

Frankie and Albert [1927]

Arranged by Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Introduction by Carl Sandburg, AMERICAN SONGBAG author,
and Chicago acquaintance of Collins.

A Frankie song is like a grand opera rôle; interpretations vary. The Leighton brothers run a gamut of emotions; John Lomax delivers a quizzically mournful monotone; Sig Spaeth vocalizes it like a gnome riding a gnu with gnats mellifluously. The maxim, "Life is a tragedy to those who fell. A comedy to those who think," may go for viewpoints on this ballad. It is stark and fierce, it is serio-comic, or it is blah-blah – as you like it.

If America has a classic gutter song, it is the one that tells of Frankie and her man, Josie, Sadie, Lillie, Annie, are a few of her aliases; she has many. Prof. H. M. Belden of the University of Missouri showed me sixteen Frankie songs, all having the same story though a few are located in the back country and in bayous instead of the big city. Then I met up with R. W. Gordon; he has 110 Frankie songs, and is still picking up new ones. R. Emmett Kennedy in his remarkably thorough and valuable book, "Mellows" has a song, "My Baby in a Guinea Blue Gown," which belongs in the Frankie discussion because its tune may have been the grandfather of the most widely known Frankie melodies. The Frankie and Albert song, as partly given here, was common along the Mississippi river and among railroad men of the middle west as early as 1888. It is a simple and mournful air, of the short and simple annals of the poor. The Frankie and Johnny song is of later development, with notes of violence and flashes of exasperation. The Frankie Blues came still later, and with its "blue" notes is, of course, "meaner" as a song. In many colleges are groups who sing Frankie songs in ragtime manner, with lackadaisical verses. As our American culture advances, it may be that classes will take up the Frankie songs as seriously as a play by Molière or a Restoration comedy or the Provençal ballads of France. It may be said that the Frankie songs, at best, are an American parallel of certain European ballads of low life, that are rendered by important musical artists for enthusiastic audiences in Carnegie Hall, New York, or Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Some day, perhaps, we may arrive at a better common understanding of our own art resources and how to use them. While the Frankie story deals with crime, violence, murder, adultery, its percentage in these respects is a good deal less than in the average grand opera.

Lastly, for those about to sing this piece, we should note that in several places, in San Francisco, Fort Worth, Fort Smith, Fort Scott and Dubuque the verse about the man under the doctor's care crying, "Roll me over easy," or "Turn me over, doctor," has no tune; all present joining in a wide, wild, disconnecting wailing. Also, we note, by alternating the names of Albert and Johnny, or Frankie, Josie, Sadie, any verse of any song goes for all. The air of version II of Franky and Johnny, carries all the verses of version I, except that the repeat, "so wrong" isn't used. While it may seem a discrepancy that Frankie, threatened with the electric chair, ends her days on the gallows, it should also be understood that several versions of the song picture her starting to join a county chain gang, wearing a ball and chain attached to one of her ankles.

1. Frankie and Albert were sweethearts, ev'rybody knows,
Frankie spent a hundred dollars, just to get her man some clothes;
He was her man, but he done her wrong.
2. Frankie went down to the corner, took along a can,
Says to the lovin' bartender, "Has you seen my lovin' man?
He is my man, but he's do-in' me wrong
3. "Well, I ain't gonna tell you no story, ain't gonna tell you no lie,
Albert went by 'bout an hour ago, with a girl called Alice Fry;
He was your man, but he's doin' you wrong."
4. Frankie's gone from the corner, Frankie ain't gone for fun,
Underneath her apron she's got Albert's gatlin' gun;
He was her man, but he done her wrong.
5. Albert sees Frankie comin', out the back door he did scoot,
Frankie pulled out the pistol, when roota-de-toot-toot-too.
He was her man, but she shot him down.
6. Frankie shot him once, Frankie shot him twice,
Third time that she shot him the bullet took his life;
He was her man, but he done her wrong.
7. When Frankie shot Albert, he fell down on his knees,
Looked up at her and said, "Oh, Frankie, please,
Don't shoot me no mo', don't shoot me no mo'.
8. "Oh, turn me over, doctor; turn me over slow,
Turn me over on my right side, 'cause the bullet am hurtin' me so.
I was her man, but I done her wrong."
9. Now it's rubber-tired carriages, decorated hack,
Eleven men went to the graveyard, and only ten come back:
He was her man, but he's dead and gone.
10. Frankie was a-standin' on the corner, watchin' de hearse go by,
Threw her arms into the air, "Oh, let me lie
By the side of my man, what done me wrong."
11. Frankie went to the graveyard, bowed down on her knees,
"Speak one word to me, Albert, an' give my heart some ease.
You was my man, but I done you wrong."
12. Sheriff arrested Frankie, took her to the county jail,
Locked her up in a dungeon cell, and threwed the keys away.
She shot her man, said he done her wrong.
13. Judge tried lil' Frankie, under an electric fan;
Judge says, "Yo' free woman now, go kill yourself anotheah man.
He was yo' man, now he's dead and gone."