

Rocco: Sonora's funkier native son

By GARY LINEHAN
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One of the best bass guitar players in the world got his start in Sonora.

"I wasn't there long," noted Francis Rocco Prestia, a founding and current member of Tower of Power and recent recipient of Bass Player Magazine's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Born March 7, 1951, at the Columbia Way Hospital in Sonora, Prestia spent the first five years of his life in Tuolumne.

"My dad died when I was 5 and I ended up moving to the Bay Area with my mother," he recalled from his home in Las Vegas.

Though his connection to the foothills dates back decades, his Web site and Wikipedia biographies still proclaim Sonora as his hometown.

"I took my kids there about four years ago," Prestia said. "I wanted to show them where I was born. I actually remembered some things. We saw where the house used to be — the old one was gone and a new one was there."

Known throughout the music world as Rocco, Prestia was called either Frank or Butch in his younger days.

"Rocco was my dad's name," he said. "My family called me Butch. I still get some relatives calling me that. At work they called me Frank growing up."

After leaving Tuolumne County, the family lived in Oakland, Piedmont and Palo Alto before his mother remarried and settled in 1959 in Fremont, where Prestia lived until graduating from high school.

The band Tower of Power, which would soon become known around the world for its soul and funk music, evolved from a group of Fremont high school students.

"I joined the band in 1965 when I was 14 and we were going good by the time we graduated," Prestia said. "At first we were the Extension Five, then the Gotham City Crimefighters — where we dressed like Batman and Robin — then Black Orpheus, then the Motowns,



COURTESY PHOTO

FRANCIS ROCCO PRESTIA is regarded as one of the best bass players in the world.

then we changed it to Tower of Power in 1968. When we got older we eventually migrated to Oakland."

When Prestia joined the band, he was playing electric guitar, but was encouraged by drummer David Garibaldi to switch to bass. He soon developed a style that would change the way the instrument was played.

"That's where he was supposed to be," said trumpet player Mic Gillette, another original Tower of Power member who rejoined the band last August after a 25-year absence. He also appears frequently in the Columbia College Jazz Series.

Prestia is famous for his "fingerstyle funk," which incorporates muting, "ghost" notes and rapid-fire sixteenth notes, Gillette said.

"He has never, ever used a pick," he said. "His style is to deaden the notes so they're thumping. It's the touch that he has between both hands that makes it sound so funky. In his element, there is nobody, and I mean nobody, that is better at what he does."

Prestia has influenced a generation of bass players, including the late, legendary Jaco Pastorius.

"He actually told me that he used to listen to the band and I'm assuming that he stole a few things," Prestia said.

There is no bitterness there, since Prestia's own advice to beginners is to "steal and incorporate."

Prestia cites James Jamerson and the different musicians who worked for James Brown, particularly Bootsy Collins, as his main influences.

With the exception of a seven-year stretch from 1977 to 1984, Prestia has been with Tower of Power during its entire existence. However, he was incapacitated following a liver transplant in 2002.

"I had cirrhosis," Prestia said. "I did a little bit too much partying, and it will take its toll. I also had heart surgery, and now I have kidney disease because of the medication from the liver transplant, so I take my fair share of medications every day. But it's all right. As long as I'm still waking up, that's the main thing."

Upon hearing of Prestia's condition, fans and fellow musicians came together to create the Rocco Prestia Medical Fund to help with his personal and medical expenses. A Web site was launched on July 4, 2002, with people from around the world making donations.

"He had no health insurance and in six months people raised \$400,000 for him over the Internet," Gillette said. "The bass players from the David Letterman Band,

Aerosmith, people all over the world clunked down five figures to help him out. And the band kept him on salary the whole time. I think that's fantastic. It really makes me proud of those guys."

Prestia received a new liver from an anonymous donor on July 23, 2002. He was back on stage with his band in September 2002, just 60 days later.

He would subsequently undergo open heart surgery on Aug. 21, 2006.

Gillette, who has known Prestia since age 10, when both were on the same Little League team in Fremont, called Prestia "a walking contradiction."

"He's his own man, and no doubt about it," Gillette said. "He's had his own battle with vices over the years, just like a lot of musicians, but very few any more. Smoking is probably the worst of them, and you can say Mic Gillette is one of the few people who can still take a cigarette out of his mouth and break it in half, even though he'll just light another one."

Prestia had not yet even started playing guitar when he and Gillette first met.

"I was good friends with him and his brothers, Tim and Steve," Gillette said. "Their mom, Bobbie, was something. She was a ball of fire and so enthusiastic

about the band. She was a little red-haired lady, but she kept those boys in line."

Gillette joined the band in 1965 when horns were sought.

"They were still the Gotham City Crimefighters and had just stopped dressing up," he said. "Their first single was 'Who Stole the Batmobile.' It was not a big hit. A great piece of trivia is that for the first eight years of Tower of Power, Rocco's bass case said 'Robin' on it."

Last October, Prestia was presented with Bass Player magazine's Lifetime Achievement Award at a ceremony in Los Angeles.

"I said a few words. I wouldn't call it a speech," Prestia said. "It was certainly a humbling experience. What do you say to something like that? It was a little overwhelming and an honor to get it. It's nice to be honored by your peers, especially from Bass Player, which is probably the best bass magazine in the world."

Those peers have placed him in high esteem.

"Some of the best bass players in the world treat him like he's from another planet," Gillette said. "They're just blown away by what he's able to do. He's a remarkable musician."

Prestia grew into funk as the band evolved.

"When I joined, we played stuff like the Stones, Animals, things like that. We were kids. Then we got hip to soul music," he said.

Prestia released one solo album, "Everybody on the Bus," in 1999 and is starting to work on another.

"It's in the master plan," he said.

Prestia moved to Las Vegas three years ago to be closer to his son and daughter, who are now high school and college age.

Despite his long absence, Prestia's presence continues to reverberate in Sonora.

Gillette's daughter, Megan, was married last year at the Sonora Opera Hall, and Prestia was honored in spirit.

"She's the singer in my band, MGB, and we dedicated a song to him," Gillette said.