

Frank Fried, 1927-2015, Presente!

January 16, 2015



Franklin Fried, who devoted more than 70 years to supporting and fighting for freedom, justice, equality, and liberation for working and oppressed people in the U.S. and around the world, died Tuesday, Jan. 13, at his home in Alameda, California. He was 87.

Frank Fried was the principal presenter of folk and popular music in Chicago for a quarter of a century, but he always thought of himself, first and foremost, as a revolutionary socialist. In his own view, his signal achievement was a historic 1968 series of benefit concerts for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he organized at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also produced the Beatles' 1964 and 1965 Chicago appearances, along with innumerable concerts by the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Miriam Makeba, Pete Seeger, Frank Zappa, the Chad Mitchell Trio, and many other artists.

Frank was a radical, a socialist, and a labor and civil rights activist throughout his life, and he took great pride in never having abandoned his principles of fair play throughout his storied show business career. "After shaking hands with some managers and promoters in the business, you would have to check if you still had all your fingers," he would half jest. The colorful story of how he tried to be different, with mixed success, is recounted on his website, showbizred.com.

Frank was born in 1927 on Chicago's north side. His father, a lawyer in private practice, died when Fried was a child. His mother, who worked as a secretary for the Illinois State Athletic Commission, felt compelled to send Fried to a military school for proper discipline. After military school, he attended the University of Chicago. He dropped out after two years to serve in the United States Navy at the end of World War II.

After the war, Fried joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a teenager and worked as a welder in Chicago's booming U.S. Steel South Works plant. He was attracted to the SWP's democratic vision of world socialism. In 1947, he and his Chicago comrades helped lead a broad and successful defense campaign for James Hickman, who was up on murder charges. Hickman, an African American sharecropper who had recently moved his family to Chicago from the South, was accused of shooting the landlord who had burned his family out of their apartment, killing three of Hickman's children. With help from SWP organizers, community pressure got the charges reduced and Hickman released. The dramatic story is recounted in a recent book from Haymarket Press, *People Wasn't Made to Burn*, which is dedicated to Frank.

Frank called the campaign "perhaps the party's finest hour" and credited that organizing experience for much of his later success in building broad coalitions for social justice. Frank had a remarkable ability to collaborate with folks from across the left spectrum, and to help others reach out and build in ways they would not have done without his help and counsel.

A few years later, Frank was expelled from the SWP along with prominent dissident Bert Cochran and many of the party's foremost intellectuals and labor activists. In 1954 Fried helped that group launch the American Socialist, a magazine that aimed to free the idea of socialism from its association in the American mind with Stalinist dictatorship, and he traveled the country promoting it.

The magazine folded in 1959, a victim of the poisonous cold war atmosphere, Frank said later. "The trajectory that we expected of hooking up with militant sections of the labor movement and a new beginning of the radical movement never happened," he explained. "The group did not leave much of a footprint, but individuals played an important role in the labor and civil rights movement, and the attractive style and open tone of the magazine did leave an imprint on the New Left that came after us," he added.

For Frank, the value of the American Socialist group lay in reaching out and attempting to regroup with other socialists without rejecting its Trotskyist background. "We attempted to bring our heritage to the problems and radical language and organization of the modern world without ever forgetting the legacy of Leon Trotsky, who had an incredible impact on me as he stood up for workers democracy against the tides of history," he said.

Frank stumbled into show business when he met the Austrian folk singer Martha Schlamme at the Gate of Horn, an early folk music venue in Chicago, in 1958. In need of a job and intrigued by the power of folk songs to move people emotionally and politically, Frank went to work as an assistant to Albert Grossman, the club's owner. On a trip to San Francisco the following year on Grossman's behalf, Frank met the Gateway Singers, a racially integrated folksinging group, and managed the group through their period of greatest commercial success. He had a knack for managing, and by the end of the 1950s he was also handling the Chad Mitchell Trio and numerous other prominent folk and popular music performers.

Frank opened Triangle Productions in 1959, with fellow socialist Fred Fine, in order to raise money for leftist projects through benefit concerts. When folk music became a pop craze during the Kennedy administration, the business took off. This was a major turn away from the repression of the 1950s, both culturally and politically. Many of the folk artists were unabashedly radical, and some, like Pete Seeger, were still blacklisted. Frank took special pride in being one of the first commercial promoters to book Seeger, whose soldout concerts on Frank Fried's stage in 1957 marked a defeat for the McCarthyite blacklist.

When Bob Dylan's turn from folk toward rock resulted in an explosion of psychedelic, blues and country-inflected music, Frank recognized that the new groups would seize the spotlight from both acoustic folk groups and more traditional, pasteurized pop. He moved quickly on his hunch. By the early 1960s, Triangle shows dominated live entertainment programming in Chicago and the surrounding area. Triangle Productions ran tours and concerts for the Rolling Stones, the Mothers of Invention, and many other major acts of the time. Meanwhile Frank Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, Johnny Mathis, and Barbra Streisand remained regulars on his stages.

Throughout his career, Frank tried to weave themes of social justice into his cultural promotions, paying special attention to Miriam Makeba and other politically engaged artists. In 1963 Frank served as producer for "We Shall Overcome," the only commercial recording by the SNCC Freedom Singers, on Mercury Records and he also took an active role in the movement against the Vietnam War as a leader of Business Executives Move for Vietnam Peace.

In 1977 he returned to his roots in the steel industry as a key backer of Ed Sadlowski's insurgent "Steelworkers FightBack" campaign. Frank traveled the country with Sadlowski, working plant

gates and union halls in an attempt to divert the Steelworkers Union from what Sadlowski had dubbed “tuxedo unionism” and toward a militant working-class perspective. He and Sadlowski became lifelong friends.

Frank sold his production company in the early 1980s and moved to Los Angeles with his wife Françoise, hoping the weather might help ease her congenital degenerative disease. After Françoise’s death in 1985, Frank moved to New Orleans as the CEO of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. He remarried there in 1988 and moved to the hills above Oakland, California with his second wife, the mystery writer Alice WilsonFried, and their daughter Teasha.

Frank’s friendship with Miriam Makeba inspired him to active solidarity with the fight against Apartheid in South Africa. After Apartheid, he was a stalwart supporter of the struggle to build a Socialist alternative as the only way to guarantee the promise of Liberation. He helped launch Amandla!, a popular radical opinion magazine associated with the Democratic Left Front, and remained a valued advisor to its editors.

Frank met the writer Daniel Singer when they fought together to defend Solidarnosc against the Polish and Soviet Stalinist parties and in the 1990s, Frank led the launch of the Daniel Singer Prize, an annual essay competition for young people on topics related to socialism.

In 2011 Frank plunged into supporting the renovation of the Trotsky Museum in Mexico City, organizing a U.S. tour by Esteban Volkov, Trotsky’s grandson. He also recently joined the Solidarity chapter in the San Francisco Bay Area as a means of being connected to the movement he invested so much of his hopes in. His longtime comrade Carl Finamore reported that even when Frank was too frail to speak, “he was still able to muster enough energy to give us the middle finger and the raised fist at separate points during our discussions.”

Preceded in death by his first wife, Françoise Nicolas, and his elder sister, Vivian Medak, Frank is survived by his wife Alice, his children Pascale, Isabelle, Bruno, Troy, and Teasha, and many grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

Frank’s memorial celebration will be held January 24, 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the Grand View Pavilion, 300 Island Drive, Alameda, California. In lieu of flowers or gifts, the family requests that donations in Frank’s memory be sent to Amandla! Magazine (in care of editor Brian Ashley, brian@amandla.org.za) or to the Center for Constitutional Rights (<http://goo.gl/H4Cmcr>).

*This obituary was a collective effort by Frank Fried's close friends, overseen by his family.