

# MENTOR

## Sean J. Kennedy Salutes Ray Deeley



I studied drums and percussion with Ray Deeley while I was a high-school student back in the mid 1980s. Ironically, so did my wife, Heather, who went to a different high school about an hour away from where I lived. It wasn't until we met each other in college that we realized we both had the privilege of studying with Mr. Deeley.

Gary Zimmaro was the band director at my high school. He was a woodwind phenom who had worked with Lou Rawls, and he had even jammed with Jaco Pastorius. Mr. Zimmaro made sure to bring in top instrumentalists to the program, and in addition to himself covering all the woodwind lessons, he had jazz trumpeter Ralph 'Red' Clemson teaching brass, and Ray handled the percussion classes. Ray was one of the most humble musicians I had ever met. You'd never know the guy toured the world with Frank Sinatra, Chubby Checker, Bobby Rydell, Ann Margaret, Julie Andrews, and other legends.

One of my favorite memories about studying with him was the nonchalant way he'd tell me about his exploits. For example, I'd go into my lesson on a Monday afternoon and say, "Hey, Mr. Deeley, how are you?"

He'd answer, "Oh, fine. I had some gigs this weekend."

I'd ask, "Who were you playing with?"

"Oh, Sinatra," he'd say, as casually as if he was simply talking about going to the supermarket.

**What is your earliest memory of music in your life?**

My father, Harold Deeley, was a professional tap dancer in vaudeville, and he used to fool with sticks using his feet. He gave it up when he got married.

**Did you start taking formal lessons when you were little?**

I first studied drums with Henry Robinson, who was at the Curtis Institute of Music at the time. I used to ride my bicycle to his house twice a week. He charged me 50 cents a lesson. Then, I went to Jules

E. Mastbaum Area Vocational/Technical School and played in the All-Catholic Orchestra. I thought I was so good that I stopped practicing. Then, I came in last place one year, and, boy, that woke me up. I started studying like crazy again.

**Did you study non-pitched percussion with Robinson, or both pitched and non-pitched?**

I just studied drums with him. I didn't start with mallets until I got into Mastbaum, and I studied with Nicholas D'Amico. He was an amazing player. I

used to go watch him play the ice shows. He had perfect pitch on the timpani. It was unbelievable.

**Where did you go after Mastbaum?**

I won a scholarship to the Curtis Institute of Music, and I studied with Fred Hinger. I was only there three years, because I got a chance to play professionally. In those days, my father was making \$35 a week, and I could make \$125 a week—which was unheard of. I did a lot of traveling with a lot of different groups, such as Vincent Montana Jr., saxophonist George Young, Mike Pettison, and Dave Appell and the Applejacks.

**When you were in high school, did you have a definite plan to have a career as a musician?**

No. It was just that was what I always wanted to be.

**What were some of the high points of your career?**

Well, I have a list somewhere. I've been writing it down. I did *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and a lot of other big TV programs. I played with Sinatra twice. I did two or three little tours with Liberace. Then, there was Johnny Mathis, Vic Damone, Ann-Margret, Julie Andrews—which was one of the toughest shows I've ever played—Bobby Rydell, Chubby Checkers, Johnny Mathis, Dion, the Smothers Brothers, the Mills Brothers, Tom Jones, Don Rickles, Milton Berle, and some Dick Clark tours. I also played percussion at The Latin Casino for many years, so you can imagine how many people I backed up. The percussion thing was a real learning experience. I was afraid of it at first, but I got pretty sharp after a couple years. I traveled all over the world. Yeah, the good old days—when you could make a living out of this business.

**If there are young people out there with aspirations to get into the music business, what is one of the best pieces of advice you could give them?**

The main thing is to study with a really good teacher in the beginning. That's number one. And you have to really want to do it. Many days, I spent five to six hours practicing. It was a tough road when I started, and it's a very tough road today.

*Interview excerpted from the podcast Backstage at the Enharmonic, hosted by Sean J. Kennedy.*

### Liberty DeVitto on Ray

"Ray Deeley was one of the house drummers at Parkway-Cameo Records. Some of my favorite recordings came from there: 'You Can't Sit Down' by the Doves; 'South Street,' 'The Wah Watusi,' 'Don't Hang Up' by the Orlons; 'So Much in Love' by The Tymes. Ray's drumming—along with so many others—shaped my playing before I ever touched a drum."

### Bobby Rydell on Ray

"I love Ray. He was my first drummer, and he traveled with me all over the world. He played the Copa with me in the early '60s. He always had great technique and time. I was lucky to have him with me for as long as I did—a great guy and a great player."

