

Melbourne pianist gets a break

Ex-firefighter records CD in London

BY MARIA SONNENBERG
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Dreams do come true sometimes. Just ask John Ryan.

Like any artist, pianist/composer John Ryan hoped for a big break, but Ryan had witnessed a big slice of reality during his career as a Melbourne firefighter. He also was well aware of the vagaries of the recording industry.

He was content playing the piano at Djon's four nights a week, weekend gigs at clubs in Vero Beach and composing songs at home.

Then British record producer Peter Clayton entered the picture.

Clayton, who leaves London every year for a hiatus to his Indialantic condo, visited Djon's and liked what he heard when he asked Ryan to play "Stardust."

"I was quite impressed," Clayton said.

When Clayton learned Ryan also wrote his own compositions, he suggested the musician visit London to cut a CD.

Ryan didn't give it much thought. He'd heard it before.

"This is one of those things every guy or gal that plays the piano gets," he said. "You learn early on that it's lip service."

Not this time. Clayton was for real.

In fact, Clayton has filled London's Royal Albert Hall with ragtime, jazz and swing, created an impressive catalog of British jazz and blues albums and even completed a musical about Louis Armstrong scheduled to hit London's West End stage.

Clayton, director of Rob-inwood Productions in London, originally intended to fly Ryan to London to record an album of piano selections. When he heard

Listen to Ryan

To listen to some of the songs from "Words Alone," visit www.ryanmusic.com. The album may be purchased at the site and also through amazon.com.

Ryan's original compositions, however, the producer changed his mind, opting instead to cut an album of Ryan's songs.

"This gentleman spared no expense," Ryan said.

"Words Alone: the Music and Lyrics of John Ryan" features 17 Ryan originals arranged and conducted by British musical director Pete Moore and backed by British and American vocalists and the 32-piece Pete Moore Orchestra.

Moore worked for legends like Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Peggy Lee and arranged the last album of conductor Johnny Mercer.

"To me, it's an absolute dream," said Ryan. "Pete Moore is a link to another generation. To think that I've had the opportunity, the honor, to work with him is just incredible."

Life became a whirlwind for the newly retired Melbourne firefighter whose closest contact to the British Empire was a trip to the Bahamas.

The major recording project turned him into a frequent Pondhopper across the Atlantic.

In London, Ryan had the experience of sharing recording time at Air Edel Studios, where the soundtrack for the newest Harry Potter movie also was being recorded.

All this is stuff for the self-taught Ryan, who started his musical career as the 13-year-old organist at Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church.

"I ended up doing five services a weekend at \$5 a mass," Ryan said.

Though he can't remember when he didn't want to play the piano, Ryan never lost a grip on



Maria Sonnenberg, for FLORIDA TODAY

In the groove. Composer John Ryan gets caught up in the music while British record producer Peter Clayton enjoys the impromptu concert.

the realities of the business.

"I had a family, so I needed to make a living," he said. "It's extremely hard to make a living as a professional musician."

The 24-hours-on and 48-hours-off schedule of a fireman gave him the chance to provide for his family and still pursue the muse.

It also provided inspiration.

"Twenty-five years as a firefighter gave me some experiences in life that many people couldn't imagine," he said. "I've seen the depths of tragedy."

Michael Parkinson, England's Johnny Carson, featured the album on his program.

Clayton and Ryan are knocking on United States radio stations' doors to expand exposure.

"It's very tough in this country because a couple of companies own most of the music," Clayton said.

Things are looking good for the CD's future. Barnes & Noble soon could be carrying the CD in its record departments. A "Good Morning, America" appearance is possible.

Whatever happens, Ryan can't complain.

"I could die right now a happy man," he said. "My daughter can play this for my grandchildren." ■