

Bustling Bronson celebrates a decade on the Vegas stage

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It's hip, hot and happenin', and maybe one of the best-kept secrets in Las Vegas.

Late-night band leader Lon Bronson preaches the solid classics of funk, soul, and rock 'n' roll from his pulpit at Le Bistro Lounge at the Riviera hotel-casino, to a crowd littered with the upper echelon of Las Vegas talent.

He may not be well-known among locals, but the booths and straight-backed chairs in the lounge shows are packed with his musical peers at his Saturday night shows.

The 41-year-old trumpet player has a boyish quality that belies his many talents: He is musical director and band leader for the 18-piece live band for David Cassidy's "At the Copa" co-starring Sheena Easton at the Rio hotel-casino; executive musical director for "The Rat Pack is Back" at the Sahara hotel-casino; production manager for the "La Cage" and "Crazy Girls" production shows at the Riviera; and a professor of music since 1996 at UNLV.

Whew.

"I wish I could clone myself," Bronson said.

Last Saturday he celebrated his 10th anniversary as front man for the "Lon Bronson All-Star R&B, Rock & Soul Revue" at the Riviera.

The audience was sprinkled, more than usual, with stars such as regular show-goers Drew Carey, Penn Jillette, Cassidy and local headliners. It was a bit of Old Las Vegas revisited, Bronson said, where headliners could hang out with local lounge acts and not be pestered.

The laid-back Bronson opted for black T-shirts, which listed the names of the "All Star" band members, black jeans and, of course, his trumpet in lieu of a tux and tails for the big event.

"It's about the music," Bronson said.

And that is the reason he commands respect among his peers and packs 'em in -- celebrities and all -- at his late-night shows on a regular basis.

While he bops on stage, there is a bit of concentration behind the joyous exterior, a keen sense of timing for the moment when that one burst of blaring horns will prompt the audience to jump out of their seats and dance to the music.

He plays the crowd, almost recklessly, with comic asides and fast-paced, horn-driven music. He's confident the audience will stay with him just to see what's next.

"That's really my philosophy," he said. "I'm trying to do a rock 'n' roll circus. I do a little bit of everything. You have to keep it fresh."

And he will do most anything to keep the audience guessing.

A drag-queen chimp made an appearance at the anniversary show on the small stage, flipping over the shoulders of its long-haired, young trainer and lip-syncing to a taped song.

"I just threw it in to blow people's minds. I only do that once a year, maybe," Bronson said. "You should never know what to expect next."

On a recent afternoon Bronson sat down at a local eatery to talk about why he plays so hard at work and what makes Las Vegas unique in the world of music.

"One of the reasons you haven't heard of me is because there has been no advertising, it's just been word-of-mouth," Bronson said. "It's that simple."

He began his silent rise to widespread acclaim when he built up a group of solid talent (singers and comics and musicians) in a casual atmosphere that lets the music shine.

"The show features vocalists in town (who) I respect, that type of (music that a) discerning, intelligent late-night audience is looking for," he said.

His collection of songs includes the grooves of the '50s and '60s hits, a bit of '70s funk and some recent tunes just to "keep things fresh," he said. "You get to the 10th year and if you did the same show every week, I don't care if you are the Beatles, there wouldn't be a 10th year.

"It doesn't matter if it's me or whether I'm known. Once you see that level of musicianship it doesn't matter who you are, it's the product that stands out."

Epiphany of symphony

Behind Bronson's self-effacing exterior is a businessman who believes in what he does.

"You know what amazes me is that nobody has jumped on the bandwagon and done this," Bronson said.

"This" is the 13-piece "All-Star" band created by Bronson in the early '90s that has played with members of the group Tower of Power, stars such as Huey Lewis and Taylor Dayne, and lots of local talent from shows along the Strip.

The artists who appear with Bronson are paid handsomely to perform in showrooms at most hotels, but they belt out backup vocals or croon center stage with Bronson for free, for fun and -- most importantly -- for the music.

"We are there to entertain ... people who want to listen to good music and know the difference between (cover band) Boogie Knights and a live band," Bronson said. "It's that simple."

Maybe not that simple.

Bronson does admit that his powerful contacts, whom he has had the "sheer, blind luck" to know and work with, gave him a chance to perform in an unoccupied lounge at the Riviera and let his love of music play out.

Arranging the talent and myriad artists together on one stage, one night a week for 10 years takes more than luck, however.

"You really have to have a good relationship with all these different artists, because when it comes to this sort of thing it is a lot like old Vegas," Bronson said. "You respect the person you are playing with, (who) you are working with and you are all in this tight-knit artists' community."

Bronson graduated in 1981 ("most musicians don't, they get gigs and work -- not me") from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. After a brief stint in Hawaii and on cruise ships ("too much of anything, even perfection, gets boring") he was offered a gig at the Riviera to open the new "La Cage" show. That was 1985.

He immediately fell in love with the town.

"The whole vibe of this was amazing," Bronson, a New Hampshire native, said. "It's a big city, but it's a small town in a lot of ways. I can have my suburbia lifestyle five minutes from the casino. That and there are more talented musicians here per capita than we have in Boston and New York. There is more opportunity to play music here, obviously with the casinos, (either) good or bad."

A night out in 1989 at the defunct Calamity Jayne's nightclub on Boulder Highway brought him back to the beauty of performing music on stage.

The widely respected horn band, Tower of Power, stood 8 feet away on a small stage -- and blew him away. "In an alcohol-induced epiphany, I said to myself, 'There is no reason why Vegas couldn't have a band just as talented as Tower with all homegrown talent,' " he said.

With the sound of the horns still fresh in his mind, young Bronson cajoled and plied local musicians with drinks to play on a Monday night, when most shows were closed, at the Riviera lounge. He obtained six of the original Tower of Power arrangements by pulling a favor for one of the members.

It was his hook. "To musicians that's pretty heavy because it's the actual music that they played, not a rearrangement," he said.

He convinced 11 musicians who backed up Natalie Cole, Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra to show up at the gig. "These cats were the heaviest guys in town, in that professional perspective," Bronson said.

The city's musicians strike of 1987, over the casinos' choice to use taped music rather than live bands, reduced the number of local musicians from 400 to a few dozen. Only the best survived to play on.

The audiences, and local artists and musicians, were starved for good music. "The music angle isn't under-used in this town, the talent is," Bronson said.

Star attractions

Also among his television appearances, Bronson's band was featured as the stage band on the HBO special "Mr. Vegas Party Starring Drew Carey"; Comedy Central's "Viva Variety" and "Drew Carey

Friar's Club Roast" cable television shows.

Carey, of the ABC prime-time sitcom "The Drew Carey Show," has sent his cast out in style at the end-of-season wrap parties featuring the soulful sounds of Bronson's band since 1995. "I thought it was just a really hot band," Carey commented at the anniversary show.

The accordion-playing Carey also enjoyed working with someone who was as professional -- and serious -- about music as he is. "It's more of a business decision," he said. "But he's just good."

The two met when Carey was knockin' out stand-up gigs at the Riviera in the mid-'90s. A fellow comic, Monty Hoffman, told him he had to check out the lounge act, Carey said.

Bronson said: "He wandered in the lounge ... tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'You don't know who I am but I'm a huge fan of yours.' "

Although Bronson was already a fan of Carey's stand-up act and was glad to play for a man who understood what it was all about.

"He's really into music," Bronson said. "That's the hook when you see the product on stage. It's not my name. Those are my arrangements and every choice of music is mine. But what makes that work is 12 or 13 of the best musicians in Las Vegas to be able to execute that show."

Another late-night regular is Jillette, who Bronson regularly jams with. The magician/comedian writes music and lyrics and plays bass guitar, and Bronson backs him on drums. Sometimes he visits Jillette's Southwest Las Vegas home to kick back and just play.

Bronson's star appeal is not relegated to this country, or even this hemisphere. The classic rock band Moody Blues was on tour in Australia when a member of another group mentioned a talented musician in Las Vegas who had to be experienced.

"It's a small community of professional musicians, that's all," Bronson said.

Ten years of trumpets

The star treatment from Bronson's peers has not gone to his head. The fair-skinned Bronson spends days by the pool, on the phone, and nights working at one of his various jobs.

He seems to keep going, and going, but he has a reason to take it easy midday and hang out at home as his 2-year-old daughter Alana runs around the house. "The parental plane is on top of everything," he said. "Parenting is a full-time job."

His wife of six years, JoAnn, (who was Lance Burton's assistant from 1991-'99) patiently puts up with his hectic schedule -- a schedule he is paring down, with pleasure. Bronson has performed two nights a week for the last six years.

"The Saturdays (shows), thank God they are only once a week," he said. "I mean, I hate to admit it, I must be getting older because that's why it went down to one night."

When asked what he will be doing in the next 10 years, Bronson doesn't like to comment. He doesn't like to look over his shoulder, he said, or too far into the unknown. But he does hope "the curtain never closes on us."

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