

MUSIC:

Workin' to keep workin'



Sam Morris

Lon Bronson performs in the orchestra for “The Rat Pack is Back” Wednesday at the Plaza. He also travels the country to keep working steadily as a musicians, conductor and orchestrator.

By [Jerry Fink](#)

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Trumpet player Lon Bronson came to Las Vegas when it was a mecca for musicians and has adapted as it has become tougher to find work.

He wears a lot of hats — performer, conductor, orchestrator, agent. He switches easily between genres — jazz, rock, pop, symphonic.

Lately, he’s been racking up the miles in his never-ending drive to perform — Orlando, Fla.; Los Angeles; New York; Boston; Chicago.

Bronson has a foothold in Hollywood, too, thanks to old friend Drew Carey. Bronson provided the music for the season-ending cast parties for “The Drew Carey Show” and “The Price is Right.”

Last weekend Bronson was conducting in Charlotte, N.C.

But he's back in Las Vegas where he will perform with and direct the Lon Bronson All-Star Band in a free concert Thursday night at Green Valley Ranch's Ovation Lounge.

When he isn't on the road he performs with his Lon Bronson Orchestra (not to be confused with the All-Star Band), providing music for "The Rat Pack is Back" at the Plaza.

That's his steadiest gig.

Bronson and the orchestra have been with this version of "The Pack" since the Dick Feeney-Sandy Hackett production debuted at the Greek Isles in June 2002. The musical has been at the Plaza for almost a year.

The Bronson Orchestra also performed with David Cassidy's version of "The Rat Pack" at the Desert Inn and the Sahara. Bronson followed the former "Partridge Family" star to the Rio for the musical "At the Copa."

Bronson is music director for 40 road dates of "The Rat Pack."

"I coordinate different musicians all over the country for the shows, like Rapid City, S.D. I love it. I get to employ some of the last professional musicians in the smaller towns all over the country, musicians that are just waiting for the opportunity to play a show like this, because it doesn't happen often anymore."

Rapid City and Vegas have something in common, Bronson says — fewer gigs for musicians.

He says lounge entertainment is an endangered species in Las Vegas, because of the corporate mentality of casino owners.

"Their philosophy is they have to maximize profit, and in so doing they have trivialized entertainment," Bronson says. "They don't understand what entertainment brings to the table. They cut out lounge entertainment to save money, but they'll go out and spend \$100 million to develop a Cirque show and not think twice about it."

Gone are the days when you could hear the likes of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Harry James or Louis Prima in a Vegas lounge. Now every hotel has an ultralounge.

"These nightclubs are the final nail in the coffin of lounge entertainment," Bronson says. "They build these clubs that have zero entertainment. The entertainment in those clubs are the people themselves — 'How am I dressed? Who's looking at me?' It's so narcissistic.

"I lived through the disco era and I thought it was gone forever, but it's back and now the fans are dropping \$2,000 to have a bottle of \$20 whiskey served to them at a table."

Bronson, 49, is a rocker at heart and outlines his roots. A native of Keene, N.H., he was 14 years old when he attended his first concert — Frank Zappa.

"I became a huge fan," he says. "And of course there was Velvet Underground and the Sex Pistols. There are a lot of groups in there I guess you wouldn't expect me to like, being a trumpet player. I'll always consider myself a rock 'n' roll trumpet player."

He's such a Cream fan that he flew to New York for the reunion gig at Madison Square Garden in 2005.

He also loves the Starland Vocal Band and its one hit — "Afternoon Delight" in 1976. "I always throw that

out there,” he says, “because people go, ‘What?’ If they get it they get it, if they don’t they don’t.”

Tower of Power remains a major influence. “I saw them back in 1990 at a club called Calamity Jane’s,” he says. “I hadn’t seen them since the ’70s and they blew me away again.”

That show inspired him to create the Lon Bronson All-Star Band. He calls it a “kicks” band — just playing for kicks, using a lot of top-notch musicians who perform in shows around town.

“We started doing Tower of Power and Blood Sweat and Tears,” Bronson says, “and evolved into our own funk rock ’n’ roll band.”

He’s working on a recording project called “Doc Does Vegas” with members of Tower of Power, including co-founder Stephen “Doc” Kupka. “The funky doctor,” Bronson says. “He actually donated two or three of his original Tower of Power songs that never got recorded.”

Bronson, a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, arrived in Vegas in 1985 as Dick Feeney’s production consultant for “La Cage” at the Riviera. Bronson had worked with Feeney in Hawaii on the musical “Lullaby Swing.”

“When Dick got the deal to come to Las Vegas he invited me come along and help him open the show,” he says. “I was living in Greenwich Village at the time — and the Village was like the artistic heart of the universe.”

But the idea of a Vegas adventure interested him. So he put his stuff in storage, intending to stay for two weeks. He never even bothered to go back to pick up the belongings he had left behind.

“I fell in love with it,” he says. “It was my adult Disneyland. It was a big city, but it wasn’t. You got to know a lot of people quickly. There were a lot of parties, a lot of gorgeous dancers.”

He describes those halcyon days for musicians.

“Every single production show had an orchestra of 20 or 30 pieces,” he says. “And not only did every production show have an orchestra, but there was a relief orchestra that would go around and do the seventh day.

“There were so many production shows, and all of them were running two shows a night, seven nights a week. Nobody does that anymore. There was work for 300, maybe 400, musicians — and we’re not even talking about the lounges. The lounge scene was a whole different bag. Every casino had at least one lounge — there were 50 or 60 bands in circulation.”

Jazz fans may remember Bronson, Don Menza and other local legends playing Monday nights at the Four Queens in the early ’90s. The jam moved to the Riviera for 14 years. Steve Schirripa, better known as Bobby Bacala on “The Sopranos,” was the entertainment director.

“He picked up the torch in trying to keep jazz alive in this town, but it’s almost impossible,” Bronson says.

The jam moved to the Golden Nugget when Tim Poster and Tom Breitling brought it in 2004. “They wanted to bring back the old Las Vegas,” Bronson says. But the Monday night sessions ended when they sold the Nugget a year later.

“Literally, the week after the property was sold we were fired,” Bronson says. “The corporate people came in and said ‘What’s this? Why are we spending money on this band?’ Sadly, that’s the situation almost

everywhere.”

There are exceptions, he says, such as the Station Casinos, the Cannery and South Point.

“They promote their lounge entertainment,” he says. “Most of the other places, when you can get a gig they don’t want you to play too loud because it disturbs the customers.”

But Vegas is still his favorite city.

“If I were in New York or L.A. or any other major city I think there would be even more competition and less work,” he says. “As bad as it seems to us now, I think per capita Las Vegas has far more entertainment and music venues than any other city in the world. I’ve established myself here, so why leave now? If you wear enough hats you can still make a living in music. You can’t just be a sideman anymore.”

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