

Career trumpeting with the best began at MCA; Nark comes back for concert

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Submitted Photo Vaughn Nark, professional trumpeter and Mount Carmel native, will perform live Saturday as a guest soloist during the annual spring concert of the Mount Carmel Area Symphonic Band.

MOUNT CARMEL - On stage at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., one night in 1983, jazz icon Dizzy Gillespie stood front and center.

Vaughn Nark, professional trumpeter and Mount Carmel native, sat behind "the ambassador of jazz" and looked out into the audience of 6,000. His mother and father, Virginia and Leon F. Nark, were in the crowd.

Father, a trumpeter himself, introduced son to Dizzy's records years before. On that night in the nation's capital, son had the privilege of introducing father to the famed musician.

"It ain't gonna get any better than this," Nark thought to himself.

"At that time I felt taller than the Washington Monument," he said this week, looking back on the moment.

It was the musical highlight of a career with many, and it all began in Nark's hometown. He'll perform Saturday night as guest soloist for the Mount Carmel Area Symphonic Band's annual spring concert. Showtime is 7 o'clock at the junior-senior high school auditorium.

Musical beginnings

Nark, 58, of Riverside, grew up on Orange Street practicing trumpet in his home. The music would sometimes carry from an open window and into the ears of Paul Semicek, leader of the Mount Carmel Mounties marching band who lived nearby. Nark joined the Mounties in grade school - the youngest student Semicek took on as band leader.

"He's sort of a phenomena. He has jazz ideas where I'd just get lost. It's natural talent," said Semicek, now 78. "He's a rare, rare jewel."

Nark came up behind two other notable Mounties on trumpet, Samuel Rovito and Joe Mosello, who himself enjoys an impressive professional career.

Semicek's connections helped land Doc Severinsen, leader of The Tonight Show Band, to perform at The Festival of Stars showcase held for several years at Mount Carmel's Silver Bowl. Nark played alongside, not yet a teenager.

Nark became lead trumpet by his freshman year. If he would freelance during a song, Semicek didn't mind.

"He used to jazz up the songs, and I didn't touch him because he was over my head," Semicek said.

Under Semicek's guidance, the Mounties marched in stadiums across the country, performing for tens of thousands of fans at dozens of National Football League games. They competed in drum and corps contests. Nark once performed the Canadian national anthem at a packed stadium for a Canadian Football League game, thousands of "canucks" singing the lyrics as he played the notes on trumpet.

Bernard Stellar, 55, is now superintendent of the school district he graduated from in 1977. He also directs the Symphonic Band. He was a drummer with the Mounties, and spoke about the impression Nark made. On the bus when the other band members were "busy having fun," Nark was polishing his trumpet and focusing on the performance.

"He was an unusually gifted trumpet player. He also had the drive to become a really excellent player. You could just tell," Stellar said. "He took his playing very seriously."

The Mountie experience steeled Nark's nerves and went a long way to prepare him for a career on stage after graduating high school in 1974. He toured globally for nearly 20 years as lead trumpeter with the Airmen of Note, a jazz ensemble of the U.S. Air Force and a group considered among the finest big bands in the world. A featured soloist, he was awarded by presidential order a Meritorious Service Medal while playing with the Airmen. He released three solo albums, too.

Henry Mancini and Wynton Marsalis, Lena Horne and Tony Bennett, are all among the greats Nark blew horn with. Gillespie, though, remains most memorable to him.

When he lived in D.C., Nark tracked Gillespie from one club to the next when he was in town. A chance meeting saw Gillespie listen to a cassette of Nark's solos that he kept on hand. As Nark tells it, Gillespie liked what he heard - "You sound pretty good, kid" - and he laughed when Nark asked for a shot to play sometime.

"You never know," Nark recalls Gillespie saying. "What about tonight?" Nark asked.

Nark didn't know it, and maybe Gillespie didn't either at the moment, but he was about to get that shot. Later that night and minutes before the lead act was to take the stage, Gillespie pointed at Nark. All Nark needed was a trumpet. His was blocks away in his parked car.

"I ran like a bat out of hell down that hill. I ran back up, and I could hardly breathe. I didn't warm up one note," Nark said about the first time, but not the last time, he played alongside his musical hero.

Priorities outside of music led to Nark's return to Northumberland County after living for years in Washington, D.C. His mother is now 89, and his father passed away in 2004. His brother, Leon D., a talented accordion player, passed away in 2013.

Nark, a studio musician, remains Yamaha's performing artist and clinician for the D.C. region. He also plays the flugelhorn

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and valve trombone. On Saturday, he'll perform Mike Crotty's arrangements of "Send In The Clowns" and "America The Beautiful."

The Symphonic Band will perform a variety of music, including the famous Sousa march "The Stars And Stripes Forever," "Mountain Thyme" by Samuel Hazo, Jack Stamp's "Cenotaph" and Mozart's Overture from "The Marriage of Figaro."

Tickets are available in advance by calling the high school band room at 570-339-1500 ext. 3139; also, from any band member or band parent, or at the door the night of the show.

For more information about Nark, visit www.vaughnnark.com.

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