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Niagara Musicians mourn loss of Ingrao

Cathy Pelletier
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Joe Ingrao

NIAGARA -- One of Niagara's most beloved and respected keyboard players, Joe Ingrao, has joined the ranks of so many musicians who meet their Maker too early.

After touring for years with the likes of Long John Baldry, Liberty Silver, the Lincolns, and George Oliver, Ingrao returned to his roots in Niagara, where he's been delighting audiences, whether in small, local pubs or at Wayne Gretzky's wedding, tickling the ivories with his trademark, distinctive flair.

Most recently, he's played a semi-steady Saturday night gig with the Fringe Locals in the Anchorage at Niagara-on-the-Lake, and his bandmates and friends were ready to jam with him as usual and celebrate his 50th birthday. Sadly, that celebration never took place.

Instead, more than 600 friends, family and fans crammed their way into a standing room only funeral for Ingrao, who, after being released from hospital complaining of severe chest pains, died suddenly in his sleep on the night of March 19.

A still-grieving Steve Goldberger, Fringe Locals bass player, jammed with Ingrao at his final gig at the Anchorage two weeks ago.

"He's going to be missed by all of us," said Goldberger, who played to a packed house this past weekend, as people poured in to acknowledge Ingrao's passing.

"He takes the band to another level and I felt so lucky that he would play with me. He was an incredible personality. I'll miss the stories he'd tell. The gig would end at 12:30 and Joe would hold court in the parking lot till 4 o'clock in the



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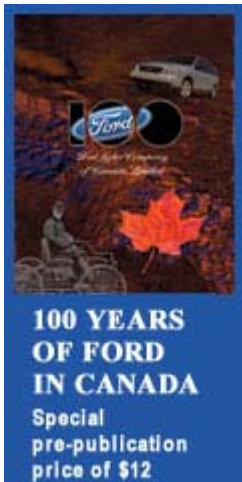


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morning. I'll never forget it."

Goldberger is thrilled Ingrao's talent has been permanently captured on the Fringe Locals CD, 'Clueless,' to be publicly launched at an Anchorage CD release party on April 9.

His colourful personality will also be missed by St. Catharines pianist/singer Mark Lalama, who credits Ingrao with giving him his first big break, touring for Liberty Silver in 1988.

"He was the best story-teller," said Lalama. "He'd drop by the studio two or three times a month and he'd always have the most animated, descriptive stories, in his Columbo-posture delivery. Being on the road can be really gruelling, but Joe made people laugh. He was the glue that united musicians here in this area.

"I always joked because Joe and I were both Italian, from Welland, and because he was eight or nine years older than me, all the same gigs he did, I'd do eight or nine years later," said Lalama. "I remember sneaking into the old Atlas Hotel in Welland at age 16 so I could see him play. I was wowed. His way of playing -- the real deal -- didn't sound like it was out of a book. It was awe-inspiring. I remember his crazy legs under the piano."

Lalama said through the years in a sometimes harsh business, Ingrao advised him about which establishments were reputable to play for and which weren't.

"I always kidded him that he was the godfather because people would ask him for advice."

The running gag was that each time Ingrao stopped by to see him perform, Lalama would stop whatever song he was playing and switch to the theme from 'The Godfather' to honour his mentor.

"I'm blessed with what I do for a living and Joe gave me that very first recommendation. He set the bar high for the rest of us. I was always proud that we were from the same town."

Toronto guitarist Steve Grisbrook has frequently jammed with the Fringe Locals at the Anchorage.

"Joe and I hit it off immediately," said Grisbrook, "personally and musically. He always had a funny story to tell. Musically, he'd approach a simple song the hard way and make it his own, bringing thunderous applause and jaws dropping. There's a part of my heart missing, but wonderful memories surrounding it."

Fortunately, Lalama says he, too, has plenty of ways to remember his buddy, including what turned out to be the final words he would hear from his friend.



"I was out on the road a few weeks ago and Joe had called, so my wife saved the message, and just yesterday I heard it. I'm going to keep that one."



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