

A Charlie Brown Christmas tunes still inspire

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By Sarah Thuswaldner



Samantha Halyk, Centretown News

Jazz drummer Jerry Granelli performed music from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in Ottawa last weekend.

Like the titular hero of Charles Schultz's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, jazz musician Jerry Granelli always chooses the ugliest Christmas tree on the lot.

It might be a subconscious attachment to Charlie Brown, he says. That attachment goes back decades. Granelli is the only remaining member of the Vince Guaraldi Trio, which recorded the music for the classic 1965 Christmas special.

At 72 years old, the drummer still tours. For the first time in 40 years, he played the Charlie Brown music for the Ottawa International Children's Festival last week. Accompanied by two local children's choirs, the Jerry Granelli Trio played some of the special's best-remembered music, like *Christmas Time Is Here* and *Linus and Lucy*.

Granelli has recorded many albums under his own name and even earned a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but he says he still looks back with fondness on Charlie Brown.

"It was made in a garage in San Francisco – hello, it's true indie music!" he says.

"It's embarrassing to say what I got paid. It was \$168. But the album had my name on it, and I showed it to my Italian grandfather. He said, 'That's-a nice. When you gonna get a job?'"

Forty-seven years later, Granelli says something about that music has stuck with its audience.

"It's far out! Drummers will email me, and want to know what cymbals I used or something. I don't know! It was a long time ago, man," he says.

Both the special and its music are seen and heard nearly everywhere in December. There are different theories as to why.

Kurt Ala-Kantti, director of the Cross Town Youth Chorus, which sang at the concert, says the special has lasted in people's memories because of the risks it took.

"It used jazz, it wasn't very pop-influenced, and because of that it almost never made it to air. But that made it timeless. It could have been campy or dated, but it's not, and each generation comes to it in their own way," Ala-Kantti says.

Ottawa Jazz Festival director Catherine O'Grady, who organized the concert at the Ottawa Little Theatre, says that the Charlie Brown music bridges the gap between generations.

"It's a meaningful experience on everyone's level," she says. "It's part of a children's story, but the parents have that huge nostalgia for the music."

Granelli attributes the album's success to its humble beginnings in the San Francisco garage.

"The music's actually real. People sense it. You can feed human beings a lot of crap, but they can sense when something's real and genuine. This music, for whatever reason, connects with that. It's not just that it makes them happy. It touches that quality of humanness. It was just put out there, and against all odds, it went boom," he says.

The soundtrack of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* has gone platinum three times, and Granelli says the music's attraction lies in its quiet depth, which was inspired by Charlie Brown.

"We were asking that question of what Christmas meant," Granelli says. "It's this one day where we all try to be nicer."

To Granelli, as well as to Charlie Brown, that means enjoying the sincere simplicity of a small, shabby Christmas tree.

Jerry Granelli talks Charlie Brown

Q: Why was the Vince Guaraldi Trio chosen to play the music for *A Charlie Brown Christmas*?

A: Charlie Schultz heard Vince's music and that's what he wanted. It was very organic. It wasn't like we were trying to make a hit.

Q: What was it like recording the album?

A: It was a lot of laughs. Vince had two completely wild guys, and he harnessed us to get music. He wrote it, and found guys who could play it that way. The greatest lesson I ever

learned from him is that you're there to serve the music, man. You take someone's dream and make it sound good.

Q: Which song on the album do you like best?

A: My favourite is Christmas Time Is Here. It's such a beautiful ballad. But then there's Linus and Lucy, man. That's steeped in real jazz piano. It took Vince hours to learn to do that with the left hand.

Q: Are you happy with the way your work was used?

A: I never thought about it much. It went in the can, and then it was on TV. I wasn't very happy with the remastering, but I'm generally happy with the music.

Q: Do you mind being associated with this album forever?

A: No, man. It was my first big paid gig. I played with Vince for two years, and then I went off to do other stuff. I found my voice, and I've been really fortunate. I have something like 24 albums under my own name, and that's pretty good for a drummer. I'm even in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I'm lucky to have something I can pursue for 68 years.

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