

Life Story of Marty Maggio

A native of Houston, TX, Marty Maggio has made his living as the master of a number of skills, but the constant in his life is the reed. The reed that makes the clarinet and saxophone work the magic they do. It's the reed that enables Marty to orchestrate that magic.

Born in Houston, TX on October 29, 1949, he began playing the clarinet when he was 8 years old. His family could not afford music lessons so they worked a trade-out with a noted Houston musician and teacher, Michael Spompanato that proved beneficial to both parties. It seems Michael's wife was not an especially adept cook and Marty's mother had the culinary skills - especially for Italian dishes --that Michael appreciated. And so it went every Sunday; an hour of clarinet lessons from Michael and a genuine Italian spaghetti dinner for the noted teacher and Marty received lessons from the best, and Spomp, as everyone called him, got spaghetti to die for.

Michael Spompanato had both the talent and reputation to provide a superb foundation for the young Marty. He had been a music director at Rice University as well as the director for All City Orchestras, which comprised the best musicians from high schools around Houston. And as a friend of the family's, he had a special interest in Marty. His influence was profound.

As with many clarinet players from Marty's era, the day came when the saxophone lured him away. It was a far more romantic instrument for the times and though of as a little more hip among the jazz and beat cultures of the fifties. And so it goes, at 12 years of age, Marty picked up a saxophone and, with Michael Spompanato's help, became astonishingly proficient at playing it. That lasted about one year.

As Marty progressed through school and learned he would be an important part of his junior high and high school orchestras, he once again picked up the clarinet. By the time he entered Jeff Davis High School, he was a remarkable musician, soon to earn first chair in their orchestra. An even greater achievement, Marty played first chair clarinet in the All City Orchestra, an honor commensurate with being an All City Athletic among the area's high schools. But the saxophone would soon return.

As Marty got older and learned a little more about the culture of jazz, blues and rock and roll, he once again picked up the saxophone. He was ready to enter professional realm of entertaining. At 16, he began accepting commercial gigs around Houston and Pasadena. Marty would grow up fast in the music business.

Although he joined his first band at 16, he credits the PerryMates, a group he joined at 17, as giving him his first legitimate job in the industry. It was headed by a local Houston veteran Clarence Perry. Perry understood the local scene and was not just another high schooler for Marty to join up with. He had several years experience, a wife and two kids, not to mention he took the music business seriously. He was a good mentor for Marty.

The PerryMates played all over Houston as well as their native Pasadena. They gained a certain amount of notoriety by playing mostly 50's and 60's dance music. Marty remembers the combo well with its upbeat style supported by a lead guitar, bass, Marty and his sax, a keyboard layer and drummer. From the Bamboo Hut in Galveston to the Bawanna Club in Pasadena to the Castaway Club in Houston, the band could light up a nightclub with long-past hits like Honky Tonk, Green Onions and Georgia on My Mind.

They also mixed in some 'mainstream' numbers from the likes of the Beatles and Elvis Presley.

The group was doing well in Houston. They had talent and they were making what most commercial musicians would call a nice living. But they wanted more. In September, 1969, the band went to Nashville with no leads, no contacts, and certainly no job offers. Marty remembers he had \$80 in his pocket and the band hit the road, in caravan style. Clarence Perry was in the lead car with his wife and two children. The bass player followed in his car with his wife, and Marty and another single member of the group took up the rear. Marty was 19 at the time and had no idea what to expect. Their drummer stayed behind.

One memory he will never forget when driving into Nashville was taking the Dickerson Pike exit. They followed the Dickerson Pike a ways until they found a cheap – a very cheap – hotel. He recalls it was around \$6/night; cheap even for those days. They also saved on food the next day as Clarence was an avid camper and brought all his Coleman equipment. The bacon and eggs they cooked in the parking lot the Sunday morning after their arrival weren't half bad.

They reached Nashville on a Saturday night. They didn't do much on Sunday. There's not much for a nightclub band to do on a Sunday. But that night Marty and Clarence began cruising around to see if anything was shaking. They happened along a joint called the Coral Club that was going strong. They went in, told the proprietor they were looking for work and were invited to sit in with their band. They played a set and the next thing you know, someone sent a note and requested Honky Tonk. They did it and did it well. The man who made the request was Scotty Decker, the manager of the Safari Club, a popular Nashville nightspot. He said if you can play Honky Tonk you can play and we need you to play at the Safari Club. Decker offered the job and they took it. One day in town and they were fully employed; not bad for a small caravan of wayward musicians from Houston operating on a wink and a prayer.

Ironically, that second night- their last at the Coral Club – a gentleman named Otis Deck asked to have a few words with them. It turns out Otis Deck was into stock car racing and Roy Orbison was one of his sponsors. Roy was looking for a road band at the time, a backup band that would travel with him when he toured. Of course the PerryMates were interested in trying out. Marty couldn't believe things were happening so fast. He and Clarence agreed to meet with Otis for breakfast, and then proceed to Orbison's home afterwards. They got to Orbison's home, a sizeable 3-story place on Old Hickory Lake. Marty remembered it was two doors down from Johnny Cash's home. He was definitely impressed.

Marty recalled that Orbison answered the door with a chow puppy under his arm. He was a real dog lover. Orbison had just remarried a young lady from Germany by the name of Barbara. His first wife was killed tragically. Barbara was a brunette with striking beauty.

Clarence and Marty were escorted into the home and taken up to the sound studio. He had lunch brought in for all of them. He discussed what he was looking for and asked Clarence if he and Marty would bring the rest of the band members over the next day. Without their drummer, they picked up a local drummer who had played with them that first night at the Coral Club. His name was Tommy Becker. They auditioned at Orbison's house the next day. He sang with them to see how the sounds would blend. Marty

remembered how impressed he was with Orbison's voice and the way it carried and resonated. He also remembered the first tune they did – an Orbison staple – Only the Lonely. He liked what he heard. The next thing they knew, they were driving downtown on Franklin Road to Acuff-Rose Recording Company. They had contracts ready for them to sign and, needless to say, they all signed.

Orbison paid them well when they toured but he also committed to \$75.00 per week each on off weeks so when they weren't traveling they would remain loyal. In the meantime, things were rocking for the group, still playing regularly at the Safari Club. Only they were now known as the Mercy Blues at Orbison's request.

The starry-eyed performers from Houston did their first gig with Orbison at the Newport Hotel in Miami Beach. It was actually a commercial closed session to be attended only by recording people and booking agents. But Marty was impressed. He remembers the trip to Miami. It was his first time on an airplane. He also remembers getting off that night after they played and walking down to the lounge to listen to Fats Domino. He remembers having his sax in his hand and jamming a little with the Fat Man to the delight of the lounge crowd. He had arrived.

Their first real tour with Orbison was soon to materialize. It started with a caravan of musicians and equipment all heading north from Roy's home in Nashville to Council Bluffs, IA. They picked up Orbison's touring bus in Council Bluffs and their sojourn began. They were to tour many of the major cities of Canada. Noted musician and songwriter Freddie Weller joined the entourage along with a band from Liverpool that Roy liked called Art of Movement. It was quite a show with the mixed bag of musicians headed across the northern plains all under the roof of one large touring bus.

They toured a number of major cities including Winnipeg, Calgary, Regina, Edmonton and Vancouver, performing several concerts over several nights in each town. Marty's fondest memory was in Vancouver, the most beautiful place he had ever seen. He was also struck by the beauty of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on Queen Elizabeth Island. But there was little time for extended sightseeing. The concert tour proved to be fast and furious.

Things couldn't have been going better. They had a regular gig at the Safari Club, they were touring band for Roy Orbison and they were making good money to boot. Then Clarence Perry had a brainstorm. Why didn't they open up their own club? Well, in a few short months they did. It was called the Back Stage.

It was an old brick building on 3rd and Broad Streets not far from the Cumberland River. Marty remembers the outside walls were amazingly thick, comprised of five or six layers of bricks. The place was huge, comfortably seating 300 people. All the band members pitched in to renovate the inside. Marty knew how to drywall, install flooring, do a lot of the basics to save money. The others pitched in. And Roy Orbison advanced them \$2,000 to help with the renovation. Roy had faith in the band and wanted them to succeed. He had also been around the block and warned them that once they opened the new club, there would be pressure to shut them down because competition in the nightclub business was stiff. He said to get connected politically right up front. Join the Chamber of Commerce and some of the business groups. It was good advice. They were open four nights a week and the place was packed four nights a week.

As the band became established and known in the area, they learned that networking was part of the business. There were no secrets in Nashville. Everybody looks for

opportunities and the opportunities were abundant. Marty got to know a sax player who worked with them on occasion. That sax player was part of a group of backup artists called the Nashville Horns. They were lead by Bergen White. Through the horn player, Marty got to know Bergen and was invited to work with the group in what he later learned would comprise some pretty important back-up sessions. The Nashville Horns had some of the best studio musicians in Nashville and their job was to produce music that would be overdubbed for tracks recorded by the likes of Elvis Presley.

For the most part, the Nashville Horns would sit down in the recording studio, earphones muffling the outside world, listening to the recording on tape, then blend artist with saxophones, trumpets in whatever combination the composition called for. So Marty and his friends' horns would comprise the background music for some very famous artists and very famous tracks. Though they didn't normally work personally with the artist, Marty recalls Elvis would drop in occasionally to check out the sound and acknowledge the professional work of the organization, something very gratifying to the studio musicians. Marty said they overdubbed three Elvis albums but didn't always know what songs were being produced for which album so he wasn't always sure which album he was on. He did remember that many of the cuts from Elvis' Muddy Waters album had the Nashville Horns as backup.

Marty's indoctrination to the Nashville scene was just beginning. He was a crack sax player and the city of Nashville was finding it out. Ronnie Milsap acknowledged Marty's sax skills and used to jam with him at the King of the Road Motor Inn, a hotel and nightclub owned by Roger Miller. Marty recalls it was before Ronnie's conversion to country. He was playing strictly rock and roll in those days. Ronnie loved Marty's rock and roll sax style.

Marty had a bartender friend by the name of Richard Kemp. Kemp got around and knew a lot of folks. Marty was doing his thing with sax in hand at the Safari Club when a young lady walked up and asked him to play a number called Yakety Sax, made famous by Chet Atkins and later, the legendary sax player Boots Randolph. Marty's friend, Richard knew Boots and frequented his place, the Carousel Club, to listen to him play his famous sax. He asked Marty if he'd like to meet him. Asking a sax player if he'd like to meet Boots Randolph is like asking a golfer if he'd like to knock it around for 18 holes with Tiger Woods. What Marty didn't know was that the young lady who was impressed with his rendition of Yakety Sax was none other than Boots Randolph's daughter.

An extremely nervous Marty showed up at the Carousel Club, feeling like he was going to meet a musical God, the best saxophone player to have ever lived. As it turned out, Boots' daughter had clued in her old man about the young upstart from Houston. So Kemp and Boot's daughter made the introductions. The next thing Boots asks Marty to come up on stage with him. Together – in double sax – they performed Night Train, Honky Tonk and Yakety Sax. At the end of Yakety Sax, the legend and the newcomer got a standing ovation. To this day, Marty's not convinced whether the standing ovation was for him or Boots. But he did know one thing; the manager of the Carousel Club later confided in Marty that was the first time Boots Randolph ever invited a horn player on stage to perform with him. Not too bad.

A little more time passed and Marty got to know another Nashville musician by the name of Jim Vest. He was the leader of a group called the Nashville Cats. He and the band were playing at the famed Western Room on Printers Alley.

Marty was offered a job with the Nashville Cats in 1972. He had been having problems with the old band and was ready for a change. Marty was meeting more people, got involved in more recording sessions, and stumbled upon a stark reality; Nashville was incorporating more saxophones in their country tunes and arrangements.

Enter Michael Figlio. Michael Figlio was an engineer with CBS, or Columbia as Marty tells it. Michael and Marty had struck up a friendship and Michael took an interest in Marty's incredible talent on the sax. He wanted to press a high-end demo but the cost of doing what he had in mind was a little out of their range. Figlio was creative. He had access to everything he needed to make the demo. He just couldn't let anyone know he was doing it. He told Marty to come to Columbia one afternoon, walk on the property like he knew what he was doing, don't say a word to anyone, and meet him in Studio B at 2:00pm. Marty warmed up and Figlio gave him some old standards to play – Danny Boy, For the Good Times and Heartaches by the Number.

After the recording session, he took Marty's saxophone and cut it with background tracks of Ray Price. The sound was fabulous. After producing the tape, Figlio went to see Ron Bledsoe, Vice President of CBS in Nashville. Figlio was convinced he had something in Marty. They began playing the tape and peaked Bledsoe's interest. As it happens, when Bledsoe was listening to the tape, the arranger of "For the Good Times", Cam Mullins was standing outside in the hall. He walked in unannounced and asked why Boots Randolph was on one of his tracks. Figlio said this is not Boots Randolph, it was Marty Maggio.

The market was ready for somebody besides Boots. Nashville was ready for a new saxophone. It appeared the stars had finally aligned for Marty and he would make his mark. All those years of practice and hard work would finally pay off.

But as fate would have it, a dark cloud would soon appear on the horizon. It was a turning point in Marty's life although he may not have realized it at the time. Boots Randolph was with Monument Records, which was a good thing, no conflict. Unfortunately for Marty, Monument had recently signed a distribution agreement with CBS. CBS was doing the distribution of Boots Randolph's recordings and, therefore, management put the kibosh on any dealings with Marty. Too competitive with Boots was the explanation.

Marty kept playing with the Nashville Cats, but he would soon realize that windows of opportunity were short. He had a shot and came ever so close to that elusive brass ring. But the Big Time was out of reach for now. He still had talent and he still had drive, and he hung on in Nashville for a few more years, highlighted by some studio work with Brenda Lee and an "almost" connection with Tom T. Hall. He became active in the Musicians Union in Nashville and was very proud of some tours he did entertaining the troops at a number of military bases. But by 1976, he decided to return to his hometown of Houston to live a more conventional life. He didn't return defeated. In fact, some of his best music was still ahead.

Though Marty said goodbye to Nashville, he had learned a lot about the business, how things were done, and he learned a lot about himself during those whirlwind years in Music City.

He reinvented himself after his return to Houston. He's playing what he likes to play. It took a little time to get back into circulation in his hometown but he's enjoying what he's

doing and he's remained versatile to support other professionals, entertain with his own quartet and even make occasional trips back to Nashville to put his saxophone on commercial tracks for whatever artist requires his assistance. On one occasion, a Nashville musician asked how come they sent all the way to Houston for a saxophone and a music veteran in the sound studio commented, "because he's the sound we wanted".

Although it took some time to put together all the tracks, Marty made a couple of albums with the help of Don Hanicek, owner of Don's Records; The Sax Tradition Album and Unforgettable. Hanicek was a Houston institution. In addition to his record stores, he also owned a recording company, Bellaire Records. Marty was also a favorite of KQUE disc jockey Paul Berlin and Berlin gave some of his recordings a good bit of airplay over the years. KQUE was a Houston radio station landmark. They played traditional swing and jazz focusing mostly on 40's, 50's and 60's and Marty's style fit their radio station format.

Marty's resume is rich with the places he's entertained and the people he has worked with in Houston. He's made the dinner club circuit at such places as Rudy's, the Swiss Chalet, Reece's Steakhouse and Boudieracci. He's performed at special functions at the Omni, the Westin Galleria and the Metropolitan Center. He played at the Italian Festival for 14 straight years and has performed at a number of golf benefits from Champions Club to Horseshoe Bay. He's worked with such legends as B.J. Thomas and Johnny Lee. He even met President Bush Senior at a Linda Lorelle Benefit raising money for The Scholarship Fund.

He has a wealth of experience and he hasn't lost his passion for music. He loves to work and is still eager to explore any opportunity as long as it involves his sax. Marty describes himself as a commercial swing/jazz entertainer. He's a vocalist, sax and clarinet player and is comfortable entertaining crowds from 40 to 4,000. He can lead four pieces to twelve pieces, and create the charts and arrangements for all situations.

Throughout Marty's life he cut about half a dozen cd's including Simple Things, Sax Tradition and Jumps Jives and Wails. With all Marty's cd's being amazing, with more than enough talent to hit it big, it just never seemed like the right chain of events happened for his big break until early 2011 when Marty signed up with BSW Records and cut his breakthrough cd "YES" Country. Then totally unexpectedly around the same time Marty started climbing the charts in Europe and Canada on April 25, 2011 Marty passed away from a possible heart attack.

Ironically when Marty's music promoter at BSW records was phoned about Marty's passing he was in Las Vegas setting up shows for Marty.. and little did Marty know he was set up to perform with other famous BSW artists at one of the biggest concerts of his life at a benefit show in downtown Houston just months away. Marty may be gone, but his memory will live on forever with his friends, family and his music he left behind.