

THE LEADER OF THE BAND

Gene Press on what it takes to make a big band

Is there anything more elegant than a roomful of tuxedoed men with their beautiful ladies in ball gowns swaying under golden chandeliers to the sounds of a large orchestra? Great music is to fundraising galas what hot dogs are to baseball: Without it the experience just isn't the same.

Band leader Gene Press is an expert, one of the few, who really knows what it takes to make music work at elegant events. He started as a teenager in New York working in the music and entertainment business. Later he worked for years at New York's famous Rainbow Room. He did Ronald Reagan's second inaugural event held at the Library of Congress. He's played in Europe. When he and his wife moved to Scottsdale in 1997, he kept his business going in New York and slowly started building a reputation in Arizona. Recently he put together a 15-piece orchestra for the Heart Ball. He's done the Barrow Ball several times along with Heard Museum functions, not to mention weddings, birthdays, bar mitzvahs – you name it.

It doesn't take long when talking to this band leader to understand just how complicated his job is. While it looks easy when you're down on the floor moving to great music, we thought it would be interesting to take a peek behind the curtain to see at what's really involved in making the music a seamless and enjoyable part of a big event.

Gene Press is a great person to ask. He clearly knows what he's doing, has done it a long time, and still loves the work, including taking his turn on stage with a guitar. He offers clients one-stop shopping. He can arrange one musician to play at a wedding or round up talented musicians from New York, Los Angeles and Phoenix to stage a 22-piece orchestra. Either way, it's much more complicated than it looks.



Lesson No. 1:

Experience is everything

"Success is knowing what guests are dictating to the orchestra," Press says. "I learned how to pace a party and read the dance floor. I find a set repertoire counterproductive. I'll see what styles of music are reaching the audience on a given evening. I'm calling the music based on what I see on the dance floor. I know how to test the floor and play to it."

Along these lines, Press says his early days in New York were invaluable to learning what to do when leading a big band. He worked with some of the most notable musicians in that city. He saw what worked, what didn't work, and how to stay flexible up on stage under those hot lights.

Lesson No. 2:

Work with the best

Playing big events and then having down time between gigs means hiring the right musicians. Press says there's very little time for rehearsal in his world, so having the right contacts and knowledge about what and who is out there is critical. You have to fly people from other cities, often, hire musicians locally, and come together on the big night with very little preparation. And there's only one chance to get it right. People are listening.

"When you're dealing with musicians at this level you need very little rehearsal unless there are special requests. Then my assistant sends out mp3s and sheet music ahead of time," Press says. "Let's say the dance floor is packed and I'm playing a medley of Motown, I'm thinking, 'What's the next stage of music.' If I see the floor is shifting into third gear I'm trying to think how to get them into fourth gear."

That means what in football is known as "calling an audible" on the field and reversing direction. It also means he has to have musicians behind him who can stop on a dime, alter what they're doing and, literally, not lose a beat. (A side note: Press doesn't allow his musicians to drink on the job!)

Lesson No. 3:

Plan ahead and stay focused

A successful job for Press means hiring the right musicians, as noted above, and employing good listening and educating skills before the event.

He says it's important to really hear what fundraiser organizers, for instance, or fathers of the brides want for their event. What's the mood? Who's the audience? After that, he feels a duty to lend his experience.

"The biggest challenge in this business is educating the client. That's my primary focus so when they make a decision about what kind of music they want they make it based on knowledge. I'll ask what kind of ear they have and educate them, because the night of the event it's too late."

Beyond that, Press makes one thing clear: The night of the event, it's his job to make it work and pull the music together. Experience has taught him not to be shy about that.

"I have had the best musicians in this business working for me for a long time," he says. "But the band leader is the show. He's the one calling the shots for the evening. That's always how it works best."

