

Kent show blends rock, man's family history

Grandfather's legacy provides inspiration for Patterson resident

Michael Risinit
The Journal News

The old man wore a fedora. A pocket watch on a chain looped across his worn, three-piece suit. Burlap sack in hand, the man plucked dandelion greens from the lawn in front of the home on Westchester Avenue in Port Chester.

To the young Chris Cassone,



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what the man said — in broken English and bits of Italian — was as confusing as his foraging for salad fixings.

"He said 'boom, boom' to me," Cassone, 57, said, mimicking the man on that early 1960s day by forming a pistol with his hand. "He told me he was really proud of my grandfather."

Please see SHOW, 8A



Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News

Chris Cassone sings a song he wrote called "Cake for the Band" at his Patterson home on Tuesday. He will perform a multimedia production today at Arts on the Lake in Kent.

Kent show mixes rock, man's family history

SHOW, from 1A

Another 10 years or so passed before Cassone, whose grandfather, J.J., founded the family bakery on South Regent Street, figured everything out.

Almost a lifetime later, the Patterson resident has folded all the elements together — from his grandfather's murder and its fallout to his own ploy for meeting well-known rock 'n' roll musicians passing through Port Chester — into a story for the stage that makes its premiere tonight in Kent.

It wasn't until Theresa, his grandmother and J.J.'s widow, died in 1972 that Cassone understood what the man known as Froggy had meant a decade earlier. Standing in St. Mary's Cemetery above Ridge Street, he looked at his grandfather's headstone and the date he died.

"That was the trigger for me. I left the (post-funeral) party and went right to the library," he said.

There, he found the Port Chester Daily Item from July 16, 1923, and his answer.

"WASHINGTON PARK BAKER MURDERED!!!" the paper's front page blared.

Carrying two boxes of yeast and his keys to the bakery, J.J. Cassone, 43, was gunned down before dawn that summer Monday, five years after World War I. Theresa Cassone found her husband on the path leading from the family's backyard along West Street to the bakery, bleeding from shotgun slugs fired at close range.

"It wasn't an edict — 'Don't talk about this' — but nobody ever talked about it," explained Cassone, a musician himself with ties to Hollywood and the music industry.

Police deemed the motive to be "money, financial competition and business enmity," according to the next day's paper. During the war, J.J. Cassone had leased his building to another operation and gone into the wholesale flour business. In 1921, he took his tenants to court to regain his bakery. Police interrogated a New Rochelle bake-shop proprietor, the proprietor's brother and two employees. But with no eyewitness identification and little evidence, the suspects were released.

By the next week, the case fell out of the news. Theresa Cassone ran the bakery and raised her seven children. Some of her sons went into the family business, though Peter Cassone, Chris' father, became a doctor. Froggy remembered that, too, as he picked dandelions, asking young Chris if he was the doctor's son.

A few blocks south of where the

If you go

"The Cakeman Chronicles" starts at 7:30 tonight at Arts on the Lake, 640 Route 52, Kent. Tickets are \$10, \$9 for members. For reservations or more information, call 845-228-2685 or visit www.artsonthelake.org.

pair stood on that early 1960s day was the family's bakery. Just down Westchester Avenue was the Capitol Theater, a vaudeville-turned-movie theater that would soon, for a brief time, become a rock 'n' roll palace.

Cassone graduated from Port Chester High School in 1968. About two years later, Pink Floyd, Joe Cocker, Van Morrison and other acts hit the Capitol's stage. For a man with a guitar who played in area bands, it was nirvana.

Ticketless and rebuffed at the door of the Cocker concert, Cassone conceived a plan rooted in his family's business. Flour, sugar, butter and eggs ended up being his ticket to meeting Janis Joplin, Traffic, Santana, Derek and the Dominos and others.

"I said, 'I've got a great idea,'" Cassone recalled. "Cake for the band. The door would open and I'd go up the stairs. Cake for the band, the door at the top of the stairs would open and I'd go right in."

Bonnie Raitt, whose debut album came out in 1971, partook of Cassone's confection — a white sheet cake decorated with flowers and pink writing that said "Welcome Bonnie Raitt." Kathy Kane, Raitt's manager, said this week that the musician recalled "it being a lovely and delicious gesture."

A photograph shows Peter Haycock, lead guitarist, and the rest of the Climax Blues Band surrounding a cake decorated with Santa Claus and several poinsettias, with Cassone in the middle of the shot. In an e-mail this week, Haycock said he was surprised when Cassone showed up with the dessert.

"I admit I can't remember the ingredients exactly. But when I saw the picture I had a good feeling in my saliva and belly, so it must have been really delicious!" he wrote.

Cassone's cake runs lasted about two years, about as long as the Capitol hosted the rock concerts. On show nights, he climbed into his white, 1966 Volkswagen Bug, picked up a cake at the bakery, "right up the street from Korvettes" (the discount department store in the Route 1 shopping center), and headed to the theater near the train



Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News

Chris Cassone of Patterson has brought together elements from his grandfather's murder and its fallout to his own ploy for meeting well-known rock 'n' roll musicians passing through Port Chester, and crafted a story for the stage, which makes its premiere tonight in Kent.



Cassone family photo

A photo of Chris Cassone's grandfather J.J., who started the baking business in Port Chester.

station. The only door that didn't open was the one behind which was the Grateful Dead. "They took the cake, though. They were hip to security by then," Cassone said.

He became a sound engineer at North Lake Sound Studio in White Plains, working on albums for Kiss' Ace Frehley and remixing some lost Duke Ellington tapes. In the early 1990s, he was the music recording engineer for Chazz Palminteri's movie "A Bronx Tale." A bout with alcohol and drugs, though, pushed away other opportunities. He describes himself now as "nine years sober."

Palminteri's recent Broadway version of "A Bronx Tale" prodded Cassone, a father of three and a grandfather of one, to wrap together his grandfather's murder and a bit of his own experiences. "It was an aha moment for me, seeing him tell his story," Cassone said.

Cassone's production is "a little play with music." At Arts on the Lake in Kent tonight, he will be accompanied by Mike Latini, Jim Nowak and "Fuzzy" Joe Gerardi.

"If I don't get in, I'll surely go mad. Maybe, maybe, they might let me in with my cake for the band," he sang one morning as he played

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his guitar.

John Arrucci of Kent, musical programming director at the center, has a small role in Cassone's production. The show, he said, carries the classic themes of love, loss and family loyalties.

"It can't but touch everyone who hears it," said Arrucci, a percussionist and composer.

Bobby Cassone, 63, a cousin and limousine driver, said no one talked about the murder. "It really wasn't mentioned that much," he said. "But music was Chris' first love. I'm quite proud of him."

For Chris Cassone, his play isn't so much about J.J. Cassone's death as it is about his principles and how they affected the family.

"This play is not about the murder of my grandfather. It's about his actions, how he was courageous in how he had to face his killers," Cassone said. "It's reverberated through my family to me."

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