



Photo by: Curt Geneau from
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AJ BENOIT

Has Passion for his Musical Craft

By Tanya Shukalova

“I taught as an infantry drill instructor. If you can picture the old sergeant out front, hooting and hollering at all of the troops at the top of his lungs, that really developed a lot of strength and power in my voice. It also really lent itself well to my singing voice which gave me a big booming kind of sound.”

After retiring from business, AJ Benoit recalls the days when his passion and talents were first being molded. Brockville born, AJ performs around the city with many different groups and shows what he has created. If you ask what his passion in life is, he will sum it up in just one word for you. “Singing.”

“I started in music when I was 15. I joined the Brockville Rifles Bugle Band and I joined the Infantry Regiment around the same time. At that time, the military band used to always parade in our military uniform but in front of our band, would march the Brockville Legion Color Party. Most of the members, 40 some years ago, were World War 2 Veterans.”

Because of the close relationship formed between the Brockville Rifles Bugle Band and the Royal Canadian Legion Color Party, touring around Canada lead to tour bus sing-a-longs. This is where AJ discovered his love of singing.

“I grew up learning to sing all of the songs from the World War 2 era with the World War 2 Veterans.”

His admiration for the theatre world didn't reveal itself until after he had a child. AJ's son grew older and lost interest in theatre performing when he started high school, but by then, a spark was lit for AJ. He auditioned for a local play and got the part. Soon after, he was playing the lead male role of many musical productions such as Petruccio in “Kiss Me Kate”, Herbie in “Gypsy”, Johnny Casino in “Grease”, and Gene Kelly in “Singin' in the Rain” to name a few. Theatre has been an outlet for AJ to do what he loves most; to sing.

Being well acquainted with Brockville, coupled with a sales and marketing background, AJ saw an opportunity to do something a little different in the music community.

“I had a lot of different interests in the kinds of music that I liked. I was introduced to so many different kinds of music over the years, whether it was Celtic or country music, bluegrass or sacred music, calypso, and of course the World War 2 songs, as well as the crooner's songs. I loved all of it. So I started to create my own music groups which catered to each specific genre.”

He has a number of music groups such as “The Mixed Nuts”, “The Memory Makers”, “The Blarney Show Band”, “The Crooners” and his latest addition, “AJ and the Buttercups.” Each group has a flavor to match the appetite of the event that AJ performs.

One person that has always been consistent for AJ is his musical director and pianist, Mary Ross-Comstock. AJ wrote and produced a musical called “Bless Em All” about World War 2 in which Mary was the musical director.

“She's one of my closest and dearest friends and she's an exceptional pianist. If it wasn't for Mary, I wouldn't have accomplished half of the things that I've done.”

He humbly credits a lot of his success to the people he has worked with, saying, “I'm just the guy that's here introducing things, these are the talented people that are with me here. Without them, especially people like Mary, I'd have nothing.”

With a new production in the works – coming out sometime next year – and local requests every week, AJ lives his passion every day of his life.

If you'd like to see AJ and his many talented musical partners, they will be at the Brockville Arts Centre for a Special Holiday Event, December 12th. **LH**