

This is the first in a series of articles based on FTLOJ's Jazz Oral History Project, a joint project with For the Love of Jazz and the University of Nevada, Reno's Oral History Program. The Jazz Oral History Project is sponsored by members of FTLOJ and the City of Reno Arts and Culture Commission. This interview was conducted by Danna O'Connor.

Gerry Genuario

If you've enjoyed any live music in our area over the past 40 years you have probably seen drummer Gerry Genuario in action. Whether it was casino show bands, trio gigs at Reno's small clubs, his own big band at the musician's union hall or accompanying young players at E.J.'s Jazz Café, Gerry has been keeping time here in Reno since arriving in the city in 1964. He has worked as a professional musician for nearly 50 years here in the Truckee Meadows with no regrets. "None what-so-ever," says Gerry, "I've actually done exactly what I always wanted to do. I feel good about it. I'm not a wealthy man but I've made a living and supported my family and gotten by playing music all these years."

Gerry was raised in Norwalk, Connecticut. His father was a lawyer who played piano by ear. He had an Uncle who played mandolin and an older brother who was a drummer but Gerry didn't start studying music until 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He was interested in the trombone but after getting his first snare drum as a Christmas gift at 15 years old, he stuck with the drums and never looked back. His private teacher was Cal Santo, a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music. From his focus on reading music to his ideas on hand technique, Gerry says Santo was an invaluable teacher. "When he found out that I was really, really, serious, which took about a year, he spent hours with me. After I graduated High School he would take me down to New York and we'd go see Buddy Rich and all the good players down there. He was a wonderful person and teacher. He really gave me a great foundation for music." Interestingly, Gerry never told his teacher he was left-handed! Which he now says is turned out to be a blessing because show bands would be unwilling to hire a lefty as it would take too long to rearrange the drum set between acts. Gerry plays drums right-handed but is left handed for everything else.

Throughout high school Gerry played in the marching, concert and jazz bands. Outside of school he played with the symphony and in a big band lead by the composer/arranger/conductor Pat Williams who was raised in nearby Darien, Connecticut and played trumpet with Gerry until graduation in 1956. Gerry was reunited with Pat Williams, who has won two Grammys for jazz arranging, when he came to town to perform with the Reno Jazz Orchestra a few years ago.

Right after high school, Gerry and a fellow musician decided their best musical opportunities would be found in the Navy and they headed to Washington, D. C. to audition for the Navy School of Music. "We first went down to New York City," says Gerry. "We went to Birdland, saw the Count Basie Band and then caught the early morning train. We practiced all the way there on the seats, got to Washington, D. C. went to the Navy School of Music and we both passed the audition with flying colors!" Gerry signed up for four years and says it was a great way for a young person to get musical experience, playing everything from marches to concerts to big band jazz.

Gerry ended up stationed in San Francisco and rooming with saxophonist Larry Stoffel, a well-known member of the Reno jazz community.

Gerry married right after leaving the Navy in 1960 and moved back to Connecticut. There was little work as a musician back east, so he spent some time in banking and then went into computers and data processing for IBM. He was offered a job as head programmer but missed playing music and made the decision to head to Reno in 1964. His first job was as a bar back at the Golden Hotel, then on to the Cal Neva to work as a key man, taking care of the slot machines, while waiting for his union card. Gerry's first union job was playing at the Flame Room on Second Street with bassman Bill Amick and pianist Jim Milne. The group would play from midnight to 5 in the morning. Local musicians would come into the Flame Room after their show band gigs and Gerry started getting a reputation as a jazz drummer.

Gerry's first steady musical job in Reno came in 1965 at the Riverside Hotel. "Don't laugh now," he cautions, "The name of the show was 'The Peephole Bunny Show.' It was basically a strip show. I got to play a lot as the drummer, you know. I played drum solos all night! I was having a ball, believe me." The Riverside Hotel job lasted for several months, and then Gerry moved to the Silver Dollar Bar at Harold's Club to perform with the Arnie Tyke Trio. They were the house trio and also backed a variety of acts.

Gerry's first big band call came from Don Conn, who was the bandleader at Harold's Club. Conn was frantically looking for a substitute for a gig that night at Harold's Seventh Floor Room. He had heard of Gerry and knew he could play drums but was concerned that Gerry only played jazz. "I said no, I've played shows," recalls Gerry, "There was no rehearsal. I had to come in, open the book and play. The Headliner was Bob Crosby, Bing's brother and a jazz singer from Los Angeles named Lorenz Alexandria. I went in, opened the book, played it and it went fine." Gerry spent the next year or so freelancing. "The work was fantastic for musicians here!" says Gerry. "Before I got steady work I could freelance and make a living. Two weeks here, a month there, you were all over the place. Between the lake and Reno you made a fine living." It wasn't long before Gerry was hired as the drummer for the "relief band." "In those days there were six big bands working in the area between Reno and Lake Tahoe. The bands worked six nights a week and the relief band would cover their night off. We had six shows a week, a different show every night, very intense!" John Carlton was the leader of the relief band at the time and in 1969 he was hired by Bill Harrah to lead Harrah's orchestra. He took Gerry with him. Gerry stayed at Harrah's with the John Carlton Orchestra from 1969 to 1993 when he left to work with Debbie Reynolds at her new hotel in Las Vegas. "It was a long run," laughs Gerry, "It was a great, fertile period for music in Nevada." Gerry still works for Reynolds today. During the course of his career he's played for Sammy Davis, Don Rickles, Andy Williams, Tony Bennett, Jack Jones, Roy Clark, Henri Mancini, Burt Bacharach, Carl Fontana, Lou Levy, Jessica Williams, John Coles, Rosemary Clooney, Shorty Rogers, Vi Redd, Madeline Eastman, and many others.

The typical night for a house band player started at about 7:15PM with a half hour of dinner music. Then a 15 minute break and back onstage for the first show at 8:00PM, which lasted an hour and a half. The second show started at midnight so Gerry went home for dinner with the family and then back to Harrah's, hoping a train

wasn't coming so he could get across the tracks. The second show finished around 1:30AM.

When asked about how creative players could be in the show band Gerry shakes his head. "You're basically locked into the music that you're given. Every now and then you might get a jazz-oriented show, like Tony Bennett. Then maybe Bob Barnes our tenor or Dickie Mills (trumpet) would get a chance to play some solos behind Tony but just momentarily. You're always supportive of the act you're playing. You never get in the way of them...and if you play something and it becomes part of the tune, it stays! So there goes your creativity right down the toilet because it has to be the same every night because they're used to hearing it that way. That's why there were so many 'kicks' bands. That's where we got our creativity, with all these extracurricular things that didn't pay anything!"

The most popular place to express that creativity was the union hall for the Reno Musicians Union Local 368 on Taylor Street. It had a huge hall for rehearsals and performance as well as smaller rooms downstairs for trio's etc. Gerry has fond memories of leading the Supernova Orchestra at one of the first "For the Love of Jazz" concerts at the union hall. The Orchestra featured trumpeters George Graham and Joe Davis who were both in the Harrah's show band before moving on to Los Angeles. Since the founding of FTLOJ in 1974 Gerry has lead or been a sideman in innumerable concerts for the club.

Although Gerry enjoyed his time in the Harrah's Orchestra he doesn't miss it. "As you know, I work for Debbie Reynolds and I travel with her, she keeps me plenty busy, not super steady but at my stage of the game right now, I prefer just playing jazz gigs and doing that kind of work." He has only wonderful things to say about his musical career here in our area, closing with "Reno was good to me. It was the right time, right place and I'm still doing it! I'm a pretty lucky guy. At my age, I get to pick and choose what I want to do and I'd love to play as much jazz as I possibly can."