

Studio Insider #82
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Tony Flores

I just said goodbye to a dear old friend and musical partner who died this week after a long battle with cancer. I decided to dedicate this month's column to him, both to honor his memory and to remind us all that a successful musical life can be long and fulfilling, even if it doesn't involve massive record sales or nationwide recognition.

Tony Flores was a wonderful mandolin player. He was born in 1914 in a little fishing village in Sicily, and came to the United States in the early twenties, after his father had found work with the growing Italian fishing community in Monterey. The family eventually moved to San Francisco, where Tony attended high school. His brother and sister were both musicians, and Tony, who started playing violin, soon moved to his preferred instrument, the mandolin, taught by his sister. By the 1930's, he was playing mandolin with the Aurora Mandolin Orchestra in San Francisco. San Francisco was a melting pot of great music then, with Italian musicians, Spanish, Mexican, Mexican-American and other latin musicians interacting constantly, playing each others' music and writing and co-writing a growing repertoire for the large and small acoustic ensembles that played for social functions. Tony's playing blossomed, and he absorbed this great music while perfecting a beautiful, interpretive style on the mandolin.

After marrying his sweetheart Lorrie, he raised five children, some of whom became musicians too. I met Tony in the early 1970's when my band hired his son, Vince, as bass player. Our group had been auditioning bass players, but when Vince showed up with his electric and upright basses, we knew instantly that we wouldn't have to look any farther. There was a special quality about Vince, aside from his remarkable musicianship, and he instantly fit in with the rest of us, creating a strong family vibe. "I'm Italian," he told us, "and the whole family comes with me. You'll see..." And we did. At the first gig we played with Vince, there was the entire Flores family in the front row, listening intently, cheering us on wildly and appreciatively. They showed up at many of our south bay area shows, particularly when we played a favorite spot in Los Gatos, "Mt. Charlie's Saloon." Our band played original music, classical music, jazz, old time, bluegrass, ethnic musics, and a widely eclectic mix of roots based music. The Flores family, with a deep appreciation for artistic and ethnic music, were our unflagging boosters. Innumerable times they would haul us all out to "breakfast" after we'd finished our last set and torn down our gear -- making sure that we skinny kids had at least an occasional hot, full meal in our bellies as we toiled away the months writing and arranging our show. There were gatherings at their beautiful home, built by Tony on Loma Prieta in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We got to meet Tony's father (nicknamed "il quarararo," or, "the tinker") who had brought the family to America so many years before. Even in his uncomfortable old age, he'd throw down his cane and dance precariously to the old Italian

mazurkas that Tony would play on his bowl back mandolin.

As Tony Flores' children moved on into their own lives and careers, Tony began to play out again. In the late 70's, I went to Santa Cruz to see a trio of Tony on mandolin, his son Vince on bass, and Santa Cruzan Billy Packard on guitar. I was astonished at the dignity, the respect and the artistic interpretation that flowed from Tony's remarkable playing. The trio was playing many of the tunes Tony had played so many years before in San Francisco, and they were making incredible music. People who watched and listened to Tony play were astounded at the quality of what they were experiencing.

Eventually, Manuel Santana, who owns Jardines, a beautiful outdoor restaurant in historic San Juan Bautista, heard Tony play and decided that this treasure had to have a regular home. He installed Tony as his regular entertainment at Jardines, and Tony continued to play there every weekend for almost 25 years. In the mid 1980's, I got a call from Tony one morning. "Joe," he said, "I need another guitar player. You know this music, and if you could come and practice a little, you could play guitar for me. You'll love this place, and especially Manny, the owner. He loves music more than anything. And I get lots of playing jobs from all the old Italians who I knew as kids in Monterey. They're all wealthy landowners now, and love to have the old music for their anniversaries, parties, weddings, etc. What do you say?" It took me about five seconds to say, "I'll be right over." So off and on for the next ten years, I played guitar for Tony. The music was his only livelihood -- he'd had a variety of jobs while raising his family, but none of them turned into a lifelong career with a substantial retirement. So he gigged. And his playing was as strong and artistic and beautiful as I ever heard.

We drove together on Saturdays and Sundays from Tony's place in Santa Cruz to Jardines restaurant in San Juan Bautista. It's still a beautiful drive through rural Santa Cruz County, past Watsonville, Aromas and on out to San Juan. Tony taught me to stop the truck, get out, and pick mustard greens from the large fields we'd drive through. He showed me how to get the best ones, and how to cook them in a frying pan with a little garlic, olive oil, and salt and pepper. He showed me how to pick olives from the prolific trees at Jardines restaurant, take them home, and cure them the old-fashioned Sicilian way with salt, and put them up for storage and later treats. Sometimes we'd listen to music on my truck's great sound system, turning it up loud and grooving with Sabicas, Escudero, and many other great old European masters as we drove through golden hills on our way to play music. Those were times that I cherished then and cherish today.

Most people were surprised to learn Tony's age, since he looked so young and vibrant. He went for fast-paced daily walks to the beach and back. Sometimes, even in the dead of winter, he'd wade far out in the frigid waters of Monterey Bay and go fishing, wearing only a bathing suit and sweat shirt. Eventually, though, he developed prostate cancer. Tony put up a long and gallant fight against the

disease, beating it back again and again so that he could continue playing. Earlier this year, advancing illness forced Tony to move up to Sonoma, where he could live full-time with his daughter and her fiance, Norton Buffalo. Norton welcomed Tony (and of course, the whole Flores family) into his home. There, surrounded by his adoring children and wife, he finally passed away early Sunday morning. I played him many of our favorite old tunes during his last hours, and will always feel honored and lucky that I was swept up into this remarkable family and musical life.

Joe Weed records acoustic music at his Highland Studio near Los Gatos, California. He has released six albums of his own, produced many projects for independent labels, and done sound tracks for film, TV and museums. His latest production, for Appleseed Recordings, is "Spain in My Heart." You can reach Joe at joe@joeweet.com.