

Come Dancing

Jim Craine and the Steel Pier Remembered Big Band celebrate AC's 150th under the stars

By Jeff Schwachter



PHOTO BY NICK VALINOTE

Jim Craine and the Steel Pier Remembered Big Band (shown playing a gig at The Walk last week) play two concerts celebrating AC's 150th birthday on Aug. 6 & 27.

JIM CRAINE KNOWS ALL ABOUT the Steel Pier. As an usher there in his early teens, the Atlantic City native learned all about the entertainment mecca that once attracted musicians and music fans from all over the world during most of the last century. Craine worked at the “old” Steel Pier in several capacities between the ages of nine and 19. In fact, he pretty much grew up there. He worked the diving bell, the Marine Ballroom, was a clown and diver in the circus, and took care of the diving horses. He was also an usher at the pier’s Music Hall. It’s that job that made him want to become a musician. He

Benny Goodman ruled, and Craine was only a kid, the big bands that were booked at Steel Pier ignited a spark in Craine that has kept him involved with big band music to this day. Luckily for all of us, Craine will help celebrate Atlantic City’s 150th birthday this Friday at the “new” Steel Pier with a big band dance concert under the stars that will surely bring back some fond memories and generate some renewed interest in this American music that was once so prevalent in Atlantic City.

Craine has made it his mission to preserve the sounds of the big band era. *AC Weekly* sat down with “the singing lifeguard” this week for a chat.

You’re known as the “singing lifeguard” — are you still a lifeguard in Atlantic City?

I’m retired now. But I’m still actively involved in the Around the Island Swim and other stuff with the beach. I retired in 1999 after 25 years.

How long did you work at Steel Pier?

I worked at Steel Pier for 10 years total. I worked seven days a week, never took a day off. I had forged working papers. I was

nine years old at the time (1963) ... I went down to the pier and got a job ... [Later] when I was an usher at the Music Hall we got to hang out with all of the big stars at the time. Any star, I don’t care who it is, I’ve seen them.

How did the Steel Pier Remembered Big Band come together?

I put the band together because these guys were in the house band at the Music Hall. I met a lot of these guys when I was 14 when I was working as an usher because I used to love the music. I loved big band. Back in the ballroom, it held 5,000 people and every big band in the world played there from the 1940s up until ... Benny Goodman came there right up to ‘71.

The guys that I work with now are the alumni of that house band. They’re all older guys from around here that I think are some of the best musicians that ever lived. Because when you’re doing four acts of vaudeville four times a day plus a headliner — like the Temptations, the Supremes even the Three Stooges — these guys have backed up the universe. They worked seven days a week and they liked it. It was such a swinging band and that’s what I’ve had for the past five years with the Steel Pier Remembered Band.

Have the band members been playing over the years?

Oh yeah, they’re all playing. They’re all still house musicians, they all still work. Some are teachers. They play all the time. But I had the idea of putting this band together since I was a kid watching them at the Steel Pier. Five years ago when I got off the beach, I called up a lot of the guys that I knew since I was a kid and said, “Look, I’m putting a band together, do you want to play?” For five years we’ve been doing at least two [shows] a summer.

And this Friday’s show?

We do a whole retrospective on every pier that played music out over the ocean. I do a tribute to all of the entertainers I saw in the Music Hall. It’s a look back at all of the singers I saw like Dick Haymes, the Andrews Sisters, Nat King Cole ... it’s a real look back at all of the great entertainers.

And we do a whole salute to the big bands. We’re going to do Woody Herman’s “Woodchopper’s Ball,” “In the Mood,” every band that played at the piers gets a mention.

What do you hope this Dancing under the Stars event captures from the old Steel Pier days and brings to the audience?

I just want to let people know that there’s still ... a big audience [for this music.] We’re going to be right next to the Steel Pier and you’re going to be able to dance right on the Boardwalk, I think that’s cool. It’s really a neat thing. When I did my first show when I was nine years old, because I remember it, from that moment I had a feeling that I was going to be in show business. Standing there as an usher at the Steel Pier and going, “wouldn’t it be cool if I could do this some day?” And here I am 30 years later in the business. I’ve traveled all over, worked with different companies, worked in the different casinos, been on HBO and I still have the big band together ... we only do two, three concerts a year, but it’s just enough to keep the music out there. It’s a big band, not a synthesizer. It’s real. This is live music. I’m just so tired of everybody using tracks. For guys in my business and in my band, they don’t have a lot of opportunities to play. And for a lot of us, the main thing is playing. ■

The Steel Pier Remembered Big Band features: (on woodwinds) John Guida, Vic Powell, Buzzy Renn, George Freedman, Stan Weiss; (trumpets) Rich Szabo, Al Harrison, Jim Ward, Dave Sheetz; (trombones) Art Blatt, John Schofield, Bill Newnam, Jessie Denton; (rhythm) Tom Magill, Tony DeLuca, Ray Nunzi, Gary Ganaway, Stan Richards.

Dancing Under the Stars, Friday August 6 and August 27 at 8 and 10pm. Free admission. Maryland Ave. and Boardwalk next to Steel Pier. Call 652-5322 for more information.

Craine fell in love with the sounds of the big bands while working at the Steel Pier in the 1960s

watched and learned from the best of the best, getting coffee for Duke Ellington and hanging out with Buddy Rich and Count Basie on different occasions.

Craine fell in love with the sounds of the big bands while working at the Steel Pier in the 1960s. Although it was a little past the prime of the big band era when Glenn Miller, the Dorsey Brothers and