



## The day the music died – local musician dead at 59

By CHRISTOPHER SOUTH  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY – For many in Cape May, South Jersey, and literally across the nation, music fans realized their American Pie moment.

Just as in 1971 when Don McLean sang of “the day the music died,” a reference to the death of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper on Feb. 3, 1959, word spread quickly on Facebook telling that Cape May’s musical icon had died.

Fans, friends and fellow musicians expressed their shock and sadness at learning about the passing of George Mesterhazy, who died in his sleep from an apparent heart attack, Thursday, April 12. Mesterhazy had turned 59 on Easter Sunday.

Condolences were expressed throughout the next several days as arrangements for a memorial service were hastily prepared. Still, the decision was made to hold the service in the Middle Township Performing Arts Center, Sunday, to give tribute to a great musician, and for many, a better friend.

According to one person who attended the memorial, the PAC seats 950 people, and it was standing room only for what turned out to be a three-hour memorial and tribute to Mesterhazy and his music.

Mesterhazy was born in

Austria of Hungarian parents, and moved to the United States in 1959. He moved to Somers Point in his teens and attended Mainland Regional High School.

A self-taught pianist, Mesterhazy played numerous instruments, including acoustic and electric guitar, accordion, and a surprisingly sweet sounding instrument called a Melodica.

Mesterhazy played at the former Club Harlem in Atlantic City and most Atlantic City casinos. He was a constant presence at the Merion Inn for three decades.

He recorded music with jazz singers including Paula West, who flew in from San Francisco to attend Mesterhazy’s memorial service.

Mesterhazy’s recording of “Loving You,” with jazz singer Shirley Horn was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1998.

At the memorial, former Cape May resident and well-known singer Derrick McQueen sang “Amazing Grace.” The Rev. Kathy Stoner-Lasalla spoke.

Gordon Jenkin’s “Goodbye” was performed by Joe Barrett on clarinet, Barry Miles on piano, Tim Lekan, bass, and Bob Shomo drums – artists who frequently played with Mesterhazy over the course of his career.

Miles conducted the music portion of the services.

The memorial service



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Above is an image provided by Dennis Spilker of the Spilker Funeral Home in Cape May. The images were made into a poster reading “George Mesterhazy, April 8, 1953 - April 12, 2012,” displayed at the memorial service honoring the well loved Cape May musician.

ended with the playing of “When the Saints Come Marching In,” which is a tribute played to all jazz

musicians. Mesterhazy was probably not well known outside of jazz circles, yet he had con-

nections that spanned the United States, and perhaps the globe. He frequently played in New York City, and had even done a tour in South Africa accompanying Paula West.

In Cape May he was probably known to many as the guy who played piano at the Merion Inn. Yet, the people who knew him well saw him as much more than that.

“I think that the magic about George Mesterhazy was the way in which he touched everyone’s lives,” Susan Tischler said. “He had the ability of making everyone special, with sincerity. He brought people into his world – he was so generous with his talent.”

“I don’t know how many people walked into the Merion and heard ‘Laura’s Theme’ being played for the 17,000th time, and he made people feel like he was playing their song,” she said. “I can’t believe the effect his death has had on me and many others.”

Tischler said Mesterhazy had rare qualities about him, including being a little crazy. She said the Rooney family, owners of the Pittsburgh Steelers were in Cape May dining at the Merion Inn, and Mesterhazy grabbed his accordion and joined by others they marched in and started serenading the Rooney family.

Lois Smith, who made three CDs with Mesterhazy

called his loss “a shock.”

“It was such a shock. I was with him on Easter Sunday – his birthday. We had reservations at the Merion Inn and the place was jam-packed. I told him how good he looked,” Smith said.

Smith asked Lois to come back Thursday when some other musicians would be there, but he passed away in the early morning hours.

Barry Miles is a musician and longtime friend of George Mesterhazy.

“He was quite imposing to me larger than life,” Miles said of Mesterhazy. “He didn’t have a big ego, but his aura was so strong it just generated out to people.”

Miles said Mesterhazy expected a lot from himself and his music, and he expected a lot from the musicians he was around. Miles said he set the bar a lot higher, and as a result we have a much better musical community; not just Cape May, but including much of South Jersey.

“But he was not demanding. He just brought out the best he could extract from them not matter how talented, whether they were amateur or professional, he could bring that out and make them better than they are,” Miles said.

Miles said people would walk in the Merion Inn and see him playing and some

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## Lower Township Council approves PBA contract

By CHRISTOPHER SOUTH  
Cape May Star and Wave

LOWER TOWNSHIP – Lower Township Council came out of closed session Monday night and voted 5-0 to approve a new contract for police sergeants and patrolmen.

The new four-year contract is effective Jan. 1, 2012 but there is no retroactive pay. According to the township’s labor attorney Bill Blaney, the PBA rank and file accepted the contract, which calls for no pay increase for the first six months of 2012. Blaney

said PBA members would receive a 2 percent increase for the second half of 2012 and a 2 percent increase in each of the next three years.

By contrast, the previous contract awarded PBA members a 3.7 percent contract the first year, and a yearly 3.75 increase in each of the following three years of the contract.

Blaney, Mayor Mike Beck and Deputy Mayor Kevin Lare praised the PBA for looking out for the township. “The police are to be commended,” Lare said.

Blaney said in the end

everyone was satisfied with the contract; however it came after a lot of discussion. He said Monday was essentially the last chance for the township and PBA to come to an agreement, because the contract would have gone to interest arbitration today. He said that meant an arbitrator would have decided the terms of the contract.

Beck said the PBA rejected a contract before Gov. Chris Christie’s tool kit went into effect. New hires will have to abide by tool kit stipulations, which include officers paying 30 percent of their healthcare

costs. One of the biggest changes in the contract is the step guide, which determines pay increases. Under previous contracts, police officers had to meet seven steps before reaching top pay for their position. An officer under the old contract would have completed the first step in 12 months. New hires will have to put in 18 months to reach that level. The contract now stipulates an officer must reach the 14th step in order to be at 100 percent of the pay for their position. Lare said to continue to allow officers

to reach top pay in just seven years was unsustainable for the township.

“To make what they would make at the seventh step will now take 14 years,” Lare said. Beck said the township would end up saving \$175,000 per officer.

In addition to the changes in the step guide, new hires will make less than their predecessors. Under the old contract, new officers were coming in with annual wages of \$47,512.64. The starting salary under the new contract is \$33,000. These new hires will also not be eligible for longev-

ity pay, and will begin paying more of their healthcare as determined by the state.

Lare said the 2 percent increase in the second half of 2012 is accomplished with a zero tax rate increase. He also said it allows the Police Department to get to 40 officers after the December police academy class. The township is currently staffed with 39 officers, and Police Chief Brian Marker requested 40 officers in his 2012 budget.

## WCM Planning Board denies appeal

By CAIN CHAMBERLIN  
Cape May Star and Wave

WEST CAPE MAY – A second home owner will be forced to remove or alter the vinyl fence surrounding his home after the Borough Planning Board declared it did not adhere to Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) guidelines.

About six months ago, Joseph Friert of Hanover, Pa., had a vinyl picket fence erected around his 403 Pacific Avenue property in West Cape May. Friert said he told the contractor in charge to acquire all the proper permits necessary to put up the fence. When the fence was completed, Friert found out the permits were never applied for and he was soon approached by the HPC. The HPC hearing ruled that the fence did not meet commission guidelines, causing Friert to file an appeal with the borough zoning board; his case going before the Planning Board Tuesday, April 10.

Even though the Planning Board hearing was a de novo hearing, in which any deci-



Cain Chamberlin/Cape May Star and Wave

This Pacific Avenue house in West Cape May was identified as being in violation of Historic District guidelines for its vinyl fence. An appeal to the Planning board was unsuccessful.

sion made in a lower court is ignored, Friert’s attorney, Louis C. Dwyer Jr., noted that he felt the HPC made an error in their decision. Dwyer said the HPC was not mindful of the applicant’s hardship in taking down the vinyl fence and putting up a wooden style fence, which would be costly to erect and maintain.

“Wood fencing costs thou-

sands more than vinyl,” he said. “It costs around \$2,600 every time it needs to be painted and stained.”

Dwyer said the HPC also treated its guidelines as more of a mandate. He said the applicant’s house, located at the corner Pacific Avenue and Sees Alley, was a new

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## Community turns out for dune planting at Cox Hall Creek

By CAIN CHAMBERLIN  
Cape May Star and Wave

VILLAS – Approximately 100 volunteers took advantage of the warm weather on Sunday and helped out with dune planting near Shore Drive as part of the Cox Hall Creek Wetlands Restoration project.

The dune planting marked one of the last phases of the project, which has been in the making since 2001. Brian Marsh, a Private Lands Biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the goal of Sunday’s event was to replant the area formerly occupied by a pump house.

The Lower Township Public Works Department and Municipal Utilities Authority (LTMUA) recently installed a 48-inch diameter pipe measuring over 300 feet in length. The pipe, buried beneath the beach, is connected to an alumi-



Cain Chamberlin/Ocean City Sentinel

Above, about 100 volunteers turned out to help plant dune grass, bayberry bushes and beach plum trees as part of the Cox Hall Creek Wetlands Restoration Project.

num tidewater control gate, which controls tidal flow from the bay into Cox Hall Creek. Dave Lepor of Public Works said installation

began in late March and finished April 11. He said once the installation

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