

Studio musician supergroup opens Mendel Center season

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Lee Shapiro was 18 years old and a piano student at the Manhattan School of Music when Frankie Valli's road manager saw him perform at a club in New Jersey.

"(Original keyboardist) Bob Gaudio was leaving the road and they were looking for someone to replace him in The Four Seasons," Shapiro says by phone more than 40 years later. "I got a phone call and went down and met them. When Frankie came in, he put some music in front of me and said, 'OK, play that.' I played the chord and he sang 'Pretty as a midsummer's morn / They call her Dawn' and I stopped. He said, 'What's the matter?' I said, 'You sound just like the radio.'"

A few days later, Shapiro, who received an offer to join the group, sought the advice of one of his professors.

"She was strictly about classical music, but I told her I had this opportunity to become one of The Four Seasons and asked her what she thought," Shapiro says. "She said, 'Lee, I don't know who The Four Seasons are, but if they're going to pay you to do orchestrations and play music, I would go.' Of course I was already leaning that way, so I went."

Shapiro did more than play the keyboards during his eight-year tenure with the band, which began in 1973. He also acted as the musical director and arranger on hits such as "Who Loves You," and "December, 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," which had Gerry Polci singing lead on the verses, and Valli doing lead vocals only on the two bridge sections.

Following the success of both the Broadway musical and film adaptation of "Jersey Boys," which chronicles the

early days of The Four Seasons, Shapiro and Polci have since reunited in a band they call The Hit Men, which plays Saturday at Lake Michigan College to open the 2015-16 Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre season.

The band also features Jimmy Ryan (The Critters, Carly Simon, Jim Croce), Larry Gates (Carole King, Janis Ian, Rick Derringer) and Russ Velazquez (Sting, Chicago).

"All of the guys have illustrious resumes of having been featured artists or performers with major groups," Shapiro says. "Jimmy Ryan was the founding member of The Critters and Carly Simon's musical director and guitarist for 21 years. I also played with Tommy James, but the whole catalyst for The Hit Men was really the success of 'Jersey Boys' since Gerry and I were two of Frankie Valli's Four Seasons."

Although both the musical and the film depict the first incarnation of the band before Shapiro and Polci joined, they also include three songs — "Who Loves You," "December, 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," and "Fallen Angel" — that Shapiro did the arrangements for and the two musicians played on.

"They blur the timeline in the name of entertainment, which people certainly do all the time, but it's just rewarding to know that these songs that I was a part of is part of that huge success," Shapiro says. "When 'Jersey Boys' came out I told Frankie what I wanted to do with this group and he was very supportive and said go do it."

Shapiro contacted the rest of the band members, some who he knew through studio work, and writing music for commercials, others, like Gates, have been lifetime friends.

"I've known Larry since we were 8 years old and in day camp together," Shapiro says. "We got together and played 'Oh What a Night' and there



Musicians Larry Gates, right, and Lee Shapiro talk inside Gates' studio, in Fair Lawn, N.J. Men, which makes a stop Saturday in Benton Harbor to open the Lake Michigan College

was kind of an eerie silence afterward. I said, 'Well, I guess we've got to do this because it sounded just like it did 33 years prior.' We started playing locally, and then did B.B. King's in New York and an agent saw us and asked us if we wanted to take it more seriously and we did. As a result, we created this tour."

Born in Passaic, N.J., and raised in Glen Rock, N.J., Shapiro was a bit of a prodigy on the piano. Although The Beatles had been his favorite band, that changed when he was 11 years old and saw The Four Seasons perform on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

"All of the groups at that time were



Julio Cortez / AP

in 2012. They, along with Gerry Polci, Jimmy Ryan and Russ Velazquez, make up The Hit Men Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre season.

very guitar-based, but Bob Gaudio, the original member of The Four Seasons was playing the keyboards on television," Shapiro says. "I was taking piano lessons, and told my mother, 'Look I could play piano like that.' I never thought that one day I would replace him in the band."

Shapiro's life since The Four Seasons has been anything but idle. In the 1980s and '90s, his gigs included playing with Tommy James and the Shondells, orchestrating Barry Manilow's Atlantic City revue, writing music for commercials, and working as music director for a cruise ship line.



IF YOU GO

What: The Hit Men

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$26-\$46

Contact: 927-1221 or lmcmainstage.org

Artist info: www.thehitmenlive.com

The Hit Men, Shapiro says, allows the band members another chance to play the music they originally helped create.

"Gerry sang lead on 'Oh What a Night,' which was The Four Seasons biggest hit ever," he says. "That in itself gives us some credibility to be something different than all the sound-a likes and tribute bands. Our show is made up of those songs we had relationships with the artists or actually recorded the songs ourselves. We were there, so we play with that authenticity, and we tell stories you only knew if you were there."

Although The Hit Men have written some original songs, Shapiro says it's music that will unlikely ever be heard outside their circle of friends.

"We consider that to be a little bit creatively self-indulgent," he says. "We love it, and we do it as a creative outlet, but people really want to hear the hits. They come to the concerts to hear the hits, so to force feed them our original ideas I don't think it would be fair. ... The product we sell is youth and time travel. We guarantee the people who come to our show will leave the show happier and younger than when they got there."

Shapiro pauses when asked to reflect on his career both then and now.

"You can be a very talented person and the planets just don't align for you to get opportunities like I got to go from The Four Seasons to Tommy James, and so on," Shapiro says. "I feel very fortunate for that, but the beautiful part about The Hit Men is that this one is ours. We don't work for anybody. We're not a part of someone else's band. This is our band and our partnership and it feels really good."

Contact: jbonfiglio@TheHP.com, 932-0364, Twitter: @HPBonfiglio