

# 15 MINUTES

## Craft is the key for local drummer

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There were sensational moments in Frank Ranuro's long career as a drummer — huge audiences, big stars, wild times on the road, things you associate with rock n' roll like living in your car.

Mr. Ranuro, 55, did that a few times. "It's just the way the business is," he said. "You can be on top one day and on the bottom the next."

"What do you call a drummer without a girlfriend?" his co-worker in the drum section at The Guitar Center in Fort Myers quipped. "Homeless."

But Mr. Ranuro still remembers his first band the most fondly of all.

It was a Latin rock band called The New York Agents, which he played drums in when he was 10 years old. Mr. Ranuro is Italian, with long, black hair halfway down his back, but there were a lot of Cubans in his neighborhood in Newark, N.J., who he played music with.

"Somebody said, 'Listen, you wanna play some Latin rock?'" Mr. Ranuro said.

And of course, he did. "My fun was when I had my own group," he said. "Having my own Latino rock group and playing all the big festivals in New York City. That was a highlight."

Meanwhile, he was learning the drummer's craft from a professional drummer for hire, who played big band music in the 1940s and trained him hard, his father. Mr. Ranuro remembers being made to practice long hours.

"Kids would be out playing and I'd be at home. My dad wouldn't let me go until I had my assignment down..."

"It's like being an actor and having Marlon Brando as your father."

When he was seven years old, he played a drum routine on Ted Mack's "The Original Amateur Hour," at CBS studio in New York City, and came in second place. He remembers it being a little bit like the show "Star Search."

When he was still a pre-teen, his father took him to gigs in New York City, which he was paid well for.

He mostly learned big band music and jazz from his father, but he wanted to play rock and roll. Sometimes when his father left during the day, he would play beats by some of the rock bands he was in to at the time — Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Spyro Gyro, Jeff Beck and many others.

"Old, old, progressive music," he said. "Fusion-rock stuff."

He eventually learned to play just about any style of music, and accepted any gig that came his way — rock, jazz, big band, disco, weddings.

"I was more of a hired gun," he said. Mr. Ranuro said his focus on craftsmanship, and learning a variety of styles, was key to his survival as a musician.

"It makes you better too, more free, when you can play all styles," he said. "When you play, it's gonna come out that way — all your knowledge will come out."

When he was a freshman in high school, his family moved away from the city to southern New Jersey, near Asbury Park.

That was in the late 1960s, "the (Bruce) Springsteen Era," Mr. Ranuro said. "We grew up with him, pretty much."

He played in bowling alleys before he turned 21, and then participated in impromptu jams at some of the same hole-in-the-wall bars Springsteen started out in, like the Upstage Lounge. It was a different time for musicians — many "hired guns" like Mr. Ranuro could get paid well for gigs at bars and clubs, because they belonged to unions.

"In the old days, the unions were strong," he said. "That's when the money was good."

At a "union bar" in southern New Jersey, musicians often played four 40-minute sets, with four 20-minute breaks, and made \$125.

In the 1970s, Mr. Ranuro played in a variety of traveling rock and roll bands and his life as a drummer on the road began.

"That's all I've ever done is play music," he said.

Throughout the 1980s, he was a working drummer in Miami, and flew to Las Vegas to live and work near his father in 1990. The Ranuros played with many of the major artists who came to town, people like Barry Manilow and Bo Diddley. Chuck Berry was a handful, Mr. Ranuro remembered. The rock legend came out on stage and ripped through a set, without following the set list or recognizing the backup band.

Mr. Ranuro was also called for stand-in parts in the movies "Goodfellas" and "Showgirls," because he looks the part.



EVAN WILLIAMS/FLORIDA WEEKLY

Frank Ranuro

"My girlfriend thought it was just a crank call," he said. "Who knows? Maybe I could have been an actor instead of a musician."

In the mid-1990s he moved back to Florida for the beautiful weather. Most days, you can find him selling drums at the Guitar Center on Fowler Street in Fort Myers. He also still plays drums for hire and teaches private drum lessons at his home in Port Charlotte.

It's a quiet time in his life and Mr. Ranuro is taking a Zen-like approach at the moment; or maybe it's the attitude he's always had.

"Music is infinite," he said. "There's always something to learn. There's always a challenge — it's been a challenge since I was 6 years old." ■

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