

## Not So Famous

Petey Sardini's father played the saxophone when he had a glass of wine or two on a

SHORT  
My Life As  
A Musician

Saturday night in the late 1950s. He would stand in the kitchen and lean back against the linoleum covered counter top while his fingers plodded over the round keys and his breath vibrated the reed in the mouthpiece when he held his tongue just right. Out from the horn came slightly sour notes as his wife stood beside him and sang, "See the pyramids along the Nile." Mr. Sardini's brother-in-law, Uncle Angie, who lived upstairs in the two family home, sat against the refrigerator and played chords that almost matched the music as he strummed an old guitar painted the color of baby poop. Uncle Angie's wife, Petey's Aunt Dominica, never came downstairs. She hardly left her bedroom anymore.

I lived next door to the Sardinis in a carbon copy house exactly 22 feet and 5 inches away, each with two flats, one over the other. When Petey and I were younger, the two of us counted the number of balusters across the front porch on each house. They totaled the same. We also counted window panes and even the nails in the floor of one room. No matter what we compared, the two houses were exactly alike, except for the color of the exterior paint.

Petey was always obsessed with details and grew up to become an accountant. I began to slack off on the importance of details and eventually became a writer. We each tried our best to master a musical instrument. Neither of us were very good musicians at the time, but we worked at it in college, trying to earn beer money and hoping to have girls notice us. My musicianship never attracted many girls. I played the piano and Petey played an old set of drums that Aunt Dominica brought home one night without any explanation. For reasons I never understood, girls liked drummers better.

The Sardini Kitchen Trio was the only live band I ever heard before the afternoon I decided to walk into a bar at Sylvan Beach, NY. I had a lot of nerve at age 15, my authority rooted midway between the privileges of adulthood and the exemptions of childhood. Inside the dark and cool atmosphere of DiCastro's Night Club, I found a stool at the end of the bar near the stage. Few patrons sat there during the day, evidently preferring Daiquiri-laden conversation at a greater distance from the loud music of any band that was qualified to play only a day gig. When the bartender came up to me with a dubious look on his face, I ordered a rye and ginger, a drink I'd heard my mother ask for at weddings.

I didn't have to wait long for the band to come on stage. A tall thirtyish red headed man wearing a bright white shirt open at the neck and a rumpled blue plaid tux jumped up on the tiny stage and flipped a few switches on the equipment surrounding him. The drummer and bass man soon joined him. Red Rovera swung the guitar strap over his shoulders, gave a little shrug and began to loudly play a riff I recognized as the opening notes of Henry Mancini's Theme from Peter Gunn.

The drummer and bass man came alive and quickly caught up to what was musically the dumbest piece Mancini ever wrote, but no doubt his most profitable. The bass took over the riff when Red began to play what passed for a melody. It might have been the funniest rendition of the song I'd ever heard, but the band didn't mean it as humor and I didn't laugh. Their sheer volume assaulted me. I could feel the bass notes pound against my chest. What absolutely amazed and excited me were three ordinary individuals getting up and playing passable music and becoming the center of attention for everyone in the room, even the Daiquiri drinkers.

I had heard only John Philip Sousa and Elvis Presley amplified on the tiny speaker of the record player my parents had received as a wedding present. But music from Red Rovera and The Rockin' Pneumonias at DiCastro's was like a call from another world. The sound had to be magic, I later realized, because I never smelled the stale beer and cigarette butts until the music stopped. And frankly, the music never did stop for me. I fell totally head over heels in love with the fantastic idea of becoming a rock and roll musician. There is not an iota of difference between believing you can do it and falling completely in love with yourself.

The few songs I had learned by ear on my mother's piano in our living room would be replaced after some serious self teaching work with a few riffs, runs and rumbles. The effort was enough to get me into a rock and roll band. I was ready to mount the stage and impress audiences all over the county.

Soon my opportunity came along. But I must admit I got the job only because a friend needed somebody ... anybody ... to play keyboard for the group he started when we were 16. I learned my chords in various keys from a boy who sounded out each note for me on his guitar until I could see their structure and begin to pick them out myself. (Oh, yeah! Two half tones down from the top makes a seventh!) Then I was lucky enough to meet another kid who was in a real band and actually knew how to play piano. He taught me a few bass lines. He also told me that absolutely none of his 3 years of piano lessons helped him to play piano in a rock and roll band. Although that was probably untrue, I believed him. Since I'd never taken a single lesson, this knowledge helped bolster my confidence.

An older teen I met at a friend's house taught me how to invert my chords. Little Richard's 45 rpm records taught me to bang on the keys way up at the high end of the keyboard. The music of the 1950's wasn't very complicated. Chord progressions for the Top 40 songs were almost always I, IV, V for the fast songs and I, VI, IV, V for the slow tunes. (In the key of C that would be C,F,G and C, Am, F, G7 respectively.)

That's all I learned about music before I suited up in my bright red tux and gold cummerbund, ready to wow music lovers everywhere. If I'd been a solo act without other band members playing louder than me, I would have been in a lot of trouble. I didn't continue to deepen my knowledge of the piano at that time because I was in high school and I was busy. Not with studies, but with day dreaming. I spent a lot of time day dreaming.

Our first gig provided my initial jolt of that addictive substance known as applause. It occurred at a dance our new band played in South Utica, hosted by a local DJ. I can't remember the number I sang that first time in public, but the girls swooned and screamed and I was absolutely hooked. For all I knew, the girls were screaming at rats running across the floor. I didn't realize at the time that teenage girls would swoon over President Eisenhower singing God Bless America, if he hung a guitar over his shoulder. And maybe wiggled his hips. This first job

would spoil us, it turned out. We didn't know it that night, but things would get worse before they got better.

We played at a gas station grand opening, at a hunting lodge that almost burned down during our second set, in dingy bars where as sixteen year olds we were propositioned by prostitutes, at high school and college proms where the kids often got drunk and threw up on us or wanted to beat us up, like the night in Canajoharie when we needed a police escort out of town.

I can't say any of us really liked playing in bars until we were a bit older, but the money was union scale and much more than what we received for proms and school dances. Mom and Dad knew I was in the band, of course. Even a resourceful sixteen year old can't leave the house in a bright red tux without some kind of explanation. I told Mom our band played only at teen dances in Church Halls. I don't think she believed me. She just loved me.

We played in so many school gyms we should have made sneakers part of our outfits. In fact the extra traction of the rubber soles would have been helpful at all the Beer Bashes we played when the floor would become slippery with spilled beer after a couple of hours. And I still feel the sand in my shoes from all the summer gigs we played on weekends at Sylvan Beach.

I knew enough musical techniques back then to keep from getting fired. I liked the adulation that sometimes came from audiences and our teenage rock and roll band certainly brought me more money than I might earn delivering newspapers. Plus, I never had a paper route customer scream with delight when I came to their door with the newspaper. And it happened that I could sing, after a fashion. Although Brook Benton and even Gene Vincent were surely not worried about competition from me, my golden voice may be why the band didn't fire me when I flubbed my keyboard solos.

My desire to be noticed by girls as I played in the band didn't work out quite the way I had planned. The ladies who came up to speak to me between sets were older or drunk and they always advised me to find a better crowd to hang out with, evidently including themselves in the comparison. Some were more free with their charms. But the only girl who ever swooned over me also threw up on me.

Still, playing to rowdy young women was a lot of fun. I'm reminded of that when I occasionally sit in church while the music ministry sing their hearts out or play the guitar or kazoos at a Folk Mass. I assume they are enjoying themselves, but with no young women screaming when you huff out your low notes, I can't imagine singing in the choir is as much fun as belting out a song to dozens of beer drinking sorority girls.

It is true I met my wife as a result of my short career of fame in two small towns. She noticed me in the band one night and recognized me from our college. When I approached her some months later, it served as sort of an introduction and we hit it off, something that didn't always happen to me with many young women who understandably had second thoughts about bringing a musician home to meet Mom and Dad. What I needed and found was a very brave girl.

I had toyed with the notion of working seriously on my playing and becoming a career musician, but no one in their right mind would choose a life of wandering around looking for work and playing music in side street pubs for people who expressed their appreciation by sitting there and getting drunk. I didn't want to find myself on a Greyhound bus every week touring the worst parts of one town after another as I played out a career in all the cheap dives on the east coast. Some of my band friends got regular jobs and played evenings and weekends for extra money. That must have cut into their family life.

An honest assessment of me as a musician would say I wasn't very serious and I certainly wasn't very good. My time of being almost famous didn't last very long, only from my junior year of high school until my second year of college. At age 19 I was done.

One hot and sticky night in July of '62, after playing in some crummy club at Sylvan Beach, I was odd man out when the management gave us an overnight room that slept only four. I woke up on the sandy beach at about 7 the next morning to a bright sunny day that was giving me a terrific headache. As I rolled over and tried to get comfortable, sand trickling down the back of my pants that were wet from the dew, I sensed my life as a musician was over.

I sat up on the beach and looked around in the bright sunlight. A young mother some distance away looked at me and instantly called out to her young daughter to come to her. I should have paid for a room somewhere instead of lying out on the sand.

I looked down the beach to DiCastro's, where I had fallen in love with the whole idea of becoming a rock musician. I wished I had been invited to play there, but they were an upscale bar and never hired us, preferring older bands from the Syracuse area. My old friend and neighbor Petey got a great job with a band from Buffalo. Eventually he quit his accounting work and took off for Nashville with them. Today he is a studio musician and has credits with well known bands. His Aunt Dominica left her bedroom and Uncle Angie and joined Petey down south. I never knew what she was to Petey, aunt or lover. He calls me now and then and asks me if I remember how many window panes were built into each of our houses.

For me, my musical ambition was limited and there were other adventures in life to pursue and places to go. I wanted a life with interesting work in computers, a terrific girl and kids and a house in the country and money to spend. I'm pretty happy with the way my life turned out, but it's fun to remember those golden days ... *some* of them ... when I was a rock musician.

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