

Las Vegas Weekly



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The advertisement for Harrah's Las Vegas features a photograph of a hotel room with a bed, a desk, and a chair. To the left of the photo is the Harrah's Las Vegas logo. To the right of the photo is a purple banner with white text that reads "HOT DEALS! CHOOSE FROM GREAT RATES!" and a red button that says "BOOK NOW".

News



A Man Without a Lounge

Lon Bronson and the decline of a great Vegas tradition

Spencer Patterson

Thu, Jul 27, 2006 (midnight)

The excited inquiry finds a mellow, middle-aged man in a "Let's Do Funk" T-shirt with deliberately ruffled, sandy-brown hair, who's relaxing near the back of a throwback Vegas lounge in an old-school Vegas casino scheduled to be a pile of dust this time next year. Once, not long ago, this same man—who is indeed Lon Bronson—reigned supreme in a room not dissimilar to this one, commanding a reputation as leader of the best lounge band on the Strip and far beyond. But those days have passed, and today the trumpeter sits in the Stardust's Starlight Lounge solely as a spectator, and a source of considerable interest to the stranger who has noticed his presence.

"You guys are great, man. I used to see you all the time."

As it turns out, Bronson's admirer also plays music, manning the drum seat for local five-piece Rated TG, which has just finished a three-song soundcheck before a two-week run beginning later that Tuesday. Following a handshake and a brief, friendly exchange, Bronson returns to his seat, in time to observe the elevated stage's velvet curtain close behind the curved center bar. "I've gotta take my hat off to these guys, 'cause they're really in the trenches," he says. "A band like this might get booked for two weeks, and then they might be off for two or three months before they get another gig. You used to have 30 or 40 lounge bands doing day shifts, night shifts, making a living doing the lounge circuit full-time. Now there's just no lounges like this left."

Bronson spent 13 years holding down first Monday nights, and then Fridays and Saturdays, at the Riviera's Le Bistro Theatre with his All-Star Band, so named because its dozen or so members earn their primary paychecks performing in the pits at such ongoing shows as Mamma Mia!, Legends in Concert and Phantom of the Opera. Then the Riviera succumbed to the lounge scene's increasingly popular "pay to play" entertainment scheme—the casino leases space to acts, who then recoup via covers and ticket sales, rather than hiring acts directly and allowing patrons in for the traditional two-drink minimum—and Bronson's group packed up its horns and saxes and trekked to the Golden Nugget in 2004.

"I wouldn't entertain the notion of selling tickets because inevitably you can't compete in that market," Bronson explains. "Plus, I don't think it would be fair to the people who have been seeing us all these years to start charging a cover. We've always prided ourselves on being a throwback to that Louis Prima-type, mid-'60s Vegas lounge band, and once you start charging a ticket price you're a headliner."

The All-Stars found a lustrous showroom waiting for them at the Nugget, with first-rate lighting and the most impressive sound system the 47-year-old Bronson has experienced in a career that stretches back to his days as a young performer in New Hampshire and Boston. The Theatre Ballroom's third-floor location drew fewer walk-ups, but hordes of locals and tourists in the know made the journey upstairs in search of hot, late-night music, as did the celebrities the band has long been famous for attracting, from Penn Jillette and Drew Carey to the Barenaked Ladies and Tower of Power.

New ownership brought cost-cutting changes at the Nugget last year, however, and Bronson & Co. didn't receive an extension when their final six-month contract expired in October. "They came in with axes, slashing every department, including entertainment," says Bronson, who immediately began entertaining offers to remain Downtown or return to a Strip hotel. But nine months later, save for a few corporate gigs and other private functions, the All-Star Band—an ensemble so good other bands routinely spent their off nights watching them—has been conspicuously absent from the lounges and showrooms of its past.

Recently emerging from public hibernation, Bronson and his group have popped up in an unexpected new home along the Strip but outside the casinos: Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. "I swore after the Golden Nugget next time it would be location, location, location, and Margaritaville isn't on the Strip, it's in the Strip," says Bronson, who has played a handful of shows at the locale and hopes to land a regular Sunday slot there soon. "In a typical lounge setting, in the course of an evening we might have been reaching 100 or 200 people at a time. At Margaritaville they pipe your music out onto the street, so in addition to up to 1,500 people inside, you're reaching thousands walking by outside."

Squeeze into Margaritaville while the All-Stars are onstage and you'll hear the band envelop not just the ground-level bar, restaurant and dance floor, but also second- and third-floor seating areas with dramatic views of Caesars Palace. Images of Bronson, his male and female vocalists, guitarist, sax and horn players and rhythm section hover on screens throughout the tavern, while tourists snap photos of what must be the best bar band they've ever stumbled upon on a trip to Las Vegas.

Here, Bronson's lineup has slimmed from 13 to 11 in accordance with a slightly smaller stage. Gone now are the sleek, black getups of the Nugget years, replaced by T-shirts, shorts and, in some cases, flip-flops. And though the versatile ensemble still works funk and jazz into its sets, the band plays to its rock side slightly more now, diving into material by Frank Zappa, Jethro Tull, Sly & the Family Stone and the Motown legends, to the obvious delight of the crowd.

"It's our ultimate clientele—middle-aged people there to hang out in Jimmy Buffett's house. They're drinking a lot, and they're ready to rock with us," Bronson says, becoming markedly more animated as he speaks about the new location. "And we don't have to compete with casino noise or deal with pit bosses pointing decibel meters at us."

Satisfied as Bronson might be, he often doubles back to the topic of lounge decline, saying he's not so much saddened by it as embarrassed. "The two-drink-minimum lounge entertainment was something that set Las Vegas apart from almost everywhere else," he says. "And now it's the reverse. You can go to Mohegan Sun in Connecticut and see a name headliner in the lounge for two drinks on the weekend. It's embarrassing that something that we pioneered and something that we're famous for has really gone the way of the dinosaur here."

By way of example he refers to Vegas veteran Freddie Bell, a performer Bronson has respected since they shared a stage during the All-Stars'

formative years. "He was a star in his own right in the late '50s, and I learned a lot about Vegas history and Vegas culture from him," Bronson says. "But the punch line of the story is that there are no lounges in town for Freddie to play anymore. Now he plays at that Italian restaurant on the outskirts of town, where they do karaoke on Mondays, the Bootlegger. It's gotten to the point where even Freddie Bell, one of the pillars of the lounge scene in Las Vegas, is playing at a freestanding Italian restaurant instead of being the centerpiece at a casino lounge in Las Vegas proper."

Joe Leone, vice president of entertainment at the Golden Nugget, questions why more casino executives don't recognize the drawing power of quality live acts. "At the end of the day, as much as the business landscape has changed across Las Vegas, one underlying thing that has not changed is 'butts in the building,'" he says. "The more ways you can find to get bodies into the building affordably, the better off you will be. I think part of it is just the corporatization of Las Vegas, where there's a lot of bottom-line thinkers right now."

In part, Bronson blames the casinos' ongoing nightclub boom—an "overplayed hand," he calls it—and the availability of cheaper forms of lounge entertainment such as hypnotists and track-backed singers. "You know what the sign in front of the Stardust says? It says, 'It's Hypno-larious.' Come on. I take exception with replacing a live group of professional musicians with one guy."

Most of all, Bronson chalks the progression away from two-drink-minimum lounge acts up to departmental rivalries, which make traditional loss leaders all but impossible to write off these days. "You've got food and beverage in direct competition with table gaming in direct competition with entertainment, and nobody wants to foot the bill," he explains. "If entertainment foots the bill, then it looks like they're running at a loss because they're not showing the gains made at food and beverage and gaming. They know lounge entertainment is gonna generate, but they want a tangible set of numbers they can point their fingers at. In the old days, if you came into a lounge and saw the Count Basie Orchestra for free and came out of that lounge raring to go, the pit bosses knew it. But how do you put that down on paper? 'This guy mentioned that he saw Count Basie?' It's not gonna fit on a ledger line."

Steve Schirripa began to feel that financial pinch toward the end of his run as entertainment director at the Riviera, which lasted from 1995 to 2000. "At one time we had an afternoon act, from 4 to 8 during happy hour, then come 8:30 or 9 we had another band, and then we had a third band play until 2 or 3 in the morning. It was continuous music. But by the end we were down to one band a night," Schirripa recalls via telephone from New York City, during a break from filming the final season of *The Sopranos* (Schirripa plays mobster Bobby "Bacala" Baccalieri). "Now, hotels want every single space to make money, and the lounge isn't necessarily a [direct] money maker. But you have to look at it and say, are they gonna bring in people that wouldn't normally be here? If a good band is bringing in 300 people from outside and those people are drinking and gambling and eating, the value can't always be measured in what they spent in the bar in the lounge. If you put the revenue all together, I believe you make money."

Schirripa has an even more direct message for casino operators unsure whether bringing the All-Stars aboard makes sense financially. "Why someone hasn't snatched up the Lon Bronson Band, I do not know. If you want 300 or 400 people in your lounge at 4 in the morning, hire the band. It's very simple." Agrees Leone, "In today's day and age of tracks and lip-synching, when they were here this was one of the few spots in Las Vegas where there was a creative vibe on a nightly basis. There's some wonderful entertainment options in Las Vegas, with incredible production, but as far as having that confidence and having some fun, just basically jamming, Lon's band stands out."

Bronson's occasionally pained tone notwithstanding, he insists he isn't bitter about what has happened to his beloved Vegas lounge culture. "It's a trend, that's all. Just business, and we're adapting." He also sees a glimmer of hope on the horizon, in the form of Red Rock Station, which sprawls out around the high-profile Rock's Lounge near its core. "I think little by little you'll see some of the casinos coming around," he predicts. "Rock's is a great room, in the center of the casino, with a comfortable setup. You can go and see a killer band, like the Steve Lee Group on Monday night, for two drinks, and then maybe you go out and gamble, which was the concept from day one."

For now, he and his band have plenty of work—both full-time and freelance—to keep them busy, not to mention secure financially. "It's never been about the money for this band. Music is our profession, but we look at this particular ensemble as a fun hobby, and we do it because we enjoy it," he maintains. But that doesn't mean the man who once ruled Vegas' lounge bandstand plans to turn his back on musicians like his Starlight visitor, soldiering on in an industry that's seen the average lounge band's hiring price drop from \$5,000 to \$7,000 a week to below \$3,000, when work is even available.

"I gotta hand it to these guys. They're probably playing something like four one-hour sets a night, six nights a week," he says as he exits the Stardust's darkened lounge, possibly for the last time. "These days in this town, you've really gotta want to work to do that."

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The advertisement is framed by a decorative border of vertical stripes in shades of pink, orange, and brown. On the left, a photograph shows two blonde women in colorful bikinis standing in a swimming pool, smiling and talking. On the right, the text is set against a white background. At the top, the word 'Flamingo' is written in a red, cursive font, with 'LAS VEGAS' in a smaller, red, sans-serif font below it. The main headline reads 'GO GET WET' in bold black letters, followed by 'FROM \$49*' and 'PER NIGHT' in smaller black text. Below this is a pink rectangular button with the text 'BOOK NOW' in white. At the bottom, a small line of text reads '*Restrictions Apply.'

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Xania's Hot Spots - This Week's Special Events



- [Emily Gimmel's birthday party at Tao Beach](#)
- [Ferry Corsten at Wet Republic](#)
- [Via Brasil presents Skip the Pool Sundays](#) (Sunday, May 17)
- [Las Vegas Magnums at the Bank](#) (Sunday, May 17)
- [Goodlife Sundays at Moon with Seb Fontaine and Noel Sanger](#) (Sunday, May 17)
- [RNR CD Release Party at Wasted Space](#) (Sunday, May 17)
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