



# Piano Bar



Mick Archer

## Bob Solone: Living Link To The Golden Age Of Rush Street Piano Bars

Though there have been many changes in the piano bar scene since I started doing this in 1980, one thing has been consistent: somewhere, somehow, Bob Solone is still singing and playing the piano. In the dictionary under the word "survivor," there should be his publicity headshot. Forty-six years on the bench and, despite the virtual disap-



Bob Solone.



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pearance of traditional piano bars, he's still going strong.

Solone grew up in Cicero, Ill. Not exactly a Mecca of fine arts, he first found musical inspiration by watching Marx Brothers movies on TV. At age 12, he got his first piano and was lured by the popular music of the day. We share bragging rights to having actually seen The Beatles live, but I didn't get to sit in, as he did when that teenager, with "The Iles of March."

While studying at Morton College and taking private lessons from the great Evanston jazz teacher, Alan Swain, he began his nightclub performance career. "When I started in piano bars in the late '60s, all the gigs were five-nighters, Tuesday through Saturday, with alternate players on Sundays and Mondays. I was fortunate to come in at a time when piano bars flourished. In the Rush Street area, there was live music, mostly piano bars, on practically every corner and scattered throughout Chicago."

Like many of us, as a young player, he was fascinated, moved, and awestruck by the artistry and congeniality of Buddy Charles, who was playing a duo with the great local jazz guitarist, Ray Duna, at a joint on Rush Street. "Once he found out I played, he would always ask me to sit in. If you were a fellow entertainer, as soon as you'd walk into the place, Buddy would acknowledge you to the crowd, and if he was on break, you'd get a monster bear hug from him. He was generous with his microphone. So the club owners took notice of me. When he moved on to the Acorn on Oak, I was called to take over the five-nighter—a dubious and scary challenge for the "new kid on the block." It was the coolest gig for me thus far, so I went out and bought a brand new Italian sports car. Picked up the car on a Monday, went to work on Tuesday and the joint was padlocked!"

This and other frustrations compelled him to hit the road: Las Vegas, Europe, Mexico, and eventually New York in the early 1980s. Solone studied with noted Broadway pianist and composer, Leo Edwards, and began composing his own pieces for the piano. He performed his "Introduction and Fantasia for Piano and String Orchestra" at Carnegie Recital Hall.

"That was perhaps my best moment onstage." And what was the worst? "A New Year's Eve gig with a big band backing Sandler and Young. I prepared ahead of time for their show, but didn't know they were going to throw a bunch of big band jazz charts in front of me for a dance set. Reading charts cold. I was not

prepared. It was a nightmare."

Despite this stumble, professional musicians have always been among Solone's biggest fans. One night at his Caesar's Palace engagement, he was playing his signature medley of soft, late-night melancholy ballads of the Larry Hart - Kurt Weill variety. "...when a short, tanned man in a tuxedo drifted away from his table and walked over to the piano. He listened with his head down, dragging on a cigarette, and said, 'That was good. That was very good.' It was Frank Sinatra."

Back in Chicago 1983, Bob began a 10-year run with Tony Zito in a two-piano team at the French bistro, Yvette on State Street, just north of Division. Most people think of dueling pianos as the rock 'n' roll version that arrived at The Baja Beach Club at North Pier in Chicago in 1989, directly from Alley Cats/Dallas, Texas, which eventually went to Cincinnati, where the first Howl At The Moon finally broke this bronco and turned it into the stale, soulless corporate commodity it is now (but that's another story). They don't realize that Chicago had a terrific twin piano show at Yvette's six years earlier. It was not derived from the same source (the original bawdy Pat O'Brien's New Orleans in the 1930s), but was rather a continuation of the traditional solo piano, standards oriented act, except with two pianos.

It was quite a spectacle, and Bob Solone was right there in the center of it. The owner, Bob Djahanguiri, was one of Chicago's most successful restaurateurs and promoters of high-quality live music. Beginning with Toulouse on Division, Yvette and Turbot on State Parkway, and several others to follow, Djahanguiri always had a lineup of the finest local talent: Johnny Frigo, Joe Vito, Dave Green, Bill Acosta (I was his music director before he moved to stardom in Las Vegas), and Frank D'Rone, just to name a few.

At Yvette, five nights a week, for ten years, Bob teamed up with Tony Zito, playing to packed houses, then in the '90s with Gwen Pippin. With back-to-back, top-of-the-line Yamaha Grand pianos, two synthesizers, and drum machines, Bob and partners played a mix of music that always surprised audiences. From Mozart, Bach, and Bachman, to Prince, Springsteen, Beatles, and of course the Great American Songbook, they easily adapted to various guest artists who frequently sat in, such as Johnny Frigo, Buddy Charles, and Frank D'Rone. Yvette also featured other performers such as Miguel de la Cerna, Al Blaton, Bruno Robins, Nino de Silva, John Redfield, Nan Mason, Terry Higgins, Denise Tomasello, and other cabaret/jazz oriented acts. It's worth noting that when Troy

Neihardt and I worked there (separately) in late '80s, there was a really cute waitress who'd sing occasionally, and is now the well-established cabaret artist, Anne (Pringle) Burnell.

It was during this time, around 1987, that Bob and I first met. Yet it wasn't the piano bar thing that connected us, but rather songwriting. Bob performed in a monthly concert series I produced for the long defunct and forgotten N.A.R.A.S., affiliated Chicago Songwriters Association at Orphan's, a very cool music room on the corner of Lincoln and Montana, across from the Biograph Theater. He's still composing: in 2003, Bob wrote the music for a Broadway-style musical comedy, "Love in the Middle Ages," about baby-boomers out on the dating scene. By 2008, he and lyricist, Chicago Cabaret Professionals member Scott Urban, finally scraped together, with the help of friends and family, a small budget for a five-week production of the play at "Village Players" in Oak Park. It received mostly good reviews, but on the verge of a larger Chicago production, the investors backed out, leaving a currently relevant work of art on the shelf. Such is show business.

I asked him what his secret was for staying booked and consistently filling up rooms. "Simple: the mailing list—persistent building, maintaining, and growing a mailing list. You develop these relationships with your fans, and when the job ends, how will they know where to come see you next? *Voilà*, the mailing list. When a gig closes suddenly, without notice, and you're left jobless, there's no point in crying over it. You just move on and find another gig. Sure, you'll bitch about it to your close friends, but I always knew not to badmouth clubs or club owners. Some of my best gigs were at places from which I was previous canned!"

"But there's got to be more to it than that," I said.

"Of course!" answered Solone. "When you work five nights a week for extended engagements, you develop relationships with patrons. They become more than just customers in a bar—you get to know them, relate to them on a personal basis. You go through their lives over the years as they go in and out of relationships, marriages, etc."

Currently, Bob performs at East Bank Club, Gibson's Steak House, the new French bistro Troquet River North on Clark and Huron, where every Wednesday, at least a dozen local singers join in on his performance. If you haven't already, check out this Chicago treasure. "But please," he says with a smile, "don't ask me to play 'American Pie!'"

[www.bobsolone.com](http://www.bobsolone.com)

■CJM