

Richard Sherman's longstanding gig: bringing the swing to the South Bay



The Richard Sherman Trio with Bili Redd: Jon Stuart, Adam Cohen, Sherman and Redd.

It began at a little place called Pat's Bar on the corner of East 2nd Ave. and 2nd St. in Miami in 1965.

Richard Sherman was 19. He was a math whiz who'd been playing the piano obsessively for nearly half his young life – he'd graduated from the ukulele at 10 after an aunt got divorced and, out of the settlement, Sherman got the piano he'd been longing for — when his mother finally put him to work.

She landed him his first gig. It wasn't an easy one. Sherman and his trio played Pat's six nights a week, six hours a night, from mid-evening to the wee hours.

"My mother got us the job," Sherman said. "It was \$15 per night per person....In between sets, we couldn't stay in the bar. We'd go to a room upstairs because we were too young."

Sherman has been gigging ever since. He arrived in the South Bay in 1972, ostensibly to become a math teacher. But he quickly booked a gig at Tony's on the Pier and thus launched what has become a four decade career as a resident pianist at an astonishing array of local venues. His list of previous engagements is like a time capsule of South Bay culture; it includes The Velvet Turtle (more than six years total, both in Redondo Beach and Torrance), Annabelle's (four years), The Strand, Barnaby's, Splash Restaurant, Manhattan Bar & Grill, the Golden Lotus, Pointe 705, Da Vinci's, Salt Creek Grille, the Torrance Holiday Inn (three years) and, most recently, at the Terranea Resort in Palos Verdes Estates.

Sherman, more than any other single musician, has been the area's jazz pianist. He has lived a double life of a sort, since for most of that time he held down day jobs – first as a math teacher, then as the Xerox sales representative serving USC and UCLA. He'd put in his nine-to-five, come home, rest a bit, then play from 9 p.m. 'til 1:30 a.m. at one of his many resident gigs.

He and his wife, Connie had a long-running disagreement over how Sherman answered that eternal cocktail party question, "What do you do?"

"Whenever people asked me what I did, I'd say I was a jazz pianist," Sherman said. "My wife would say, 'No, he sells for Xerox.' I'd say, 'Let me ask you a question, sweetheart – when I am only playing piano and my income is down to \$20,000 a year, then can I say I am only a musician?'"

After 46 years and several thousand nights of gigs, Sherman is now unequivocally a fulltime jazz pianist. There have been some very interesting developments at this stage of his career. First, he has assembled his finest band yet, featuring bassist Adam Cohen (whose experience includes playing with Ernie Watts, Ray Charles, and Englebert Humperdinck), drummer Jon Stuart (Ed Thigpen, Louis Bellson) and Grammy-nominated, Gospel Hall of Fame inductee vocalist Bili Redd.

"The caliber of musicianship is extraordinary," Sherman said. "I have the best players in the city with me."

Second, his own playing, arranging, and writing has matured. Accompanying a singer of Redd's quality has taught Sherman the value of sparseness, his inventive and vibrantly melodic arrangements of such songs as "Sing" (from Sesame Street) and "Norwegian Wood" are so startlingly original that the songs almost become his own, and his own compositions – including an elegant, classically infused piece called "Solemnity" – take up an ever growing part of his trio's 150-strong songbook.

And third, people are coming, in droves. His regular Friday and Saturday night shows in the large room (called The Living Room) just off the bar in the main lobby regularly become standing-room only affairs. Sherman has always prided himself in generating crowds for the

venues he plays, but at Terranea the crowds seem to have generated a momentum of their own. Even Sherman is a bit flabbergasted by the phenomenon.

“People just keep coming,” he said. “They just seem to be coming back on their own – the guests, the people in the neighborhood, they go and tell their friends, and the next night it’s like a big snowball. It’s just great. I’m playing with the best drummer I’ve ever played with, the best bassist, the best singer...and this is the nicest place I’ve ever played, the nicest audience I’ve ever had, and the nicest employer I’ve ever had.”

Ironically, Sherman doesn’t really consider himself a pure jazz player.

“Personally, I never considered myself a jazz player, like pure jazz – I don’t do all the standards in the jazz songbook,” he said. “Myself, I take songs and jazz them up – I take a song and play it ‘til something hits me. I’ll make a jazz arrangement out of a popular song.”

In a way, Sherman has lived a jazz life more than many players who have spent their years in the more pristine environs of concert halls and tony jazz clubs. Jazz, after all, is a music that in its beginnings was played in the brothels of New Orleans and for a long time was considered too “hot” for wider public consumption. “Oh, I’ve played some dime a dance places,” Sherman noted.

He’s had his chances at bigger stages. In 2001, an executive from the MGM Grand in Las Vegas saw Sherman’s trio at Splash in Redondo Beach, flew them to his hotel and was so pleased with the crowd’s response there that he offered them a fulltime gig. But Sherman was content ministering to his own audience locally, some of whom have followed him for decades.

Plus there was the matter of his wife. “I think my wife would notice I was gone after a while,” he said. “Of course, she told me to go.”

One night at Terranea, a special guest showed up to take in Sherman’s show. David Benoit, who lives in Palos Verdes is one of the most well-known jazz pianist in the world. He heard that something special was occurring with Sherman and his band and stopped by to check it out himself. He came away impressed.

“He’s a really good player,” Benoit said in a brief interview this week. “It seemed like he was very versatile – he could do almost anything, standards or all kinds of different stuff. My feeling was he was a really solid player, moving any direction.”

Benoit, like Sherman, grew up listening to such greats as Oscar Peterson and Ramsey Lewis – jazz players who became household names back when jazz was popular music. Those days are long gone, and it’s increasingly hard, regardless of a player’s merits, to pay the bills as a jazz musician.

“Everything has changed so much,” Benoit said. “I’m always counting my blessings – I was kind of in the right place at the right time. It’s very tough now just to make a living playing jazz.”

Sherman was touched by Benoit’s visit. The two pianists talked between sets, and Benoit thanked him for the time to mid-gig.

“He stayed for three hours and listened to us, and thanked me for speaking with him on break,” Sherman said. “It was so nice of him. I told, ‘No, thank you!’ I really appreciated his kindness.”

Ultimately, for Sherman, the music has been its own reward. So much so, that he feels compelled to give back. Since 1984, he has played a series of benefit concerts at El Camino College, The Norris Theatre, the Hermosa Civic Center, and the James Armstrong Theatre and raised over \$250,000 for the Association for Retarded Citizens, The American Cancer Society, The 20-30 Club of Torrance, Kiwanis International, and Seaside Church.

The experience was disconcerting for Sherman, at first – playing in front of a fully attentive audience with nary a bartender in sight. “I was petrified,” Sherman recalled, thinking back to that first 1984 concert. “They weren’t smoking and drinking.”

The concerts since have become signature South Bay events. On April 27, Sherman and his band will perform at the Armstrong Theater in a fundraiser for Amigos Sin Barreras/Friends Without Barriers in a partnership with the Jazz for Peace Foundation (and jazz vocalist and philanthropist Rick DellaRatta).

These days, his wife no longer contradicts him when Sherman calls himself a jazz pianist. His career has been decidedly handmade and local, and he has not a shred of regret about it.

“You know, my house is paid for now,” he said. “Most of my musician friends were able to handle lives of financial insecurity much better than I could....I had to do it my way.”

Tickets for the April 27 fundraiser are \$25. Call 310-378-5813. The Richard Sherman Trio featuring Bili Redd play, free of charge, every Friday and Saturday from 7:30 to 11:30 p.m. at Terranea Resort. See <http://www.shermanpianoman.com> for more information. ER