

From Milwaukee to Vegas and Back Again

Richard Eliot's long journey

BY DAVID LUHRSSEN

In a career spanning more than half a century, Milwaukee's Richard Eliot has played guitar on recordings by Elvis Presley and Perry Como, Patti Page and Harry James. He went on tour with Sammy Davis Jr. and Shirley MacLaine. And during his long residency in Las Vegas, he played behind Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, Barbra Streisand, Tom Jones and Liza Minnelli.

Nowadays, Eliot has come full circle and plays in a spot only a few miles from where it all began. Eliot performs Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 6-9 p.m., at Chez Jacques (1022 S. First St.). As a teenager in the mid-1950s, Eliot began his career playing the jazz clubs of Cudahy.

The jazz clubs of Cudahy? "There were a couple of them," Eliot says in a voice as soft-spoken as the music he plays from his corner at Jacques. "Milwaukee was a wonderful jazz town. A lot of great players came from here. Now it's a dying art—it's like chamber music."

Richard and his brother Don, who often plays bass with him at Jacques, came from a family where music was encouraged. "We played every night at home," Eliot recalls. "My father had a library of classical and ethnic recordings. He gave me the family car when I was 17 on nights when I played."

And Eliot played often, performing at the Roof Ballroom, on a Saturday radio

show and on live TV every Thursday. Drafted in 1959, he did his service in a military band and returned to play the still-flourishing jazz scene of Milwaukee at clubs such as Tunnel Inn, Gallaghers and the Elbow Room. He gigged with most of the leading local jazz musicians of the day, including Nick Contino and Skip Wagner.

His big break came with an opportunity to play regularly in Vegas. "I left Milwaukee in November 1963, the day Kennedy was assassinated," he says. "I was blessed to work in the major hotels—Caesars Palace seven nights a week, the Stardust, the Riviera, the International at the time Elvis made his comeback."

In the golden years of Las Vegas, a singer sometimes would be booked for a month at a time and the venue's house band had to learn all the material. Sometimes recording sessions commenced early in the morning following the last live set. "I did a session like that with Louis Armstrong, but it was never released," Eliot recalls. "Louis walked out after the

A&R man tried to tell him how to sing. Nobody told Louis how to sing!"

Vegas went sour in the '80s when the casinos replaced live bands with canned music or dumped music altogether. Eliot returned to Milwaukee in 1996 as a caregiver for his mother and has kept busy in his hometown playing guest spots with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and touring Broadway shows. Jacques has given him an opportunity to perform the songs he loves in arrangements that suit his mood. He sings "Autumn Leaves" with eyes half-



Richard Eliot

closed, strumming a run of minor chords on his electric guitar on a melody that circles and descends like russet-colored leaves. Midway through, Eliot runs his fingers through the melody to find treasures hidden among the notes. His repertoire is vast and he takes requests from the audience.

"I want the music to lift people up at a difficult time in history," Eliot says. "If I can take people on a musical excursion for two hours, I'm happy."