

Jeff Stoll - Organist

By Yvonne Zarcone

It is truly an amazing experience to watch Jeff's fingers effortlessly float up and down the keyboard creating some of the most beautiful music you will ever hear. Then, when he sings you experience the true beauty of his song interpretations as he wraps his lyrics in softened breaths, crescendos and pauses becoming a creation all his own.

Jeff and his wife Pam have five children, three boys and two girls. They also have one grandson and a second grandson on the way. They like to gather the family together whenever possible around the barbecue and just enjoy each others company. Jeff's uncle was a fantastic piano player and the choir director for Plymouth High School and put a lot of kids in "Kids from Wisconsin." Jeff's Father is also good piano player and he is the one responsible for introducing Jeff to jazz. After his father retired he spent much more time playing. He would call Jeff and say "can you tell me the chords for this or that tune". Then as he was getting better, he would call Jeff and say "you know - I don't think that chord was right". Jeff feels very blessed to have such a wonderful family.

Jeff started out taking piano lessons when he was in Elementary School, but that didn't last very long. When he was in High School he studied with Bill Odden who really got him started and recognized that Jeff had a lot of great natural talent. He also taught him theory in preparation for college, even though Jeff had other plans. Bill worked with Jeff to develop his technique for both hands and feet. Bill would set Jeff down with pictures of foot pedals and told him I never want to see you looking at the foot pedals. Then as fast as Bill could call off a note, Jeff would have to touch that pedal with his foot immediately, one right after the other. Bill really pushed him to become the great musician that he is today. While Jeff reads music, he really envies people that can sight read with ease. Jeff memorizes music fairly quickly and seems to know every tune and lyric ever written. This extremely wonderful talent has served him well over his playing career.

When Jeff graduated from High School back in the 70's he went on the road with a band called "Brethren", they toured all around the Midwest, playing a lot of Chicago and Blood Sweat and Tears type of music. Jeff had long hair back at that time (almost down to his shoulders), a full beard and he says "a lot thinner", but then, weren't we all. The band figured out that if they could work some choreography into their show, they could do show sets, and demand more money. However, after two and a half years on the road he left the band to get married and started working on his own.

When Jeff was 21 years old he started his first job at a club called Hewett's Gourmet House in South Milwaukee. It was an organ bar similar to the setup currently at the Packing House. However, back then he was pretty shy and not used to having people sitting right there in front of him. He had always worked on stage with a group of 7 people. He told a story of an older couple that just sat there and stared at him one night, making him very nervous. so when he finished a tune he asked them "what would you folks like to hear". They just sat

there and didn't say a thing. At that, his sweat glands started working overtime and he didn't know what to do or say. so he just played another tune. He says, today he could think of a hundred lines to use in that situation. That story just tickled my funny bone because for those who know him. it's hard to believe that he could have ever been that shy. Jeff is one of the most outgoing, funny. spontaneous fellows I know.

Jeff recalls a couple that would come in to the Gourmet House every weekend and she would think nothing of coming into the club with her hair up in curlers. Someone asked her one time why she wore the curlers in her hair and she replied "well... I'm going some place tomorrow". Jeff also played with a Polka Band at Chuck's Supper Club in Silver Lake for a couple of months. Then he played at the Elm Grove Inn for two years and then at the Diplomat on 30th and Lincoln. The hostess at the Diplomat had her husband, who was bar manager at the Packing House, come listen to him. He commissioned Jeff to play a party for one night. After that he was hired by the Packing House and has been there for 27 years. When Jeff started at the Packing House he played 6 nights a week with a drummer.

On a Wednesday night in October, Joe, Sharon Schmidt and I went down to the Packing House to join in on the "Wednesday night social club" as Jeff refers to it. Sharon, Joe and Margie Vollrath sang a couple of tunes. Nancy Hanson and Jim came in that evening too to enjoy the music. You never know who may stroll in on Wednesdays or Fridays to join in on vocals or bring in an instrument and add to the fun.

We talked about several musicians current and in the past that have influenced Jeff. He told stories of Lee Burrows, George Pritchert and how he admired-them as musicians. Some other musicians that have influenced Jeff are Oscar Peterson, Jimmy Smith and George Shearing.

You can enjoy watching and listening to the beautiful sounds of Jeff Stoll every Wednesday. Friday and Saturday night at the Packing House on Layton Avenue across from Gen. Mitchell Field. You can also join in on all the crazy fun at the Red Mill from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM every Thursday night for the open jam session with Sharon Schmidt and Joe Zarcone. Jeff would like to thank Sharon and all the people who respect and enjoy his talent enough to hire him. And. even more importantly. the people who pay their hard earned money to hear him and the group!