody is spread out. It's different times. One of my daughters goes to college in Delaware and my other daughter is in DC now. But for years we tried to all be together on Sundays. My wife cooks, but everybody is running around.

JE: My daughter is going into her junior year at the University of Delaware and my son will be starting his senior year at the University of Maryland.

SS: That's where my daughter goes too, the University of Delaware. She's starting her sophomore year. It's a good school.

JE: It is a good school. I'm told that many of the alumni return each year and keep in touch with their friends. There is a real comradery among the students. It's the same at the University of Maryland. My kids are enjoying college.

SS: Good school.

JE: Although you came from a close family, you decided at a relatively young age to leave New York to make a go of it.

SS: Yeah, I wanted to leave at a certain point. I went to Brooklyn College. I had a little taste. I traveled a little bit. I grew up on welfare, no money, no nothing. Like I said, seven people in a little apartment, everything was a struggle. I had to get out of there. So I had gone to Vegas the summer before I graduated and worked there. And I said, when I'm done I want to come back. So I came back. I was insistent on finishing school so I went to college and graduated in June of 1980, a year behind. It took me five years and I was gone three weeks later. It was planned. I hopped in the car with a buddy of mine that I'm still very close with, and we left.

JE: How was your mom with our decision to leave home?

SS: Okay, but my mother had some crazy thing. If you leave, you'll never come back. That remark makes absolutely no sense to me. I think about it, my mother was younger than me when I left. And I left and I was gone. It was a good neighborhood. Don't get me wrong, a good place to be from. But I had enough. I knew there was a lot more out there.

JE: Let's talk about food. I'll ask you the \$64,000 question. When you were a kid, was it called sauce or gravy in your household?

SS: For me, it's sauce. To me, gravy is the Sunday gravy my grandmother made with the meatballs and braciolo, the sausage. That to me is gravy, that thick Sunday gravy, which is a meal in itself. It's amazing. I still love to eat, but I can't do it like I use to. Eating the meatballs all morning, then it's going to be sausage, braciolo, a big thing of that. And then macaroni and then the roast beef with potatoes. I mean, it's amazing, but this is the way people ate. Look, if I could do it, I would still do it.

JE: OK, here's a second question, double or nothing. Was every dish except spaghetti, ravioli and lasagna called pasta or macaroni when you were growing up?

SS: Macaroni!

JE: Macaroni ... good answer. You're the real deal. You win the jackpot.

SS: I always find pasta to be a yuppie expression. And I don't know when, maybe in the eighties where it became pasta. Every Italian restaurant then was red checkered table cloths, and then it became pasta this and pasta that. It wasn't the down and dirty, which is still my favorite kind of place.

JE: I'm with you.

JE: Why did you decide to venture into the food business and put out a line of sauces? Was it trading off your days on *The Sopranos* a little bit?

SS: Not at all, not at all. You know, I finished *The Sopranos* in 2007. I wrote six books. I sold one of the books to Nickelodeon and got the movie made in 2012. That was my dream. It's called *Nicky Deuce*. I had some of *The Sopranos* in it: Jim Gandolfini, it's one of his last movies, and Tony Sirico, Vince Curatola and Michael Imperioli. It's kid movie, and a really good movie, nice family movie. It's about Italians. You should get it. You'll get a big kick out of it.

JE: Growing up in an Italian family, I'm certain I can relate to it. I'll check it out.

SS: So I wrote six books, and of course, that was trading off on *The Sopranos*. Surprisingly enough, the first book became a New York Times bestseller. It was called *A Goomba's Guide to Life* (2002), where we hit Italian stereotypes on the head. You might be a goomba if this, you might be a goomba if that. And it was a hellava lot of fun. My role was getting bigger on *The Sopranos* at the time, and all the stars were lined up, John. It's one of those things, the role gets

bigger and then the book comes out. Nobody thought we were going to do what we did and all of a sudden the book is number four on Amazon and becomes a bestseller. So that got me into other things. While *The Sopranos* was going on I continued to work because I knew sooner or later it was going to end. There is a period in all of our lives and then it is going to stop. You're not going to top *The Sopranos*. You're not going to be on another show like it, it's not going to get any better than it was.

JE: It was iconic, it really was.

SS: Yeah, it was a huge hit. They will be watching it fifty years from now. It was wonderful material, a great group of guys and we sincerely were friends. And I got lucky enough when the show ended to get on another show for five years, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-2013), where I played a suburban dad with a son. I enjoyed doing that very much. And then I had television shows on (*Investigation*) *Discovery* that I produced and hosted, *Nothing Personal* (2011), and *Karma's a B*tch!* (2013). I did a bunch of stuff. I was a special correspondent on the *Today Show* and for Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*. *The Sopranos* obviously opened every single door. I had no career before that. I wanted to take advantage of it because there are a lot of things I like to do. I like the books, I like hosting things and I liked being a correspondent. I was able to do all of this, obviously because of *The Sopranos*.

JE: After having accomplished so many endeavors in the entertainment field, you have now ventured into the food business with your own line of Italian specialty sauces, called *Uncle Steve's Italian Specialties*. Is there any significance in choosing the name *Uncle Steve's*?

SS: No, the name *Uncle Steve's* has no real significance. A close friend of mine came up with the name because he calls me Uncle Steve. He said, 'Let's do something to honor your mom because she was such a good cook.' So I got my mom's recipe and we decided to do the sauces. We made it healthier. My wife eats organic. She is a marathon runner. We made it organic, gluten free, and non-GMO. Have you tried any of the sauces?

JE: Yes, my wife and I did a taste-test of the Marinara sauce. I said to her about an hour before we began this interview that prior to speaking with Steve I have to try one of his sauces. So we tasted the Marinara sauce with a spoon standing by the kitchen sink. No sooner did I open the lid that she remarked how good it smelled. And the taste was like homemade sauce and nothing like the usual bottled sauce from a jar. We thought it was terrific. Nothing short of excellent. And I've read reviews where the critics all agreed that it tasted homemade. In fact, we're going to serve it over the scallops that she brought home tonight for dinner. Next time we'll try the Tomato Basil.

SS: You go ahead and try the sauce. You'll be stunned. Now I am not a jar sauce guy. I can't even tell you I've ever eaten jar sauce because that's not what I do. My wife is a good cook and my mother was a good cook. I never ate jar sauce.

JE: How long has *Uncle Steve's* been in business?

SS: We are officially in business about one year. We have three sauces: the Arrabiata, which is a spicy sauce and the biggest seller; the Marinara sauce; and the Tomato Basil. My wife hasn't made sauce in eight months and I'm not lying. It's fresh and all the ingredients are listed on the front of the label. If it wasn't very good, I couldn't honestly promote it. I'm not that kind of a guy. I went on the *Ice-Tea and Coco* show this week. We did a blind taste test with three sauces. I didn't know which one was mine. Honestly. And I tasted the first one and it was ok. And then the second one, when I tell you, it was god-awful, like a foul taste in my mouth. And number three was my sauce, which I picked it out. It's incredible. The number two sauce was inedible. They threw in tomato paste, which I never knew before, because I was never in this business. They put in corn starch, water, sugar and preservatives, and we have none of that. So I can honestly go out and promote it, like I'm talking to you, because I believe in it. It is a fresh, natural product and all my friends, and all the people I know who are Italians, they eat it.

JE: Well, you're making me hungry. We're looking forward to it this evening, especially after the taste-test we did earlier this afternoon.

SS: You'll see. So that's why I got into the sauce business. It's been a lot of fun, but hasn't been easy. We are in over 2,000 stores now in 41 states. In New Jersey we're in Kings, ShopRite, Whole Foods, and Stop & Shop and Foodtown. It's located in the natural food sections in some of those supermarkets.

It's been a learning process, a learning curve getting to where we are now. It took us a long time to get it right. But it has been a lot of fun. We've come a long way in such a short time. People are amazed. I make a lot of appearances. I will be in the Kings Supermarket in Mendham, NJ on September 12, Whole Foods in Marlboro, NJ on September 20, and the Kings Supermarket in Short Hills, NJ [changed to Garwood, NJ] on September 26.

JE: My wife and I plan to stop by and see you at one of your appearances in New Jersey. My nephew told me that he has two of your books. When I mentioned I would be speaking with you and that you would be appearing locally, he was thrilled and said he would go see you.

SS: Tell him to come by. I usually stay about an hour and a half. We have some Italian bread and do a tasting demonstration to try the sauces. I sign wooden spoons that we give out with the *Uncle Steve's* logo. If you taste the sauce, you get a spoon. You don't have to buy the sauce, you only have to taste it.

JE: Do you have any connection to New Jersey over the years or spent any time there.

SS: Sure. The guys I grew up with all live in New Jersey. Isn't that the migration (laughs), from Brooklyn, to Staten Island, to New Jersey? I have a good buddy, Phil Cuzzi, who lives in Belleville, NJ. He is a major league umpire. Another good friend of mine is Joe Maurillo (one of

the owners of *Nanina's in the Park*), in Belleville. For the last six to eight years I've done the ALS auction for Phil, which is held each year at *Nanina's in the Park*. (Phil Cuzzi does work for the *ALS Fund*, which includes a silent auction of sports memorabilia at this event. It raises money for research to find a cure for Lou Gehrig's disease).

I also enjoy going to a restaurant in Belleville called *La Sicilia (Pizza and Cafe)*. It's a good restaurant.

JE: Did you ever live in New Jersey?

SS: No, but my mother lived in Hazlet and my sister still lives in Hazlet and has been a school bus driver there. My mother lived for a time in a nursing home in Shrewsbury before she passed away. She lived in the same nursing home as (E Street rocker) Stevie Van Zandt's mom. I've met Stevie and Bruce (Springsteen) numerous times. They are very nice guys.

And when I was a kid, we went to Wildwood.

JE: I noted that on *Uncle Steve's* website, in addition to the three sauces, you are also selling gift baskets that include imported organic pasta from Tuscany. Are you planning to further expand the line?

SS: Yes. Right now, we're working on a vodka sauce. That will be our next sauce coming out. We have some other products. Like I said, it's brand new, but it's coming! We've done about fifteen national shows. I've gone on everything from *Squawk Box* to *Imus*, to *Today Show*, to *Ice-Tea and Coco*. We've been plugging away.

JE: Do you have any upcoming television or film projects?

SS: I've been busy. I'm doing a new show for *IFC* called *Benders*. It's about a club hockey team that comes out in October. I have a movie, *Chasing Yesterday*, with a young kid from New Jersey. I play a neighborhood priest. It's a nice movie. Anything but a mobster.

JE: I know you have played a few roles that involve mobster characters, but for the most part you've done quite a number of other parts in a completely separate vein, presumably so not to be labeled or type-cast.

SS: You know, John, listen, it's always going to be the guy, "Bacala" to some people. They don't even know I ever did another series. I did (my other show) with 110 episodes, more than double the amount of *The Sopranos*, but it doesn't always mean anything. They say, you're that guy, and you are going to be that guy, and that's all there is to it. Listen, I can't play an English professor, but I can play a lot of things. It's OK. Like I said, *The Sopranos* was a once in a lifetime thing and a wonderful experience. I'd like to get one more series and move on down the road.

JE: Approximately one year ago I happened to watch a wonderful trailer (on YouTube) for a short film you starred in called *A Poet Long Ago*. It was directed by Bob Giraldi (who directed feature films, commercials and music videos for Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, and Hall and Oates), and adapted from a short story written by Pete Hamill (former newspaper columnist and editor-in-chief for both the New York Daily News and the New York Post, journalist, essayist, and best-selling author) based on an actual event in Hamill's life.

SS: Oh yeah. I had a good time doing it, I got to tell you. Even though it was just a short thing, you know, a 3-day shoot, it was a good one.

JE: How long did the film run? Forty-five minutes?

SS: No, not even. It's only fifteen, to eighteen, to twenty minutes.

JE: There was a poignant scene that takes place in a coffee shop between you and Boris McGiver, who plays Hamill as a reporter. You guys worked well together. It's a wonderful story and I've been a huge admirer of Pete Hamill since my twenties. I would encourage anyone to see it.

SS: Me too. I'm a big fan of Pete's, and Bob's a terrific director.

JE: And I think both you and Bob Giraldi may have once said there is usually not a great deal of money to be made doing short films. But he approached Pete Hamill with the idea to do the film because he admires Hamill's work so much and because he loved the story. And Pete said OK. It was apparently a labor of love for Bob as well as you.

I had the good fortune of interviewing Pete on a number of different occasions for his last four books. *A Poet Long Ago* happens to be included in Pete's short story collection, *The Christmas Kid and Other Brooklyn Stories*, which was basis for the most recent interview we did together, just about two years ago.

SS: Yeah, I know, I read the book. I had been a fan of Pete's for many, many years so I was happy to do the film.

JE: Pete's a standup guy. He once mentioned that you know one of his brothers.

SS: I know Denis (newspaper columnist for the New York Daily News, journalist, and author). It's funny you know. I was walking down the block. It was after the hurricane and I got off the train at the wrong stop. I was walking down the street in Tribeca. It had been raining and it was hot out, whatever. I just happened to go down that block. I had never met him (Pete Hamill). Big fan, you know. And I had never met him and so he said, "Hey, how you doing!" I said, "I'm a big fan. I'm a friend of Denis." And he said, "I see you at the Knicks games all the time." He watches the games and I go to a lot of Knicks games. And we started to talk, small talk.

And it was coincidence because the next day Denis calls me and says Pete wants you to do this film with Bob Giraldi. Denis said they wanted me to play this guy, Sonny. So if I didn't walk down that block, but a different block, maybe he wouldn't think of me. I met them a few days later at a restaurant that Giraldi owns in Tribeca. So we had lunch and I sat with Pete for over an hour. Just talking to him alone and listening to his stories, I enjoyed speaking to him so much, the great Pete Hamill. We just sat there. Such a gentle guy.

I knew the other brothers too. Another was a producer who died.

JE: Joe, I believe.

SS: Yeah, Joe. He was a good guy. And Brian is the photographer. So I kind of knew them and I was happy to do it. Pete wasn't involved while we were shooting it, but Bob Giraldi's the real deal.

JE: That young guy (Salvatore Mirando) who played you in grammar school. He was not an actor before, was he?

SS: No, no. He did a good job.

JE: You've had a number of incredible accomplishments in your career. I understand that while living in Las Vegas you worked as a bouncer at Paul Anka's nightclub, then went on to the Riviera Hotel on the Vegas strip where you were the maître d' and subsequently then became their Entertainment Director. You also got to know Frank Sinatra. I would be remiss if I didn't ask you a little later to relate a Sinatra story or two, but in thinking back to the early nineties, I recalled Sinatra also put out his own line of pasta sauces.

SS: Yeah, it was called *Artanis*, which was Sinatra spelled backwards.

JE: You're right. And as I recollect, it wasn't half -bad, but apparently didn't last too long for whatever reason.

SS: There have been a lot of celebrity sauces. That was something we went up against because a lot of actors that have tried sauces. I know Tommy Lasorda (former Los Angeles Dodger manager) had one, Sinatra had one, and it didn't work. I didn't consider doing a celebrity sauce, which is why my picture is not on it. I made a conscious effort not to put my picture on the label because we're not a novelty. I don't want people to say, "We're a *Sopranos* fan, and I got your *Bacala* sauce." That's not what I was looking for, because we believe in the product. I would go to meetings and a bunch of food shows and bring some Italian bread with me. And I would say, just open the sauce, taste it, and you will be surprised. That's all I ask you to do. If you go to some neighborhoods there are old Italian women, who are very against the jar sauces, and I understand. But just taste the sauce. You don't have to buy it. Just taste it. Almost everyone who tastes it, takes home a jar. If I said, come over to my apartment, John, and I made you sauce and you never saw the jar, there's not a chance you'll ever know.

JE: So tell me how you came to meet Frank Sinatra.

SS: I had met him a couple of times earlier. I was friends with “Jilly” Rizzo (New York restaurateur and close friend of Sinatra). I use to live with Jilly’s son, Willy. We were friends in Vegas and lived together for a short time. He was a very close friend of my wife and our family. Jilly had come to my house for Christmas Eve and we were friends. He was a beautiful guy. I was invited to Jilly’s 70th birthday party at the Riviera Hotel in 1987. It was about two in the morning. They said stick around. So I called my wife. I don’t even think we were married at the time. I said come on down, Sinatra is going to come. We already had a false alarm, you know, and I was the least star-struck guy in the world, but that was one guy that I wanted to get a picture. So she came down after having been sleeping, got out of bed, took her shower. Don Rickles, Corbett Monica, Bernie Allen and Jerry Vale were there. There were about twenty-five people. We were at like a big horse shoe table. Sinatra obviously had a few drinks. I think he was working at Bally’s and he finished his shows. And everyone got up and spoke. He kept to himself. Everyone sat at the table and was eating. Now it is four o’clock in the morning and the party is over. Frank is drinking *Jack Daniels* and wearing a *Members Only* jacket, which says “Frank,” on the left side, like no one knew who it was. At the end, I had to get a picture, man, so I had a disposable camera. This is before the days when everybody had a phone with a camera. So my wife says to Sinatra, do you mind, is it possible, if we take a picture? And then everybody went like, “ooh!” like how dare you ask him, you know, like he would start yelling. And he said, sure. And so me, Jilly, and his son, Willy took a picture. After my wife snaps the picture she says, “Hang on a second, Frank, I want to get one too.” He said, “Come here, sweetheart.” And he put his arm around her and somebody took the picture.

And then I met Frank Sinatra again, unfortunately, at Jilly’s 75th birthday (on May 6, 1992), when he got hit by a drunk driver and died. I was a pallbearer. After the funeral everyone went back to Sinatra’s house. So now I’m in the house and you know, it’s an odd thing, because you have the run of the place. I walked around. He had that famous train room in about a 1,200 square foot house. He had all kinds of stuff there. He was very cordial and his wife was very nice. I needed to use his phone because back then I didn’t have a cell phone. I was in his living room. I called my wife and said I’m sitting here in Sinatra’s living room. I remember he had this big bowl that was filled with Pepperidge Farm Goldfish and there was this big bird in the room. Amazing!

JE: Great story! (laughs) Frank was the man.

SS: Yeah, he was.

JE: Steve, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. I want to wish you the very best on your line of organic specialty products and continued success in your career. I’ve seen you interviewed on talk shows and you’re just as I expected you would be. You’re a good guy.

SS: What you see is what you get, pal.

JE: I look forward to seeing you at one of your appearances in September.

SS: Yeah, please come when I'm in New Jersey next month. It will be good to see you. Good talking with you, John. Thanks.

John Esposito is a freelance writer, who lives in New Providence, NJ with his wife and two children. Mr. Esposito's publications and Blog page are available on his website:

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