

LAST FRIDAY I was 21. Legally I became an adult, but coming of age doesn't make you a grownup.

Several weeks ago, an incident jolted me into realizing how far I've got to go. My court guardian, Judith Jamison, asked Frankie Day, my manager, and me to drop in to her office. Judith has played a special role in my life. Until I was 21, I came under the so-called "Coogan Law," named for Jackie Coogan, who was the most successful child actor of the 1920s. He had earned more than \$4,000,000, but all he ever got from it was a \$6.25 allowance and \$1,000 when he reached 21. The rest had been squandered.

To protect other child performers, laws were passed which created court-appointed guardians to take charge of their income. Judy Jamison was my guardian, and I am thankful for all she has done for me.

But the afternoon Frankie and I arrived at her office, I was beat and in no mood to hear about finances. Judy began to talk about taxes, bonds, and the \$1,000,000 I've earned through such record hits as "Wild One" and "Volare" and my new movie, "Bye Bye Birdie," which opened this week—and I guess my mind began to wander. Suddenly, she turned sharply to me and asked, "Bob, what are you going to do on your birthday?"

"What do you mean?" I answered.

"Just this. For years, I've invested your money and checked your bills to make sure no one cheats you. But soon you'll be 21, and all this drops into your lap. Are you ready for it?"

The question hung there in the room. I looked at Frankie, and we both knew what she meant. For most of my life, I've been living in a strange, adult world where there always has been someone to pay the bills, hold the bags, answer the phone. I've had only one job—to get on a stage and sing, and I've been so busy doing this, I've never had to worry about growing up.

I know it sounds crazy, but since the age of five, I've had my mind on show business. My father used to take me to see the big bands when they came to my home town, Philadelphia. I flipped over the music and would go home imitating the band instruments.

WHEN I WAS nine, I auditioned for the Paul Whiteman tv teen show broadcasting out of Philadelphia. I wasn't a teen-ager, but Mr. Whiteman took me on as a regular anyway. I sang and did imitations, and when I saw the audience laughing and smiling in the studio, I knew this was *really* what I wanted.

I also got a new name. Mr. Whiteman had a hard time pronouncing my real name, Ridarelli, so he changed it to Bobby Rydell. There wasn't much time after this to play with my neighborhood pals or to learn about growing up with them. I had a career to work on.

I joined a rock 'n' roll group called Rocco and the Saints. Frankie Avalon played trumpet, I was on drums, and we split the singing. This turned out to be my biggest break. During a club date one evening, the bass player with another act called me over, told me his name was Frankie Day, and said, "I'd like to manage you."

Pop was pretty skeptical, but he agreed to talk to Frankie. "Mr. Ridarelli," Frankie said, "I never thought of being a manager until I saw your son. I'm not even sure what a manager does, but there is so much raw talent in this boy that

Now That I'm of Age



By BOBBY RYDELL

as told to
Marya Saunders and Bob Gaines

While he sang, others worried
about the \$1,000,000
he earned; but last week the
factory foreman's son
turned 21—and all that money
became his responsibility

it's just got to be developed." Pop and I liked him immediately. Finally, we shook hands; that was the only agreement we had.

While other kids were going to proms and basketball games, I was traveling hundreds of miles for record hops, sleeping in the back of Frankie's old car to save money, washing in garage rest rooms, eating meals at hot-dog stands. While other kids were getting ready for high-school graduation, I sat in dirty dressing rooms between performances in rock 'n' roll shows studying for exams I'd missed. It really bothered me not graduating with my class. Eventually I got my diploma, but it wasn't the same.

Finally, it happened. In 1960, Frankie convinced Bernie Lowe of Cameo Records in Philly to give me a chance to cut some records. Within two weeks, "Kissin' Time" was on its way to becoming a million-record seller.

Things went great, but Frankie made it clear we still hadn't made it for good. My teen-age following would inevitably fall off as I grew older. So when I was 19, he decided to book me into the Copacabana club in New York, to see if I could reach a sophisticated audience.

June 22, 1961, was the big night. The Copa was packed with adults; teen-age fans couldn't help me here. My first show lasted 47 minutes. When it was over, I couldn't believe it—the audience wouldn't stop applauding. We'd made it again, Frankie and I.

TODAY A TEAM of people picked by Frankie surrounds me. Pop retired as a factory foreman and is now my road manager. I've got a publicist who deals with the press, a booking agent, accountants, a conductor, and a drummer. I'm rarely alone. If I want a pack of chewing gum, Frankie still buys it. If I want a magazine, Frankie buys it. Recently when a couple of teen-age girls followed me everywhere and called my room at all hours, it was Frankie who made them stop. He called their parents.

I'm grateful for what Frankie has done for me, but we both know that now I've got to prove myself—I've got to make it as a man. And I must do it on my own.

Thanks to my guardian's warning, I started facing my responsibilities. When the courts officially handed me control over my estate, I retained the accounting firm Judy recommended to handle my finances, and Mom, Pop, and I now discuss and decide on all investments.

Instead of a big blast of spending, my only major purchase will be something I've looked forward to buying for a long time—a home for my parents in a suburb of Philadelphia. We don't want one of those splashy \$100,000 mansions with swimming pool. We're looking for a comfortable, modest home which has room enough for my parents, grandparents, and me, and maybe a visiting relative.

The first time I had to put my foot down came when I was told a lavish party was being planned for my birthday at Radio City Music Hall in New York. It was to be a promotion tie-in with the opening of "Bye Bye Birdie." I said, "No, it'll have to be another day. I'm spending my birthday with my folks in Philadelphia."

The publicist looked surprised, but that's how I spent the day. We gorged ourselves on Italian food and my aunt's cakes. It felt good to be home for such an occasion. I want to make a success of my life, but even if I mess it up, it's my job, and I'm responsible for it now—nobody else.