

"PETE in the POCKET"

My dad called him "Pete in the Pocket". They met when Pete was about 15 years old., at the Phoenix music store where Pete's father worked. Dad walked in one day at the urging of Pete, Sr. "You've got to hear my kid play", he said. Dad described it to me this way: "There was Pete, playing the piano, and he was so small that his feet didn't reach all the way down to the pedals, but he already played like Oscar Peterson - just amazing!"

Pete was a true savant; a musical genius who played as well when he was ten years old, and had his own radio show in his native Connecticut, as the adult professionals with whom he performed. By 18, Pete was leading the trio at Phoenix's "Jazz Mill", backing traveling jazz stars Barney Kessel, Chet Baker, Miles Davis and every other major jazz artist who came through town.

When he eventually followed Dad to Hollywood in the 1950s, Pete immediately moved into the upper echelon of great players, one of the most influential in shaping Pete's career being Shorty Rogers. Pete was one of Shorty's "Allstars", as well as having a solo and duo career playing the many jazz clubs that lined Sunset Strip during the Golden Age of West Coast jazz, a scene in the creation of which Pete played a major role

Soon, the motion picture, television and recording studios began calling him, beginning with his piano work on "The Man With the Golden Arm" starring Frank Sinatra. Speaking of Sinatra, when you hear that piano phrase that is immediately recognizable as the intro and 'hook' to "New York, New York", that's Pete playing it. Known as "Mr. One-Take" for being able to walk into the studio, play his part down flawlessly the first time, and walk out again, Pete can be heard on thousands of television. and movie scores and hit records, from "To Kill a Mockingbird" to "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid", to the beautiful and lilting accordion work on "The Pink Panther", and the signature piano part on "Herb Alpert's "This Guy's in Love with You".

Speaking of the much-maligned accordion, Pete was first call musician on 90% of the accordion recording dates during that era. In the 1980s, he performed all the Bud Powell piano parts behind the digitized sax of Charlie Parker in Clint Eastwood's "Bird". Pete's last televised performance was on PBS, on the "Blues" series that aired in 2003. He performed his composition, "Little Bird", on Clint Eastwood's segment of the show, dedicated to the piano in blues. During the segment, Pete was interviewed by Eastwood, himself also a very fine jazz pianist. Pete was Clint's favorite jazz pianist, and their mutual tenure in Hollywood goes back to the early years when Eastwood was an emerging young actor on "Rawhide" and Pete was playing all the amazing jazz clubs on Sunset Strip and everywhere else good music was to be found in Los Angeles.

It is telling that Pete, who joined Local 586 by lying about his age when he was 16, maintained his membership in our Local all his life. When he went to L.A., he of course joined Local 47, but he kept his membership here, without a break, all these years. He also came back to town now and again to participate in Young Sounds clinics and play at our member parties, as well as visit old friends Nadine Jansen and Keith Greko.. This was typical of Pete and his loyalty to friends and colleagues. Many of his friends date all the way back to his teenage years. Friends didn't necessarily have to be musicians such as my dad, either; some are just ordinary, everyday, decent people he met along the way and never forgot or abandoned. Many such people attended his funeral last month in Pasadena, along with Chuck Berghofer, Earle Hagen, Herb Alpert, and other well-known names.

When my father was terminally ill in the early 1990s, Pete's trio had just released its 25th anniversary album, "Gems". Dad listened to that album and only that album, over and over again; it's all he wanted to hear. Pete in the Pocket, indeed. Pete's music is deft, deep, spacious, uplifting and free of cliches. Dad loved to listen to Pete, and only to Pete, near the end.

At the time he died, Pete had been with the same trio, Chuck Berghofer on bass and Nick Martinis on drums, for 47 years. Nick came on board first and then Chuck replaced Pete's original

bassist, Ralph Pena, who had been tragically killed in a car accident while still a very young man. Talk about loyalty and commitment! Chuck says he "went to the College of Pete Jolly" to learn to play and that, in 47 years, Pete had never, ever told either he or Nick how or what to play --- except to ask Nick to "use brushes on the dinner set". There was an extraordinary alchemical meeting of the minds, born of all those years together, that made their performances sound as if they had been tightly rehearsed and arranged.

Given Pete's start in Phoenix as well as his lifelong connection to this city, it is totally fitting that Pete's last recording was done here, at Clarke Rigsby's Tempest Studios, last May. Pete had some while earlier agreed to come to town to perform on Jerry Donato's recording. We didn't know it when he arrived, and neither did Pete, but he was gravely ill, with a condition from which he would not recover, when he got here. Pete knew he had medical problems but he didn't know or expect what the immediate future held in store. After a few hours in the studio, again living up to his "one take" reputation, Pete laid down the last tracks he was ever to record and, in the process, became so ill that he had to be checked into the Mayo Hospital for a week.

With charts arranged by Bob Freedman, and performances by Jerry on saxes, Brad Bauder (sax), Tom Miles (trumpet), Dom Moio (drums) and Dwight Kilian (bass), Pete lived up to his "A" Player reputation, bringing his best game to town regardless of how ill he was feeling. The results are such that a whole lot of people are going to want to hear this album when it is released next spring. There is no finer or higher example of professional and artistic excellence than that of how Pete performed on his last sessions, just as he had done on all the other playing occasions of his life.

I am very, very fortunate to have been included in Pete's circle of friends and that is a gift beyond my ability to express its meaning to me. I applaud Jerry Donato for many things in bringing this project to fruition; having had the courage to contact Pete, a former stranger, and bring him to town. Then, doing right by the artist and the project, he got one of the finest arrangers in the country to do original charts. When they did the recording, Jerry treated Pete and his devoted wife, Lew, with the deference and respect Pete deserved.

I am also glad that, during the time of adversity when Pete was in the hospital, Jerry took care of Pete and Lew as if they were his own parents. Although it wasn't to be a long-standing friendship as things turned out, it was a deep and familial friendship that was forged between Jerry and the Jollys, just as Pete had formed so many deep bonds throughout his life. When Pete died, Jerry was at the funeral and was "family". This final recording proved to be bittersweet and poignant, just like many of the best things in life.

I have a picture of my dad, guitarist Howard Roberts, and Pete on accordion, ages 19 and 16 respectively, playing at a Local 586 party in 1949 or 1950. The picture shows two beautiful and brilliantly gifted young men, just at the beginning of their life-long musical quests. He was "Pete in the Pocket" then, and he is the same now, somewhere in musicians' heaven, deep, deep into the groove and playing far-out and sublimely, with Dad, Ralph, Shorty, Barney and the hippest gang EVER.

"Pete in the Pocket" indeed!

(This article is used courtesy of Madelyn Roberts, President of AFM Local 586.)