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FEATURE ARTICLE

Bob Jackson: Walt Disney World's Piano Man

by

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Bob Jackson

If you've been to Walt Disney World, perhaps you have overheard someone say, "I saw Ye Haa Bob last night; great as always." You may have even heard the name several times.

Did you ever wonder who Ye Haa Bob is and why people make it a point to see him when they go to Walt Disney World? Have you ever wondered what is it about his show that has everyone talking?

Well, let me introduce you to the man behind Ye Haa Bob: His name is Bob Jackson, and he has been playing the piano for almost 50 years -- ever since he was a young boy.

As young Bob Jackson grew into his teens, his love for music grew, too. He attended the University of Cincinnati School of Conservatory Music and became a music composition student. Jackson found himself drawn to the music of the 1920s and 1930s and in fact, became a huge fan of "stride music," which is a jazz piano style that evolved partially from ragtime. The term "stride" refers to the left-hand movement of "striding" up and down the keyboard. Stride and boogie-woogie music fascinated Bob Jackson. Jackson says he is also, understandably, "a huge fan of Fats Waller," a jazz pianist from back in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the 1980s Jackson met the man he refers to as his piano teacher -- Dick Hyman. Hyman has many credentials, and over a remarkable career, has functioned as pianist, organist, arranger, music director, and composer. His accomplishments are too numerous to list here, but they involve so many areas of the world of entertainment that you would marvel at how much he has given to the musical world. He also has given us Bob Jackson, an accomplished pianist who honed his craft under the tutelage of Dick Hyman.

As a young married couple, Jackson and his wife spent most summers and fall in Europe and would return to Florida in the winter and the spring. In 1991, Jackson moved to Orlando and he soon found his life beginning a new relationship -- with Walt Disney World.

For those of you who have visited Orlando over the years, you may have visited Church Street Station, and maybe even Rosie O'Grady's Good Time Emporium. Jackson spent several years playing piano at Rosie O'Grady's entertaining the customers, including one fellow by the name of Bob Hope. Jackson soon found himself making the rounds in what he calls the "dueling piano bars" and that's where destiny stepped in. As he became more of an accomplished pianist Jackson found himself networking with many of the piano players in the area. One player friend in particular, John Jones, had been performing at Walt Disney World's Dixie Landings Resort Food Court. He mentioned to Jackson that he was leaving to head to Las Vegas and strongly suggested, asked even, for Jackson to audition for the soon-to-be-vacated spot.

That was about 14 years ago. The rest is history. Bob Jackson can now be seen four nights a week, Wednesday through Saturday, at the River Roost Lounge, at what is now known as Port Orleans Riverside Resort, next to the restaurant Boatwright's.

In addition to Port Orleans Riverside, Jackson has performed at Sea World, Pat O'Brien's at Universal's City Walk, and recently at the Gaylord Palms Resort. He's also had a number of other Walt Disney World gigs. He played at the Diamond Horseshoe Revue in the Magic Kingdom, and as that energetic piano player at Casey's Corner on Main Street USA. He filled in at "Tarzan Rocks" during that show's stint in Disney's Animal Kingdom, and has also played at the popular Hoop Dee Doo Musical Revue at Fort Wilderness. He's also worked with many Disney entertainers, comedians, and magicians, including some of whom you may have seen performing as "Streetmosphere" when we called a certain theme park, the Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park. (I know they are now called the "Citizens of Hollywood" but as Jackson says, they will always be "Streetmosphere" to me, too.) Jackson never performed with those entertainers as part of "Streetmosphere," but worked with them in other venues. He says he always marveled at their ability to interact with their audience and encourage audience participation. He studied how these entertainers gradually got their audience to move from point A to Point B and eventually to point C... gradually bringing them along.

He was a good student. During his own show Jackson slowly gets his audience to participate, and his ability to eventually get almost everyone to stand up, beat their chest,

and give a Tarzan yell is something to behold. He has always recognized the art of building up one's audience.

Jackson says it seems he has had this character, Ye Haa Bob, with him for about 17 years now. It's a character that is loved by all who see the show. Before each show Jackson does his own little "Meet 'n' Greet" and makes it a point to stop at every table and learn the name of at least one person at the table. During the show each table is apt to hear one or several people called out by Jackson, thus finding him or her becoming part of the show.

Jackson says the biggest challenge facing him every show is maintaining the energy level required to keep the audience engaged. He says he works hard to keep it in "5th gear" and says that in 14 years of performing at Port Orleans Riverside he has never "phoned it in." Jackson notes that unlike a concert where the energy comes from the stage, the energy in his show, "most of the time comes from the audience" and helps him keep going strong.

He notes that the room he performs in at Port Orleans Riverside is the perfect size for him. It offers him the intimacy needed to properly interact with the audience, even on a busy night with 300 people packed to watch him. Jackson says if the room were any bigger he would lose that ability to communicate with his audience.

He loves his job and says, "It's fun; a big hoot."

For those who have seen him perform, they realize they are watching a creative, caring, and charismatic entertainer; who like Walt Disney himself, sees the value in putting forth family entertainment. His show is for the whole family and loves to see children in his audience.

Jackson recognizes that his show continues to evolve. He says what he does today is not what he was doing five years ago. What has not changed over the last 14 years is the fervor with which he plays his upright piano, pounding on the keys, rocking the instrument with his thigh, and slamming the piano top. Are you surprised to learn that the man loves roller coasters? (Piano strings are always breaking, by the way, and the piano gets tuned every other day.)

As mentioned previously, Jackson has performed all over Walt Disney World, including private parties at the Brown Derby, and the former Living Seas. While performing at the latter, seated at a clear grand piano, Jackson recalls a number of scuba divers swimming up to the glass in the tank behind him and taking photos -- a truly memorable moment for him.

Beyond the Port Orleans Riverside gig he has been doing for 14 years, Jackson is always doing something -- if not subbing for another performer somewhere in Walt Disney World perhaps it's performing at a choir practice at a local church or working on a piece of music. Currently he is working on a children's CD to add to the repertoire of gospel, Christmas, and live show CDs he has already recorded. Jackson looks to someday compose for a string ensemble, something he will no doubt accomplish, knowing his love for music. He is always working on some sort of piece of music -- once a music composition student always a music composition student.

The talent Bob Jackson carries with him is no accident. He practices every day, and does his hand exercises; every day you will find him in his studio playing Bach and Haydn, making sure his craft remains sharp.

Bob Jackson loves his life and loves his job. He also loves to get people to laugh -- with him... at him... and at themselves.

The next time you happen to be at Port Orleans in the evening, check to see if Ye Haa Bob is performing. If so, grab a table before they are all taken and prepare yourself for a whirlwind night of entertainment. Bob Jackson wants you to watch his show and wants you to walk away from the show thinking about how much fun you had -- especially if you had fun as a family.

Hmmm, that sounds pretty much like what a young man from Marceline, Missouri, once thought, doesn't it?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mike Scopa has been a huge Disney fan for as long as he can remember. He first visited Walt Disney World in 1975 and has returned many times (how many? he's lost count!) since. Mike is a contributor to the Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World and Cara Goldsbury's Luxury Guide to Walt Disney World, and has served as keynote speaker for MagicMeets. He is also co-host of the WDW TODAY Podcast and writes a regular blog, The View from Scopa Towers, for AllEars.Net:

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