

Music, Memories and All That Jazz

AFTER MORE THAN 70 YEARS
OF PLAYING WITH LEGENDS,
GUILFORD'S DONN TRENNER
STILL HAS MUSIC TO MAKE
AND MUSICIANS TO NURTURE

BY JOEL SAMBERG

B.J. WARD vocal ease

Whether at his Guilford home or presiding over an orchestra, Donn Trenner is in his element surrounded by music. Over his shoulder is the 1970 B.J. Ward album *Vocal Ease*, which Trenner arranged and performed on.

Donn Trenner never sought fame. He claims to be disinterested in the spotlight.

Seems a little odd, considering the 92-year-old New Haven native's busy life as a piano accompanist, jazz arranger and big band conductor spans seven decades; that it includes working with Ann-Margret, Shirley MacLaine, Bob Hope, Nancy Wilson, Lena Horn, José Feliciano, Vikki Carr and dozens of other showbiz luminaries; that he appears on more than 100 albums and CDs; and that he's been on television hundreds of times, including several years as bandleader and pianist for the daily *Steve Allen Show* in the early 1960s.

So why the touch of modesty?

For one thing, he was born that way. But more to the point, it's part of his *modus operandi*: his goal is to give other musicians, particularly singers, the focus he knows they deserve and wants them to have.

"One of the things I enjoy more than many pianists is the art of accompanying," Trenner says from his home in Guilford. "I am an accompanist first and foremost. I don't want to be out front. I'd much rather embellish a singer. That's very important to me."

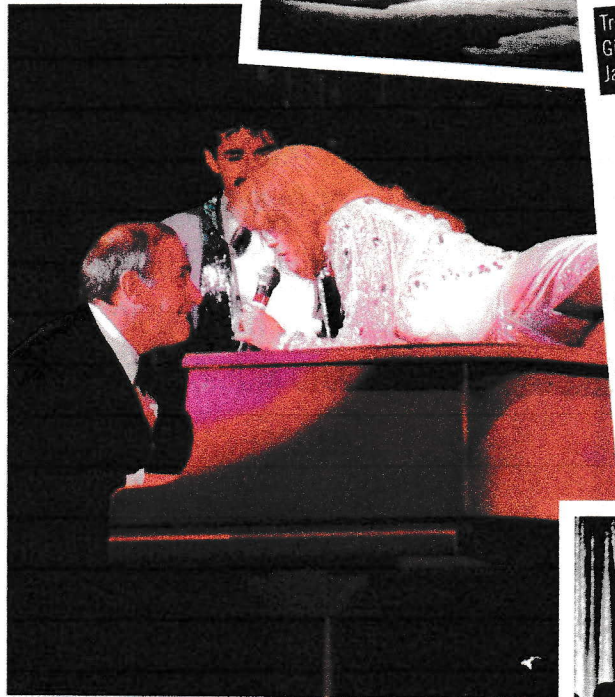
And it's been very important — you might say instrumental — to people like Ann-Margret, for whom Trenner served as musical director for 18 years. Asked to provide a publicity blurb a few years back, the singer and actress wrote: "Donn Trenner always made me feel so safe and secure as a performer. I would stand on stage, he would lift his baton, the music would begin, and I was home."

"He listens to the story of a song, to the words," echoes Sue Raney, a singer with whom Trenner has worked several times. "There's something in his harmonics, in his chords, that's so much fuller than that of most accompanists."

Raney's first album, *When Your Lover is Gone*, was produced in 1957 when she was just 17, and she later appeared on *The Dean Martin Show*, *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, and in Las Vegas with Don Rickles and Bob Newhart. "It's the way Donn puts his fingers on the notes," the accomplished vocalist says.

Singers like Ann-Margret, Raney and dozens of others feel at home whenever Trenner is behind the keyboard simply because that's where he always feels most at home. The result of that mutual comfort has been both the backbone and the heartbeat behind hundreds of

Front, from left, Steve Allen, Trenner and André Previn on *The Steve Allen Show*, circa 1961-65. On guitar is Herb Ellis. **Below:** Trenner and Ann-Margret in Atlantic City in 1983.



Trenner with Dizzy Gillespie at the Stockholm Jazz Festival in 1980.



Trenner and singer Nancy Wilson, circa 1968.

performances of thousands of songs over the course of more than 70 years.

Credit New Haven, if you'd like — at least a little bit. After all, it's the birthplace of bandleaders Buddy Morrow and Artie Shaw, singer-songwriter Michael Bolton, film composer Alfred Newman, and pop superstars Richard and Karen Carpenter. Trenner, born in 1927, was an only child who began piano lessons at a young age, concentrating (as do most new students) on classical music. "But by the time I was 12 I became interested in the orchestra," he says. "I used to go to high school on a trolley car, and I would see Captain Glenn Miller walking from the Taft Hotel over to where the band was stationed." This was in 1943 when Miller, by then one of the most famous bandleaders in the country, was directing a 50-member orchestra as part of the Army Specialists Corps. Young Trenner, just 16 at the time, was already devoted to music but became further enamored

seeing how Miller was using it to help build American morale during the war.

"Someone told me that if I wrote a chart in Glenn Miller's style, I might get him to rehearse it with his orchestra," Trenner recalls. "So I arranged 'I'm in the Mood for Love,' and the Miller band rehearsed it in

Trenner with Jerry Lewis at the St. Louis Variety Club Telethon in 1990.

HISTORICAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DONN TRENNER



Trenner with actress and singer Rose Marie in Sydney, Australia, in the early 1970s.



Trenner, right, with Shirley MacLaine and drummer Tommy Duckworth in 1976. MacLaine's note reads: *To Darling Donn ... For making the three of us one! Forever bound with love, understanding and indispensability ... Little I, I Love You ("Little I" — short for "Little Iodine," a bratty comic strip character — was Trenner's nickname for MacLaine).*

my high school!" It was a thrill he never forgot, and never will.

Once he started to establish himself as a pianist of consummate skill and professionalism, Trenner began working with such big band icons as Charlie Barnet and Les Brown, and performed alongside an impressive roster of jazz greats like Charlie Parker, Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan. Later on he served as Bob Hope's personal accompanist for seven years, was the musical director for six of Hope's International Christmas Tours, was nominated for an Emmy Award for his musical direction of the Shirley MacLaine television special *Gypsy in My Soul*, and worked several times at the famed John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. One time it was for Jimmy Carter's presidential inauguration and another for Bob Hope's 75th birthday celebration.

It wasn't the only place in Washington

he worked: Trenner was the musical director for an event at the White House during Gerald Ford's administration when the Shah of Iran had personally requested a performance by Ann-Margret.

That's certainly not the full list of his accomplishments, but it's exhausting enough. Not for Trenner, though, since the word *exhausting* seems not to be in his vocabulary. Over the years he has worked with hundreds of long-time veterans and relative newcomers alike. Reputation or prominence play no part in his decision to work with a musician. It's all about the music and his zeal in helping to nurture it and spread it among the people.

"He's done more than anyone I know," says vocalist and trumpeter Rob Zappulla, a Kensington native who spent nearly a decade with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra under the direction of Morrow. Several years ago, before he became acquainted

with Trenner, Zappulla worked up the courage to ask him to play the piano for him during a Frank Sinatra tribute concert to be televised on the Cox cable network. He knew of Trenner's sterling reputation, but had no clue as to his schedule or new project objectives. "Sometimes you ask people to play for you and you don't know if they'll accept. But Donn accepted and we hit it off. He's just a wonderful person. I ended up having the greatest pianist. The guy should have a monument put up to him — a monument without an ego."

Trenner chose to return to Connecticut in 1996 after a few years in California not just because of roots, but because branching out regionally gives him plenty of joy, and no lack of opportunities. He didn't opt for the northwest or southwest corners of the state, either, where hopping into the city for performances or meetings is quick and easy. His Guilford home is a 90-mile journey to Middtown. Other New Haven musical greats relocated elsewhere, either for the weather or proximity to the television industry and top-line recording studios. Morrow spent his later years in Florida; Shaw lived in a suburb of Los Angeles, as does Richard Carpenter today, and countless professional musicians stick close to Manhattan. But Trenner's heart is more New England than New York; it's where he has family and plenty of friends. His girlfriend, he says, is his former wife. (Her name is Carmen, and as Trenner likes to say, "I've always wanted my own opera.") He also has a 26-year-old daughter who is studying to be an audio engineer.

He has students here, too, though he keeps the list small at only about a half-dozen, both instrumentalists and singers,

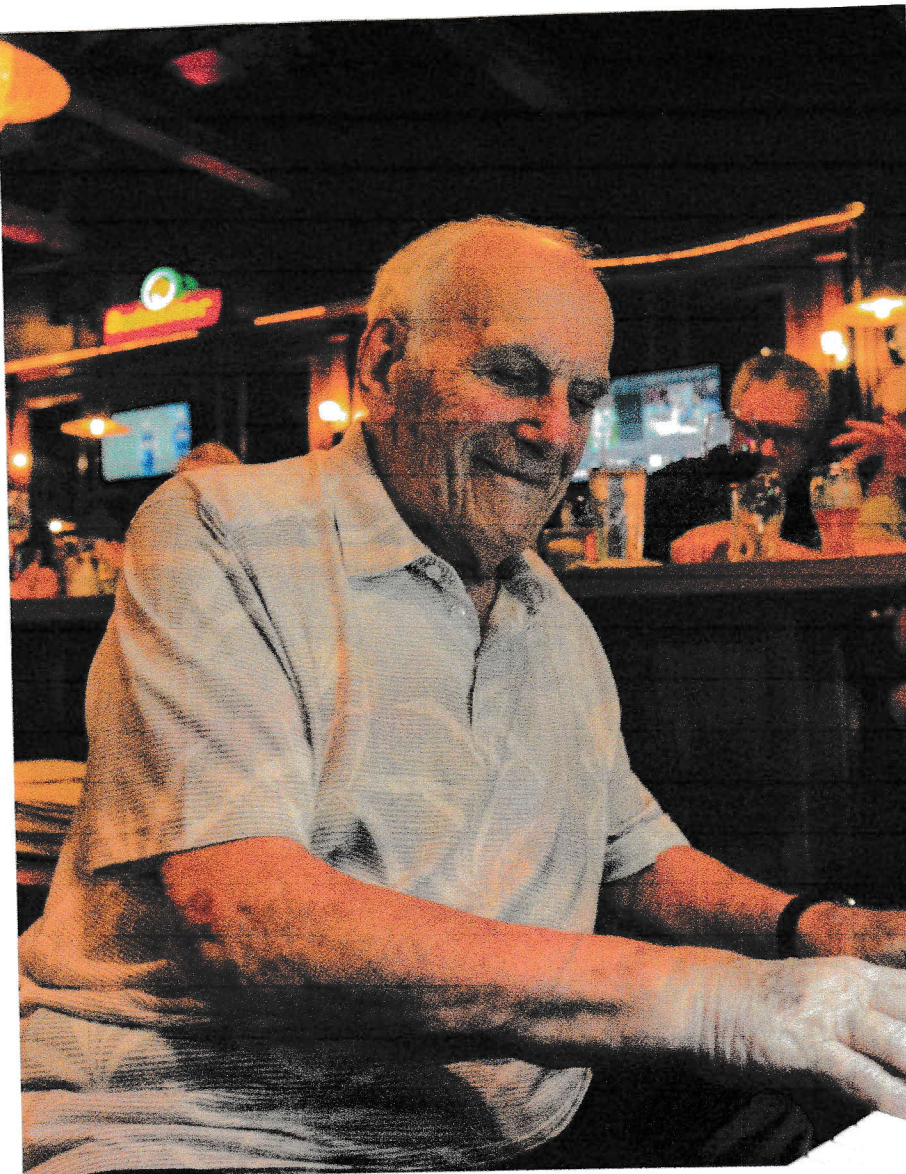
and keeps the scheduling loose so that they can come whenever they feel they need to.

Trenner often performs these days in venues decidedly smaller than the Kennedy Center or the White House — and not surprisingly, that makes no difference to him at all. He's played at the Buttonwood Tree Performing Arts & Cultural Center in Middletown in support of vocalist Karen Frisk, at the Avon Public Library to kick off one of its winter concert series, and at several other regional spots large and small.

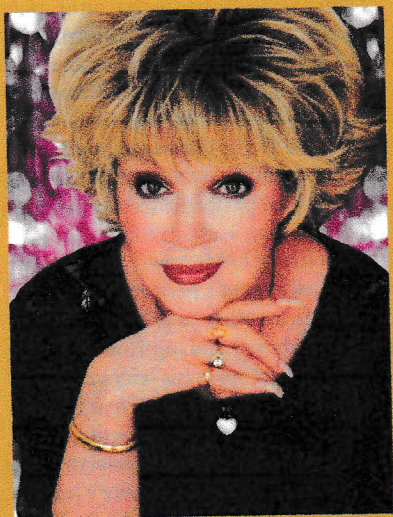
And if all that's not enough for a musical nonagenarian, he is also on the faculty of a summer jazz camp in Woodstock, Vermont. "It's a week of intensive studies with a wonderful group of teachers, and I am honored to be one of them," he says proudly. In fact, when asked to name the highlights of his long career, without missing a beat he says that the Woodstock engagement is at the top of the list.

Would he trade it all for another shot on national TV? Probably not on a permanent basis, but neither would he completely disregard the notion. "It would depend on the gig. I'd have to know what it is, how many nights a week, if it's permanent or a one-time special. I'm interested in just about anything that can enhance what I do," he says — by which he means supporting other musicians, regardless of where the spotlight is or on whom it's shining.

It is quite likely, though, that not accepting a nightly job on TV would be a fairly easy decision to make simply because it would interrupt what has become Trenner's musical signature in central



Trenner at his usual Monday night spot: behind the piano at Hartford's Arch Street Tavern. PHOTO: HAMPTON G. LEWIS



"I only wish that over the course of my career I could have been graced with his amazing talent even more."

— Professional recording artist, teacher and vocal coach Sue Raney

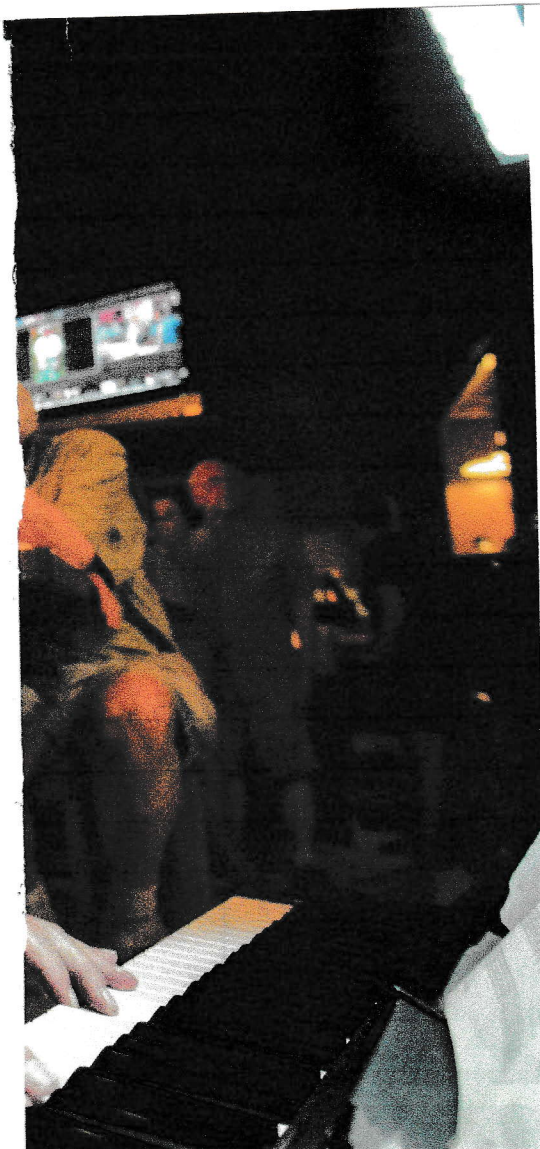
The Reviews Are In

NO ONE KNOWS TRENNER BETTER THAN THE PEOPLE WITH WHOM HE'S WORKED. AND THAT NARROWS IT DOWN TO, WELL, AT LEAST A THOUSAND. Over his seven-decade career, Trenner has worked with the famous, the up-and-coming, local pros, and students just starting out on their quest to make music a major part of their lives. Ask any one of them and they'll tell you that they are richer as musicians for knowing Trenner. Here are just a handful of verses:

"Donn continues to give me enormous confidence and support to be the musician I want to be. With him, striving for that kind of perfection is not a chore, but a joy."

— Dave Stangarone, flugelhorn and trumpet player for the Hartford Jazz Orchestra





Connecticut: his leadership of the Hartford Jazz Orchestra every Monday night at the Arch Street Tavern.

Trenner took over the orchestra in 2000 after the passing of acclaimed arranger and bandleader Charles "Chic" Cicchetti (a Waterbury native), whose musical charts he uses exclusively. The sidewalks around Arch Street may be mostly empty on a typical Monday night, but inside you'll find a capacity crowd of a few dozen patrons listening to the orchestra while bartenders work the bar and waitresses work the floor. The band includes 16 professional musicians, as young as 34 and as seasoned as 76, playing two sets of songs from big band charts to Broadway tunes to jazz standards and other genres in between. Built in 1895 as the Hartford Brick Carriage Factory, the tavern's old-fashioned lighting fixtures hanging from the exposed wooden ceiling beams provide a nice antidote to the stresses of modern life — not to mention from all the intrusive construction in the area.

But more than that, there's the music. From "You'll Never Know" and "Try to Remember," to "Nobody's Perfect" and "Satin Doll," the repertoire envelops the place in equal doses of contemporary energy and nostalgia. Often there's a vocalist for part of the show, such as Hartford native Nicole Pasternack or the Sinatra tribute veteran Zappulla.

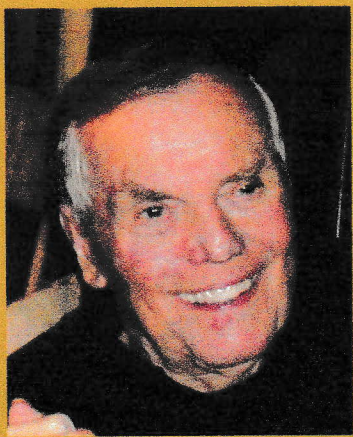
"I look forward to his introductions," says Zappulla, referring to Trenner's solo pre-show ivory tinkling. "He opens the night that way, and it knocks me out every time."

Ironically, despite the consistent crowd,

the Hartford Jazz Orchestra is not well known outside of the club, and certainly not statewide or nationally. Their regular gig at Arch Street is not particularly well publicized. That seems almost criminal given the skill of the band and the reputation of the man who keeps the beat every Monday night.

Does he need to let go of a little modesty in order to help spread the word? There may actually be reason to believe that in the last few years there has been a modest reduction in that regard. For years Trenner avoided pleas to write a book about his life and career, but finally acquiesced. *Leave it to Me: My Life in Music* (written with Tim Atherton) was published in 2015. Plus, these days he is certainly not shy about sharing his closeness with some of the superstars with whom he has worked over the years. "On Christmas Day I called everybody I could think of," he recently boasted. "I called Ann-Margret and spoke to her. I called Shirley MacLaine and spoke to her. I called Nancy Wilson and spoke to her."

All this bodes well for helping to amplify the publicity for who Trenner is and what he does. That's important because Trenner's career is not just one for the musical history books. It's also for the benefit of today's discriminating audiences. Indeed, his calendar is full. In fact, there may be a very good reason why, on any given night at the Arch Street Tavern, you may hear the 92-year-old virtuoso conducting "The Best Is Yet to Come." ■

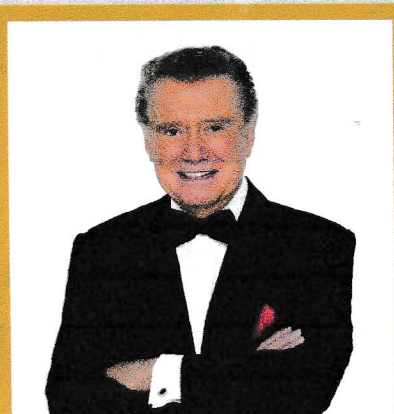


"As a vocalist I have worked with numerous musical directors over the years, and there is no one better than my good friend Donn Trenner."

— Singer, actor and TV host Peter Marshall, in Trenner's biography, *Leave It to Me: My Life in Music*

"I was lucky enough to inherit Donn for a two-week run on Steve Allen's show while Steve was on vacation, and it was a thrill I will never forget."

— TV talk show host Regis Philbin.



"When you're at a venue where he's playing or conducting, magic happens when you walk in pretty much just because of him."

— Vocalist and Sinatra tribute artist Rob Zappulla