

Helping Niagara's heart beat

Niagara Rhythm Section celebrates 15 years of Saturday nights

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Staff

In a town as historic as ours, 15 years may not sound like a long time — but for working musicians, playing a gig in your own town every Saturday night for a decade and a half is legendary.

On Nov. 17, the Niagara Rhythm Section is celebrating 15 years of weekly house gigs at local haunts the Anchorage, Corks and The Old Winery.

Steve Goldberger, bandleader, bass player and singer, says it's "amazing to play so close to home. One night I broke a string, and it was faster to go home and get a different bass than to replace the string."

The nucleus of the band — Goldberger along with Penner MacKay (drum kit and percussion) and Dave Norris (drums) — played regularly at the Olde Angel Inn.

Their keyboard player at the time was Herb Nelson. One day Nelson announced he'd scored them a musical holy grail: a weekly gig at the Anchorage Motel. They were slated to play every Saturday night for six months.

The only thing that could end their stage there was the imminent destruction of the buildings.

Nelson and Goldberger had struck upon the idea to have a core group — the Niagara Rhythm Section — and invite a rotation of different local musical guests to join them. "Our original guest roster included Joe Ingrao, Mark Lalama, Bruce Jones, James Brown, and even Tim Hicks when he was nobody," says Goldberger. (James Brown was a NOTL singer — not the King of Soul — and Tim Hicks is now a country music mega-star.)

Says John White, the band's nominated number one fan, "The first time I saw the NRS was with (then local musician) Bruce Jones — a Brazilian artist. There were eight or nine people on stage, including several drum kits. I spoke with Bruce and asked him about the gig, and he said, 'Oh, I'm just the guest. Next week it will be a completely different show.' And it was: Johnny Maxx, a pop singer. I thought, 'Alright, I'm on to something here.'"

What he likes about the weekly shows is the diversity: "Variety with a certain element of familiarity. There



Dave Norris and Steve Goldberger, members of Niagara Rhythm Section. (Lauren O'Malley)

are common elements, but it's never the same show twice."

White has missed few of the band's weekly shows in the last decade plus, and has even taken on the role of lighting technician. Other die-hard fans include Wayne and Lorna Short, who come from Oakville every Saturday night — often bearing gifts of baked goods and lovingly made crafts that celebrate the band. Wayne has become the de facto emcee of the shows at the Old Winery. "We like to put our fans to work," jokes Norris.

Goldberger and Norris remember the years at the Anchorage fondly. Norris recalls the spaciousness of the stage: "We could each individually swing a cat," he says. They also recall the NRS line-up changes that occurred through those years. "After about six months, Herb left, and Joe Ingrao joined us on keys," recalls Goldberger.

"I met Joe when he called me up and invited me on a gig," says Goldberger. Imitating Ingrao's trademark gravel-pocked voice and dramatic inflections, he says Ingrao called him and said, "Steve. I hear you're pretty good. Come play with me at

Casa Mia." Goldberger asked, "What are you playing?" Ingrao answered, "Whatever you want, just come."

Ingrao, a legend in the Niagara music scene, played with the NRS for several years — until, tragically, he died suddenly of a heart attack in 2005.

Rodger Niznik — "a monster on keys" according to Norris — joined the band for a couple of years after that, often bringing his B3 organ and Leslie speaker cabinet to gigs.

Guitarist Steve Grisbrook also joined the band in the Anchorage years. "He came as a guest one night, and then kept suggesting other guests to us, saying, 'Get this guy, and I'll come with him,'" says Goldberger. Eventually Grisbrook just became a permanent fixture, and, through his extensive connections in the blues music scene across Ontario, boosted the band's guest roster significantly.

Grisbrook is evidence of the fact that these guys are musicians' musicians. "The overwhelming rule is that guests always want to come back, which is so flattering," says Goldberger.

Jane Cripps, then manager at the Anchorage, remembers the band fondly. "They were just the greatest. Just the greatest," she repeats. Of her memories of those years, she says, "Probably the most significant one for me was when they played for our closing. That was a really emotional night for all of us. That night was really sad."

But the boys in the NRS weren't going to let a demolition get in the way of their Saturday night winning streak. "When the Anchorage looked like it was going to close, Bob Mavridis (owner of Corks Wine Bar & Eatery) came to us and said, 'The moment you're done there, come and play at Corks,'" says Goldberger.

"We were Bob's guinea pigs for live music at Corks," said Norris. After almost a year of trying, the unanimous conclusion was that the NRS plus guests were just too large a band for the configuration of the bar and restaurant.

Once again, there was a suitor waiting in the wings. "Rob Glatt (co-owner of The Old Winery Restaurant) said, 'If this thing at Corks ever goes south, we want you in our wine bar,'" remembers

Norris.

"And again we didn't miss a Saturday night — we just had to let our scheduled guests know to go the Old Winery instead of Corks," says Goldberger.

The core members are proud of their unbroken record of service. "I think in 15 years Dave has missed two gigs — and I've only missed one or two, for my heart surgery," says Goldberger, who — as a member of the "zipper club" — has had a valve in his heart replaced twice.

They're also proud of another rather significant thing. "Rehearsals are not allowed," says Norris. The only thing the band gets together for is espresso in Goldberger's studio before the gigs. "On stage, the guest artist gives us a five-second synopsis of the song, and off we go. Not one rehearsal in 15 years — and only a few minor musical train wrecks. That's what live music is all about," says Norris.

Local musician and former winemaker Sandra Marynissen is one of a few honorary members of the Niagara Rhythm Section. "Sandra is a percussion student, a protege of Penner's who found her

way on stage." Marynissen nestles in between MacKay and Norris on stage at The Old Winery and adds djembe and tambourine to the on-the-fly arrangements.

"We're so grateful to Rob Glatt for this gig," says Goldberger. "We have a wonderful relationship with him. He told us we're there as long as he is. Not long ago he told us, 'I have bad news for you guys: I just signed a lease for another ten years.'"

Goldberger jokes, "I might be coming in on my walker," — he mimes staggering in to the club. "Alright everybody, let's walk — I mean rock!"

"We aren't taking it for granted, that's for sure. We get to play whatever we want, have good people around us, friends nearby, and we're so close to home," continues the bandleader. The only drawback? "We're getting paid the same as we did 15 years ago," he says. "We're getting paid the same as we did in the 70's," Norris chimes in, laughing.

Raoul Bhaneja — actor, former Shaw company member, and blues singer — is the NRS's guest on Nov. 17 at the wine bar in The Old Winery restaurant.

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