

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Former Gang members still playing like Rascals

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

For most senior citizens, heavy breathing is a cause for concern. For Dom and Tony Sgro, however, it's what's keeps them alive.

"Playing harmonica is one of the healthiest things for you," said Dom, 70, a parishioner at St. Casimir's Church in Elmira. He noted that he recently read an article extolling the beneficial effects regular harmonica playing has on the cardiovascular system.

You'd never know it by their humble countenances, but Dom and his brother, Tony, 68, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church in Elmira, are among the greatest harmonica players in the world. Dom plays chromatic harmonica, which is capable of producing many more tones than the standard 10-hole diatonic harmonica. Tony plays chord harmonica, a huge instrument that consists of two tiers of small harmonicas linked together. Dom generally plays lead melodies, while his brother lays down rhythm and harmony. When they play together, it sounds as if one person is playing accordion, so effortlessly do they combine their playing styles.

An excellent showcase of their style can be found on their self-produced *The Sgro Brothers 2000*, which features their takes on such tunes as Andrew Lloyd Weber's "Phantom of the Opera" and Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billie Joe." The brothers play jazz, blues, pop, show tunes and classical music, and have performed at Italian and Irish folk festivals.

The Sgros played with both The Harmonica Rascals and Johnny Puleo and His Harmonica Gang in the 1950s, and have toured as a duo since the 1960s. The Rascals were among the most popular acts in vaudeville history, while the Gang had their own show on the ABC Radio Network in the '50s. The Sgro brothers have shared the stage with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Perry Como and have played on TV shows hosted by Ed Sullivan and Milton Berle.

Interestingly, their rich lives may have never happened were it not for the Great Depression, according to Tony. The brothers' father, Frank Sgro, played mandolin and guitar, and shared his love of music with his children. However, hard times made diatonic harmonicas much more affordable than other instruments, and the boys' father gave them each a diatonic for Christmas one year.

"Back then, that's all they could afford in instruments," Tony said. "All the kids in our neighborhood played harmonicas. They used to have harmonica bands in the school system."

The youngsters quickly became proficient on their harmonicas, eventually putting the diatonics aside to play chromatic and chord harmonicas. Dom and Tony made their debut during an Easter showcase at their school, when Tony was in eighth grade and Dom was in 10th. They played "Old Rugged Cross" and were an instant local hit.

"Everybody would ask us to play for local shows," Tony said, adding that they formed their own act, The Harmaniacs, and played on radio as well as the stage.

Eventually, they saw the Harmonica Rascals in Pittsburgh and met the Rascals' Johnny Puleo, who had them perform an impromptu audition. They were both still teenagers when asked to join the Rascals some time afterward. They briefly enjoyed the Rascals' limelight, although they grew disenchanted with the pittance they were paid by the group's leader, Borrah Minevitch.

Meanwhile, the Korean War threatened to separate the brothers if they were drafted, so they left the Rascals and enlisted together in the U.S. Marine Air Reserve. After a year in the Reserve, they joined the Marine Corp, and although they wanted to serve in Korea, the Corp had different plans for them, sponsoring their own radio show for one year.

After leaving the Corp, the Sgros were signed by RCA Victor, and formed a harmonica band with Herb Shriner. They were labelmates with a young singer from



James Stein

The Sgro brothers Tony (left) and Dominic (right) pose with Father Eugene Weis, pastor of St. Mary's in Waterloo, during a celebration marking the 40th anniversary of Father Weis' ordination. The harmonica-playing brothers entertained guests at the June 2 festivities, which took place at the Waterloo Holiday Inn.

Tupelo, Miss., by the name of Elvis-Prezley. They even met The King once, who told them: "I love the way you guys play them harps."

After Minevitch died, Puleo asked the Sgros to join his newly formed Harmonica Gang, which included many former Rascals. The brothers said they loved playing with Puleo, a short man whose growth had been stunted by rickets as a child, and who had been the butt of many Minevitch routines on stage.

"Johnny was a little guy, but he had a big heart," Dom said, noting that the former Rascal doubled the pay of his compatriots the first week he formed the Gang, many of whom were former Rascals tired of low wages. With the Harmonica Gang, the Sgros performed in Las Vegas, Havana, Hollywood and London. The brothers shared memories of such characters as Berle, who would use his cigar lighters once and then toss them away, as people around him scrambled to collect them. Dom added that Berle kept everyone in line backstage by blowing a referee's whistle.

The two also remembered sharing the stage with Sinatra, and meeting him.

"He was distant, not too overly friend-

ly," Dom said.

"But the guy was probably the best act that I've ever seen," Tony added.

After a number of years, they settled down in Elmira with two Hornell sisters, Ange Di Nardo, Dom's wife, and Lucy Di Nardo, Tony's wife who died in the late 1980s. He married his second wife, Dorothy, this January.

In Elmira, the brothers opened a nightclub that operated for years, and since the mid-1980s, have performed on cruise ships and at a variety of other venues. Despite having seen many of their show-business friends succumb to substance abuse and other dangers of the limelight, the Sgros seem to be remarkably level-headed men. They are irresistible in their enthusiasm for their music, but obviously not blinded by the light of their fame.

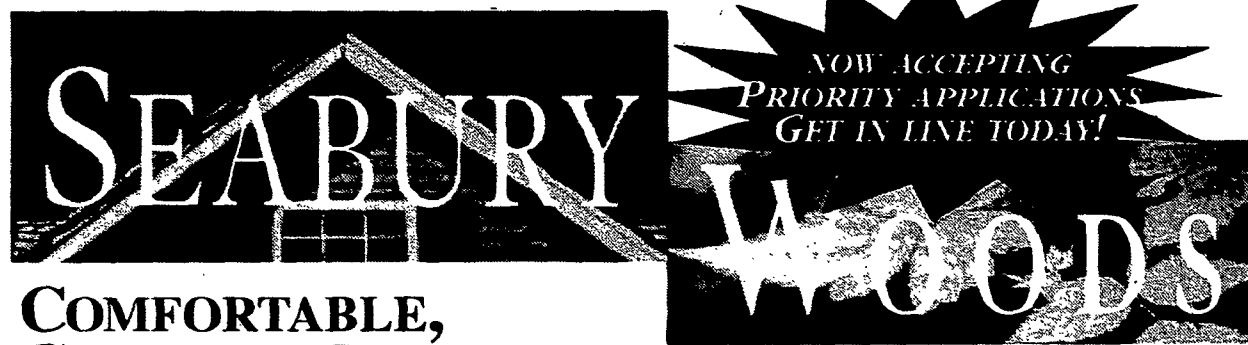
"You learn from watching other people's mistakes," Tony said, recalling one likable fellow harmonica player falling prey to hard drugs.

Both men are religious, and Dom's wife, Ange, coordinates the Perpetual Adoration Divine Mercy Chapel at St. Casimir's with her sister, Rose Marie McLaughlin. Perpetual adoration consists of lay volunteers taking turns 24 hours a day, seven days a week, kneeling before a monstrance housing the Blessed Sacrament.

"Perpetual adoration allows us personal time in the true presence of Jesus for however long we desire," Ange said. She added that she wouldn't have married Dom if he hadn't agreed to say the rosary regularly. Dom, however, apparently had no problem combining his show business life with the spirituality his wife valued.

"The Lord's got to be the center of your life," Dom said, pointing at the numerous religious statues and pictures in his home.

His brother nodded in agreement: "We've stayed close to our faith."



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