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Morgana King, Jazz Singer and 'Godfather' Actor, Is Dead at 87

By **Neil Genzlinger**

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Before March 1972, Morgana King was known as a jazz singer with an impressive vocal range and an ability to put a distinctive spin on an eclectic selection of songs. But by late that month, although she remained an accomplished singer, millions of moviegoers thought of her as Vito Corleone's wife.

Ms. King had never been in a feature film before playing Mama Corleone in "The Godfather," which after its release that month became one of the most acclaimed movies of all time.

She was in "Godfather II" as well and had a smattering of other television and film credits, but music was always her passion. She had been singing since she was a teenager and had a breakthrough in 1964 with her much-admired version of "A Taste of Honey," the title track of an album she released that year. It brought her a Grammy nomination for best new artist; the award went to the Beatles.

"She has, she says, a four-octave range," John S. Wilson wrote of her in The New York Times in 1970, "and she draws on all its resources as the basis for a vocal style that is an astounding mélange of humming, singing and vocalizing, creating tapestries of supple sounds that float in the air, that slither sinuously around a melody, that dip down to some visceral foundation or soar softly off into the stratosphere as an ethereal mutter."

Ms. King knew she made a distinctive impression, especially on the younger fans she began noticing in her audiences after "The Godfather."

"I am an experience," she told The Chicago Tribune in 1990. "Very individual. Kids like that."

Ms. King died on March 22 in Palm Springs, Calif., where she lived, having stopped performing in 2000 and receded from the public eye. She was 87. The cause was non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the Riverside County Coroner's Office said. Her death had not drawn wide public notice until The Washington Post reported it this week.

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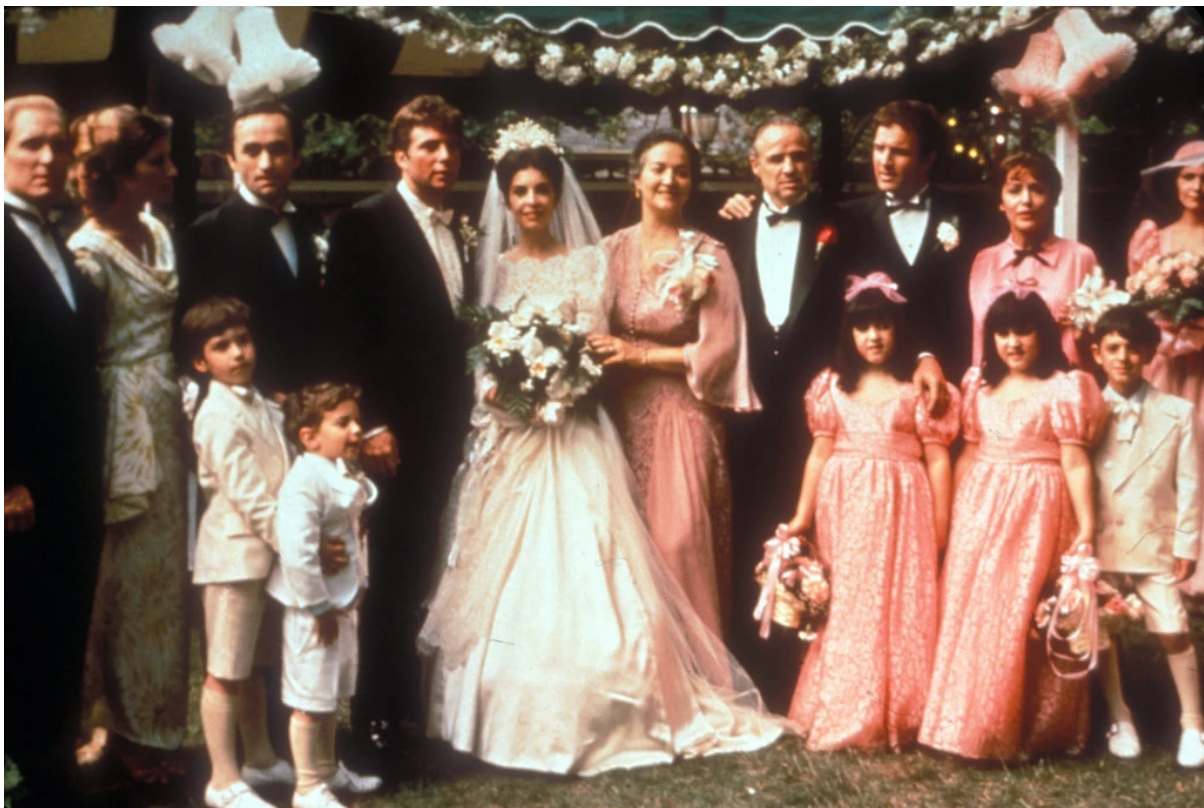
Maria Grazia Morgana Messina was born on June 4, 1930, in Pleasantville, N.Y., and grew up in Upper Manhattan. Her parents, Ignatius and Isadora Messina, had emigrated from Catania, on Sicily. Her father was an ice and coal merchant who played classical guitar and gave her a grounding in opera and symphonic music. Her mother imparted traditional Sicilian songs.

She began singing in hospitals and U.S.O. clubs as a teenager and by 16 had graduated to nightclubs, some less reputable than others, adopting the name Morgana King because her mother did not want her to use the family name for performing. At 17 she married Tony Fruscella, a jazz trumpeter with a drug problem; she often found herself supporting their daughter, Graysan.

“I took care of my kid when my husband was stoned out of his bird,” she told JazzTimes in 2016.

She and Mr. Fruscella, who died in 1969, divorced in 1956, just as Ms. King’s career was beginning to ascend. She had begun recording albums — her 1950s releases included “For You, for Me, for Evermore” and “Morgana King Sings the Blues” — and she had started to get better bookings. By 1959 she was the featured vocalist at Carnegie Hall in front of “eight feminine jazz instrumentalists” (as The New York Times put it) for a concert called “Jazz Female.”

In the early 1960s she married the trombonist Willie Dennis. They toured Brazil with Buddy Rich’s band, an experience that opened new musical worlds for her.



Ms. King, next to the bride, in “The Godfather” (1972). She had never been in a feature film before being cast in “The Godfather” as Marlon Brando’s wife. Paramount Pictures/Photofest

"I'm Sicilian," she told *The Times* in 1970, "and I suddenly realized that all my life I'd been hearing bossa nova, because it's very Moorish, very Arabic, like the music my mother sang around the house. I *feel* that music."

Her "A Taste of Honey" album led to television appearances on "The Andy Williams Show" and others, but she did not have much time to enjoy the success: In 1965 Mr. Dennis was killed in a car crash in Central Park. She reduced her musical activities considerably for three years, and when she did work, her music had a new layer to it.

"Since Willie's death, there's a new dimension whenever I sing," she said in 1970. "There are heavy spiritual feelings now."

In 1969 she was severely injured in a car crash of her own — "broken ribs, torn stomach, crushed left side, reconstructed mouth," she told *The Washington Post* in 1981. She moved to Palm Springs, hoping the climate would aid in her lengthy rehabilitation.

In an audio commentary with a DVD release of "The Godfather," Francis Ford Coppola, the film's director, said of the casting of Ms. King, "She just made me think of the kind of handsome, authentically Sicilian woman that would be his wife" — referring to Vito Corleone, who was played by Marlon Brando.

The role of Mama Corleone is relatively small. But Ms. King found that the three weeks she initially was told she would be needed for filming stretched longer, as she was sought out on all matters Sicilian because of her heritage.

"I knew the culture, the psychology," she once said. "I felt more like a technical adviser on the film, the way everyone kept turning to me with questions."

In the second "Godfather" movie, her character dies, but the scene of the viewing of the body exceeded the limits of what she was willing to do.

"I wouldn't go in the casket," she told *The Boston Globe* in 1977. "What lines can I speak from a casket?" I asked them. So the person you saw in the coffin was the mother of the director, Francis Ford Coppola."

Ms. King's daughter died in 2008. She is survived by a grandson.

Her albums ranged across the musical landscape. William Buchanan of *The Boston Globe* called "It's a Quiet Thing," released in 1966, "a mood piece album all the way, with Miss King really digging deeply into the heart of the song and the meaning of the lyrics." The next year, "I Know How It Feels to Be Lonely" delved into pop hits of the day like Donovan's "Sunshine Superman" and the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby."

Her later albums included "I Just Can't Stop Loving You" (1991) and "This Is Always" (1994).

In her 1981 interview with *The Post*, Ms. King summed up her approach to musical choices, and life in general.

“I am my own captain and this is my ship,” she said. “I don’t want anybody messing with my steering wheel or my navigation.”

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