



# ENTERTAINMENT BUZZ

## RUSS FERRANTE: JAZZ SUPERSTAR

By Glenn Swift

For nearly thirty years, famed piano and keyboard player Russ Ferrante has been one of the leading forces in contemporary jazz. He has had an enormous influence on the "fusion" scene, masterfully mixing elements of jazz, rock, and r&b into his highly-acclaimed work. With his band, the



Yellowjackets, Ferrante has performed all over the globe with jazz greats like Lee Ritenour, Tom Scott, Ernie Watts, and Robben Ford.

And thanks to the Florida Smooth Jazz Association and Jazz Series Brevard...he's coming to the Space Coast.

Yes... Ferrante and the world-renowned Yellowjackets, along with saxophonist extraordinaire Eric Marienthal, will be performing at 7:30pm, Sunday, September 30, at the Space Coast Convention Center/Holiday Inn Express, located just off of I-95 at SR 520 (Exit 201) in Cocoa. Tickets range from \$18 to \$32 and dinner/concert packages are available.

Ferrante's first exposure to music came from his church, where his father was the choir director as well as being a frequent vocal soloist and leader of a vocal gospel quartet. His father's whole family was music lovers, and several of his brothers and sisters had marvelous voices -- something Russ admits never got passed on to him.

As for how he came to choose the piano, well... he really didn't.

"I didn't choose the piano, my parents did," laughed Ferrante. "They thought it would be a nice thing for me to learn how to play... to broaden my horizons."

So there you have it -- a heart-felt confession from one of the world's most highly respected jazz pianists. Then again, you don't have to feel too badly; Ferrante wasn't exactly dragged kicking and screaming. And as for the whole coercion thing...

he didn't have to be "forced" for very long. In fact, Ferrante took to the new instrument like a fish to water.

"I began taking piano lessons at 9 and immediately fell in love with it. And although I've experimented with other instruments on occasion, with the exception of some work on percussion, it's always been the piano for me. I never really had the desire to strap on an electric guitar and be a rock star. In fact, my goal musically growing up was to someday be a church pianist. Obviously, my musical interests took me elsewhere, but my sister who is two years younger actually went on to fulfill my parent's dreams. She is now directing the music program for a church in Watsonville, CA," Ferrante said proudly.

As for musical education, Ferrante said this: "I took lessons from a wonderful piano teacher in San Jose, CA named Ann Penner, from age 9-16 or so, nothing fancy, just the basics. I got interested in jazz and pop around the age of 15 and studied jazz from whatever sources were available, notably scattered lessons with local jazz musicians, jazz theory books that I found or were recommended to me,

and listening to my favorite recordings and transcribing songs and solos. Regrettably I never formally studied music in school."

With regard to influences, he added: "The first recording I heard that really got me excited about being a musician was "Swiss Movement" by Les McCann and Eddie Harris. I loved the way the musicians combined jazz, R&B, and gospel music. This marriage of jazz and R&B was something I heard a lot around San Jose where I grew up. However, there was one musician in particular, Clifford Coulter, who greatly inspired me.

"At around the same time, I was introduced to John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" and various recordings by Miles Davis. I didn't understand that music at all but nonetheless, I immediately loved it! Along with these recordings, I was listening to and drawing inspiration from The Beatles, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band" and Joni Mitchell's first album "Clouds."

Although most associate Ferrante with the Yellowjackets, his musical accomplishments go far beyond the famed group.

"I've been privileged to write with and produce records for: Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Michael Franks, Diane Reeves, Rita Coolidge, Sadao Watanabe, Marilyn Scott, Keyvyn Lettau, Eric Marienthal, and Sergio Salvatore among others. I've also arranged for Take 6, The GRP Big Band, Lee Ritenour, and many others."

Then again, Ferrante is first and foremost associated with the Yellowjackets, a group that Ferrante is not only proud of, but emotionally bonded.

"I'm very fortunate to play with such an extraordinarily talented group of musicians, some of whom I've been playing with for a long time."

The aesthetic intimacy that Ferrante has cultivated with the band has been the source of much of its greatness.

"We like to think of ourselves as the 1970 New York Knicks," said Ferrante, an avid sports fan.

Now just in case you're not into professional basketball, the legendary team to which Ferrante compares "the jackets" to is often cited in the sports world as one of the finest examples of how the total can be far greater than the sum of the parts.

The Yellowjackets "team" also allows Ferrante a great deal of artistic freedom.

"I know I can take a riff and run with it, because the other guys in the band will instinctively know how to cover for me," smiled Ferrante, who could not be more proud of the band that in many ways is a throwback to the classical jazz era.

"We've never concerned ourselves with what would sell or feel the need to get people up on their feet clapping their hands. We just want to make beautiful music."

And that's just what Ferrante and the Yellowjackets will be doing on Sunday evening at 7:30 pm, Sept. 30 at the Space Coast Convention Center in Cocoa.

Don't miss a great opportunity to hear one of the great forces in contemporary jazz today. Call (321)783-9004 and Get Your Tickets Now!

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