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The beat goes on for Jack Costanzo.

Born and raised in Chicago, Costanzo has been playing bongos for a long time. In a career that spans 40 years, he has played bongos with Elvis Presley, Jerry Lewis and Nat King Cole. He taught Marlon Brando how to perfect his bongo playing. Brando was dabbling with bongos before he met Costanzo.

Costanzo has brought his bongos to the legendary Tropicana nightclub in Havana, and a Mr. Bongo record store just opened in his honor in London. Once or twice a year Costanzo comes home from his San Diego digs to get down at the Flame of Countryside in southwest suburban Chicago.

"Mr. Bongo" will be scorching the skins at the Flame - with no cover charge. Costanzo fronts an entourage that includes brother Marty as emcee, nephew Jaimie on congos with vocal stylings provided by the incomparable Mike Milo and Loni Green. The Johnny Gabor Trio is the backing band.

Late jazz critic Leonard Feather dubbed Costanzo "Mr. Bongo" when Costanzo was with the Stan Kenton Jazz Orchestra, contributing to tropical tunes like "Peanut Vendor" and "Bongo Riff."

"Kenton was known for going in town ahead of the band," Costanzo said. "He'd appear on radio talk shows and go on and on, but he always sounded so sincere. Leonard came up to me on a platform in Philadelphia while we were waiting for a train. He said, 'So, Mr. Bongo, is Stan sincere about his sincerity?' It was a great joke for a long time."

Well, Costanzo is sincere about his bongos.

He encountered the beat at age 13 when a Puerto Rican group came through the Irving Park-Albany area of Chicago where he lived. "I had to play the bongos," he said. "So I got some buttercups. In those days, butter was not in 1-pound packages, it came in big wooden tubs. I cut the empty tubs down and made a pair of bongos. I used heads from regular bass drums. And I taught myself to play."



Costanzo was a rhumba dancer before becoming a full-time musician and incorporated bongos into his "Costanzo & Marda" dance act. He broke off to play with Kenton from 1947-49. Nat King Cole saw him in 1949 and flew Mr. Bongo to Chicago for a show at the defunct Blue Note nightclub in the Loop.

"He liked the way I sounded," he said. "I didn't do much bongos; it was mostly conga drums. I didn't know it was an audition gig. We never discussed how I should play. He took it for granted I would know what to do." Cole even changed his billing from "The Cole Trio" to "The Nat King Cole Trio, featuring Jack Costanzo." They appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" five times. Costanzo stayed with Cole until 1953.

The key to being a good bongo player is not in wrists or fast hands, according to Costanzo. It's the ability to lay back. "Enhance the rhythm section you're playing with," he said. "Don't see how many beats you know,

but how you can help it swing. That's where I pride myself. I love a beat. I could play a solo for five days but I'd much rather fit into a band and just let it cook."

That's what Costanzo told Marlon Brando when the actor was asked to appear on Edward R. Murrow's television show prior to winning a 1954 Oscar for "On the Waterfront." Costanzo recalled, "Marlon met me backstage after a Nat King Cole concert in Carnegie Hall. We used to jam at Marlon's house, which is why he brought me on as his guest. So we jammed on the show." Costanzo also has had musical roles in Jerry Lewis' 1956 film "The Delicate Delinquent" (sans Dean Martin) and "Harum Scarum" (1965) with Elvis Presley. Costanzo said he didn't get to know the King well, although Presley did show him some karate moves.

Did Presley call him Mr. Bongo?

"He called me Mr. Costanzo," he said. "And, it was 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir.' He was so polite."

Despite the celebrity resume, Costanzo's recordings like "Mr. Bongo Plays Hi-Fi Cha Cha" are available only as imports. The Cha Cha collection is a big seller at Mr. Bongo in London. And the ferocious bongo solo "Bongo Festeres" from the previously released Mr. Bongo Afro Cuban" album (Crescendo Records) has cracked the Top 10 in Sydney, Australia.

"I don't know what's going on," said Costanzo, in soft, innocent tones. "Do you think it could be an underground cult thing? All of a sudden there's this electricity going on that I don't understand."

*Jack Costanzo died on Aug. 18, 2018 of a ruptured abdominal aortic aneurysm in Lakeside, Calif. He was 98 years old.*