

The Highland Club and The Fabulous Penguins

By Frank DiLeonardi

Back in the 1980s, the place to be was The Highland Club. "If you just got into town and you wanted to know who else was in town, you went to The Highland Club," recalls Jody Miller.

Gary and Mary Sue Ruschmeyer owned and operated the club from 1981-2005. Previously, Gary says the location was a day care facility. "Charlie Rayala really helped us open The Highland Club," Gary shared, adding that the liquor license was previously held by the 30-30 Lodge.

Gary began playing the piano publicly as an 18-year-old, starting at the Hurley Holiday Inn. After hitting the local bar circuit with other local bands and a stint as a ski instructor in Lake Tahoe, Gary came back to the area, forming Trilogy with Mike Cole and Peter Grewe.

The Blue Bayou opened in 1980, and Walt Mazur had the band play that summer. This marked a sort of re-birth for live music in the area at the time as there was not the robust live music scene we enjoy today.

While Gary appreciated the early break afforded by Mazur, he had his own plans. "I had the dream to open a bar/restaurant focused on music at that young, arrogant age when I felt I could do a better job," Gary said. "We would open at 8 pm at first, seven nights a week. Eventually, when we started serving food, I would cook at lunch and dinner, and play when I was finished in the kitchen." Mary Sue always worked the front of the house and made sure that the food was delivered and the drink flowed.

During the winter months, Gary took the act to Florida, with The Fabulous Penguins getting its start in Sarasota in 1980, featuring Ron Jodwallace on guitar and Gary on keyboards, with Marvin Stolp (drums) coming on later. Mary Sue came up with the band's name with The Fabulous Thunderbirds in mind.

While other musicians like Don Lincoln (drums), Mike Schultz (saxophone), Randy Hibbard (drums), Don Penfield (piano), Laurie Joubert, Mike Hawthorne, and others did stints with The Fabulous Penguins, Gary was the constant with Marvin by his side for five years.

Everyone who frequented the club likely has his or her favorite story, and Gary and Mary Sue fondly recall ushering in the new millennium on New Year's Eve 1999, the last night a band played the venue. After that, Gary performed solo. Mary Sue also remembers being diagnosed with a bilateral hernia by Doc Przlowski in the bathroom during halftime of a Packers game, with Doc announcing the diagnosis to the crowd following the exam.

Gary and Mary Sue went on to run The Bear Bar in Winchester (2002-2014), and the Belle Isle and The Boathouse in Minocqua, with Gary always tickling the ivories. He also brought the concept of dueling pianos to the area at The Bear Bar with Mark Burns. Gary still plays on Friday and Saturday nights at Marty's Place North.