

Music Provides the Anchor for the Colby-Rohlehr Family

by Lisa Brisson
Avon Life Newspaper

For John Colby and Bev Rohlehr, the Avon couple behind the popular rhythm and blues band known as “The Colbys,” composing and performing music while raising their family has proven to be the anchor in their lives.

“For us, music is a natural focal point,” Mr. Colby explained. “It’s not that music fits into everything else with us—everything else fits into music.”

Naturally, as their children have grown older (Liza is now 17 and Gabe is 12), the grueling hours on the road traveling to club dates had to give way to more time spent at home. As a way to make it all work, the couple has cut back on the number of late nights playing gigs and limited them to venues which are closer to home.

In addition to providing music for weddings and corporate parties, The Colbys are regulars at local clubs such as the Double Down Grille, the Maple Tree Cafe in Simsbury and Black-Eyed Sally’s in Hartford. During the group’s 20-plus years together, its sound has evolved from an R&B group with a little bit of a jazz swing bent to its present incarnation of a hard-core old-school rhythm and blues band.

Although they primarily play songs by the masters like Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and Chuck Berry, the group is not a “cover” band trying to sound like the original artists. They interpret each song and infuse it with their own stylings.

While Mr. Colby plays keyboards and sings, his wife provides lead vocals and percussion. The group is rounded out by a host of musician friends from New England and New York, including guitarist Jeff Pevar, drummer Richie Crooks, Paul Ossola and Guy DeVito on bass, Jimmy Biggins on reeds, guitarist Peter Walker and vocalist Don Sugai, as well as the Uptown Horns. Avon resident Bill Holloman plays the saxophone in the group.

Over the years Mr. Colby also has been busy writing and producing award-winning scores from his home studio, which he calls “The Cave.” For a dozen years he worked as the musical director of ESPN, with his most often heard contribution being the theme music to the popular daily “SportsCenter” program.

Some of his other credits include writing and producing hundreds of television themes and underscores and serving in those capacities as well as musical director of Superbowl XXVII and XXVIII. For the past decade he has been the musical director of ESPN’s annual ESPY Awards show and during this year’s NCAA Men’s Basketball Final Four championship awards show, he will perform with Grandmaster Flash.

It was at the ESPY Awards that Mr. Colby met Clarence Clemons, the saxophone player famous for his membership in Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band. Having an appreciation for so-called “Jersey music” and being a graduate of Asbury Park High School himself, Mr. Colby hit off with the Big Man and today serves as his musical director.

In addition, when Gabe was a student at Pine Grove School, his parents formed a student vocal group called “The Pinetones” and they recorded their own cd called “Big World.” It was made up of original tunes written primarily by his parents and recorded in “The Cave.”

As music in a number of forms is an omnipresent part of their household, the couple's children are passionate about it in their own ways. Liza is a very gifted singer, while Gabe plays the trombone and piano. "It's an organic situation," their father said, "and we're not aggressive with either of them unless we're invited in."

For the past seven years, Ms. Rohlehr has owned and operated her day spa in Canton called Mariposa, which means butterfly in Spanish. The spa specializes in electrolysis, facial rejuvenation, reiki, aromatherapy and herbal body wraps.

When her children reached school-age, she said she was searching for something to do, as the musical options for her in Avon were a little limited. If she lived closer to New York, she would do more studio work, and although she has taught at the University of Massachusetts and Westfield State College, she wasn't interested in pursuing a teaching career.

"I've always been interested in alternative healing therapies, so that was the next alternative," she said. "I've been doing facial rejuvenations for 14 years."

The coming months should prove to be a busy time for the family. After Gabe's bar mitzvah in May, the couple will start working on recording their first cd while continuing to play club dates.

Their first "Colbys" recording will comprise original material as well as some old songs they feel they should include because they're requested so often at their shows, like "Jambalaya" and "Mustang Sally."

Mr. Colby said the time is right to finally make their own album, despite being so involved in making music for other people. That fact, coupled with the pressure-free motivation of just going out to play and have some fun, are the reasons there hasn't been a Colbys album out in its 20 years on the music scene.

"For us at this point, we feel we really need to make a record of our own that reflects what we've been doing," he said. "It gets to the point where you go, if we don't do something soon, we're really going to regret not having a record of what we've done as The Colbys, having played a zillion gigs together."

On top of all of that, Mr. Colby will continue work on an array of writing and producing projects and his wife provides vocals on her own projects, such as the recent centennial celebration of poet Langston Hughes at Yale University. Last spring she sang back-up for the likes of Dionne Warwick, Cissy Houston and Ashford and Simpson at an event honoring poet Maya Angelou.

The couple does not drop the names of the famous folks they have worked with over their careers for effect-these people are simply co-workers, with many ending up as their friends.

Without being star struck as many others might find themselves, this talented musical duo thoroughly enjoys and appreciates the blessings that have come their way to work along side and be inspired by some of the best professional musicians working today.

Some of these include B.B. King, Max Roach, Paul Shaffer, Duane Eddy, Delbert McClinton, Jonny Lang, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy and Sister Sledge.

Recalling his early days in the industry more than 25 years ago, Mr. Colby said he has been fortunate to work with many talented people who have served as inspirations to him and have helped him to grow professionally. One of the first ones was his future wife.

"Starting off, I didn't even know what good was-couldn't even sniff it," he said with a smile. "But to be able to continue on to this standard and to rise to it and be inspired is what it's been like for me."

1990 was a huge year for Mr. Colby as far as recognition from his musical peers is concerned. That is the year he took home a Grammy award in the "Best Contemporary Folk" category for the music he composed in Ken Burns' movie "The Civil War," as well as an Emmy award for his music used on ESPN.

In addition, he received a cable television Ace award at its 16th annual awards show for the music he created for "Outside the Lines," a film about Muhammad Ali.

Yet another reason why Mr. Colby's summer may be busy is due to the release of Mr. Clemons' newest recording, entitled "Clarence Clemons Live at the Stone Pony." He played keyboards and served as the musical director during a two-night stint over last Labor Day weekend at the famed New Jersey club. And he got to play along side one of his heroes, Mr. Springsteen. He had another opportunity to jam with The Boss earlier this year when Mr. Clemons celebrated his 60th birthday at B.B. King's Dance Club at Foxwoods Casino and Resort.

"Clarence is a wonderful man," Mr. Colby said. "His thing is typical of a lot of people of his ilk-we'll have a couple of dates booked here, come back home, it's not like constant touring." The two are at work writing songs for Mr. Clemons' next studio album. And on April 6, Mr. Colby will serve as keyboardist and musical director for the Big Man at a Key West gig.

It was pure magic that Labor Day weekend making music with his Jersey brothers, Mr. Colby recalled with a smile. "It's Labor Day, there's a full beautiful moon, Bruce Springsteen comes on, the band is kicking-sounds great and I'm thinking to myself, if my career ended right now, it would be OK because I felt like I've experienced, with what talent I have, the work that I've done, I've experienced these different elements of music, and I know what it's like to write something that's really good that I feel good about, I've played with great people, and I'm onstage with someone who is truly great.

"We're at the level where people our age who are still on stage playing have to seriously have something going, either that or they're lunatics," he said. "It's like you're a golfer and you're playing with Tiger Woods, or a basketball player and you're playing with Magic Johnson. Someone who's blessed with such an unbelievable amount of power that it both humbles you and makes you better."

Although the lineup of The Colbys has been an everchanging one during the years, its nucleus was formed when the couple met in 1976 while Ms. Rohlehr was singing and amassing quite a following around Western Massachusetts and the Berkshires. She has sung with Mel Lewis' Jazz Orchestra and was the only female singer to perform with the a capella group The Persuasions.

After seeing her perform, Mr. Colby began accompanying her on keyboards and they formed the Bev Rohlehr Band. One of their gigs was to open for Roger McGuinn.

During the early 1980s, they met up with singer Marion Groves and toured all over New England as the band RGC. They even made a record together.

After about a year, RGC broke up and Ms. Rohlehr went to New York to pursue her solo career and Mr. Colby went on the road to produce musicals such as "Janis and Jimi" and "Jesus Christ Superstar."

Their paths crossed again in New York, but this time they both found themselves single. What originally began as a professional relationship in Massachusetts when they were both involved with others blossomed into love in New York, and they were married in 1983.

“We got together and all of a sudden it became a romantic situation,” Mr. Colby recalled. “We formed a band, then another band, and that was the start of many bands.”

He said the primary focus of playing as a band has not been monetarily motivated, rather it's been a way for them to interact with other talented musicians in a low-pressure atmosphere doing what they all love: performing music together.

“The thing with us is the bands were not formed for any other reason than just to play for pleasure-not playing in a commercial way,” he said. “To play what we wanted with whoever we wanted to play. It was never designed to quote, unquote, make a hit.”

The most lucrative part of playing in a band is the amount of friends they have made throughout the years. He said the people who come out to the clubs to hear “The Colbys” (or “Rococo,” its previous name) are out there just to see them and reflect their own demographics of age and family priorities.

“We have a very loyal following,” he added. “At best it's like going to a party, and I'd rather play at a party than just go to one. Everywhere we go there's these pockets of fans who have been coming to hear us, so you're always running into people that you haven't seen.”

The most fulfilling part of his musical career is the fact that his wife has been working right next to him.

“She is great, not just because she's my wife-she's just great,” he said. “For me what makes a person great is their ability to express themselves easily, fluently, immediately-to pick up on it quickly. Those are the things you look for in people you want to work with. That's what Bev is.” Looking back over the two decades she has been a part of The Colbys in addition to the fact she has been working as a professional singer since 1969, Ms. Rohlehr said that it's been only in the last few years she has fully realized what a gift they have and the joy that comes along with sharing it with so many.

“Like John has said, we've never gone for the huge gold ring-don't have a lot of albums and we're not famous-but people will come up and say ‘Bev, I saw you 20 years ago and you sound even better today and you changed my life,’” she said. “You're just awed by the fact that you've been able to do this, almost in spite of yourself. It's a wonderful feeling and for me, it's just fun.”

Upcoming chances to hear The Colbys include April 5 from 9 to 10:30 p.m. at B.B. King's Nite Club, located in the Foxwood Resort and Casino in Ledyard; on April 13 at 10 p.m. at the Maple Tree Cafe; and on May 4 at 10 p.m. at the Double Down Grille. For more information, go online to colbymusic.com.