

Incredible Journey

Artist Interview by: Chuck Sudo (AS SEEN AT JAZZREVIEW.COM)

Tony Monaco's life is an amazingly inspired story...a courageous tale about overcoming physically limitations in bringing his genuine, musical gift to jazz lovers everywhere. Tony, a Columbus, Ohio native, is at the vanguard of a new crop of Hammond B3 jazz organists, having received rave reviews and an enhanced profile for his Summit Record's release "Burnin' Grooves." But, his success did not happen overnight. In fact, there were many obstacles to his journey.

Monaco grew up in a musical family. "My parents came from a small town called Introdacqua," Monaco said. "The whole town is musical." After coming to the United States after the Second World War, Monaco's father, Baldino, joined the Army as a field drummer and after his discharge, settled in Columbus. He started a construction business and played drums on the side. "My father wasn't a good jazz drummer," Monaco recalls, "but he had a good sense of swing and feel." Monaco's father also recognized musical talent when he heard it, and Tony had it in spades.

Tony started playing the accordion at the age of eight. "It was actually a cordobox," Monaco remembers. "Basically, it was a Lowery organ played through an accordion. I could play the bass lines with the left hand because it had buttons all over. I could chord and solo with my right hand. The buttons on the left had the same harmonic semblance as the drawbar on a B3. It absolutely sounded like a B3 through a Leslie speaker," Tony recalled.

When Monaco was twelve, he got his hands on a Jimmy Smith record and he was hooked. "Someone had bought the record and didn't like it, so he gave it to me," Monaco said. "So I started learning to play Jimmy Smith on the cordobox. Eventually, I figured out how to play Jimmy Smith tunes, and I sent tapes to Jimmy of me playing his songs through the cordobox."

When asked why so many organists today cite Smith as an influence, Monaco said, "Jimmy had a certain part of his playing that other organists didn't. Jimmy could play with soul, funk, bop, and swing, and he did it so well. Groove Holmes, Jack McDuff, Hank Marr, Don Patterson, and Lonnie Smith also influenced me. I try to bring all of their elements into my playing style."

At the age of 15, Monaco developed neuralgic Amyotrophy, a disease closely related to polio. The onset of this disease is sudden. Monaco suffered nerve damage in his shoulders, making it nearly impossible to use his arms. "I couldn't lift my arms above my head, which made playing the accordion impossible because of the need to strap it onto my shoulders," said Monaco. "I also got a reaction to the mylogram used to detect the disease...they didn't have MRIs at that time."

The onset of neuralgic Amyotrophy was the impetus for Monaco to switch to the Hammond B3 organ. When he left the hospital, Monaco received another surprise. "When I came home from the hospital, my family had bought a B3 and set it up in the family room," Monaco remembers. "It was a beautiful B3 with a 122 Leslie speaker cabinet."

He then began organ lessons with Jim Russell, a local B3 legend who Monaco reminisced as a good instructor. "We spent six months working on the B3. He taught me the drawbar, all the pedals, their proper alignment." It was during this time that Monaco also received a return phone call from his idol. "Jimmy Smith called me when I was sixteen and he gave me tips on how to play the B3," Monaco said. Smith continued to give Monaco pointers on organ playing over the phone over the proceeding four

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years. When he was 20, Monaco got the opportunity to play in front of Smith at Smith's legendary supper club.

Monaco's family opened a fine Italian dining restaurant, Monaco's Palace, when he was 21. As a family business, it left Monaco little opportunity to play outside of the restaurant. "Our family had a song-and-dance gig in the restaurant's lounge on Friday and Saturday nights," Monaco said. "I would play something like 'Oleo' on the organ and then back up my sister singing 'Hit Me With Your Best Shot.'"

At the age of 35, Monaco seized the opportunity to play organ regularly again. "I started working for my father's construction business in 1991, so it opened up the opportunity to start gigging again," Monaco said. "I would do private parties and later club gigs. Then the organ boom happened."

Fate would be a cruel mistress once again, as Monaco's neuralgic Amyotrophy flared up again. This time the disease damaged nerve clusters in his ankles, forearms, and a major nerve in his left vocal chord. "There is no treatment for neuralgic Amyotrophy," Monaco said, "the doctors give you steroids at the beginning in order to fight it, and your body basically has to re-grow the damaged nerves."

The left vocal chord was the most damaged. "The doctors performed an operation to the vocal chord; then after six months they did another procedure where they took fat from my stomach and injected it into the left vocal chord," Monaco recalled. The operation moved Monaco's left vocal chord closer to the right vocal chord and mid-line. "They said I'd could talk, but probably never sing the way I could again," Monaco said. "Not only can I sing again, I think I sing better. Because the chord isn't lined up, my voice is more breathy." Monaco also had to learn to play the organ again, from scratch. "I used a metronome to get my sense of time and rhythm back. I still have problems with my right arm and I walk with a cane, but I still carry my B3 to the gigs."

Monaco's playing caught the attention of two major players. "My dad ran into Chuck Mangione in Florida and he said, 'You have to hear my son.' He gave Chuck a tape of me." Mangione was so impressed with the tape that he set up a concert specifically to play with Monaco. Asked about why one of the building blocks of the slick sounding "Smooth Jazz" would want to play a gig with a more earthy organist, Monaco replied, "I think that Chuck's been trying to get back into more traditional playing for a while. His last two albums reflect that. He's trying to get back into that circle."

The gig with Mangione heightened Monaco's profile on the Columbus club circuit. Monaco met another champion of his music. "My friend Louis (Tsamous) was in the car with me after we unloaded the gear for a gig and he said, 'You know Joey (DeFrancesco) is coming to town?' I said, 'Really?' So, I called up someone I knew who was handling Joey's itinerary and asked him to let me take Joey to a restaurant."

"There was really no motivation outside of taking Joey for a nice meal or two," said Monaco, "but when we met, it was like we knew each other for a long time. Maybe it's because we're both Italian. I picked Joey up at a clinic that he was conducting. I introduced myself and people at the clinic started saying, 'This is Tony Monaco. He plays organ, too.'"

"Joey slid off the bench, I slid on," said Monaco. "My knees were shaking. I decided to just get into a groove with the drummer. I started playing 'Fly Me To The Moon' and Joey's eyes lit up because he played that song during the clinic. So after showing Joey around town, he invited me to come to his place in Arizona to work on an album."

With the release of "Burnin' Grooves," enhancing Monaco's profile, does he see the opportunity for major labels coming to scout him? "I would love to be on Blue Note or Verve, but Darby (Christensen) from Summit has been a believer in me from the beginning. I'm more than content to stay where I am," said Tony. "I have here an opportunity to give back a gift, and Summit has been really good to me," Monaco continued. "The album is #47 on the Yellow Dog jazz charts, which is the successor to the Gavin charts."

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Dr. Jazz thinks that's real good for a new release."

Among the rave reviews Monaco's album has gotten, were from Jazz Improv magazine, who put one of the tracks from "Burnin' Grooves" on a compilation sampler. Monaco has also received rave reviews from Keyboard magazine and a review of "Burnin' Grooves" is slated to appear in Jazz Times in January.

Monaco looks to spread the word about his talent beyond Columbus, Ohio. He also hopes to put Columbus on the map as a modern-day Philadelphia of Jazz Organ, noting that legends Hank Marr, Don Patterson, and Bobby Pierce (all from Columbus) were legends in their own time. "I would hang out in the clubs whenever they were playing and sometimes would fill in if an organist was needed," Monaco recalls.

"I've been very blessed," said Monaco. "I don't think this disease will come back and I'm just gonna keep on playing."

Jazz Review thanks Tony Monaco for taking time out of his busy schedule for this interview. We wish him every success with his new CD and in the future.

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