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LAS VEGAS--- My eyes have seen the glory of gleeby rhythm.

Sam Butera was the arranger and sax player for Louis Prima, an unknown soldier who helped give birth to rock 'n' roll by mixing jumping Brylcreem jazz with tweed-suit soul .

Prima and Butera collaborated on nuggets such as "Just a Gigolo/Ain't Got Nobody," "Jump Jive an' Wail," and "You Rascal You." Prima formed his first band in 1940, lovingly called Louis Prima and His Gleeby Rhythm Orchestra. Of course, their first song was "Gleeby Rhythm Is Born," which preached high-jive lyrics such as, "The gleebs are rompin', the gleebs are stompin', oh, gleeby rhythm is born."

Louis Prima died in 1978 in a nursing home in his native New Orleans.

Sam Butera keeps going in the name of gleeby rhythm.

When Sam Butera and the Wildest perform in the Atrium Lounge at the Tropicana Hotel on the south side of the strip, their show spirals into a whirl of wild rock and innocent shlock. They cover much of the Prima material with Butera straining to sing in gruff style of his mentor. Other selections include a Shakespearian reading of "Just the Way You Are" and "When the Saints Go Marching In," a set closer where Butera and the Wildest parade through the lounge in second-line style.

Butera fronts his five-piece band wearing a midnight black jacket accented by a big white shirt collar and matching creased white slacks. In a cleverly cool complement, the Wildest are wearing white jackets accented by big midnight black shirt collars.

Butera's stage banter is equally brilliant. He snaps fingers, he struts his stuff, he sweats; he shouts. He introduces celebrities who have dropped in for the late set.

Bob Flanagan of the Four Freshmen was in the audience.

At the end of each set, Butera sells records and tapes from the stage while reminding the early morning gathering, "It's nice to be important, but it's important to be nice." Before he heads to his first-floor hotel room to take a pause for the cause (there is no dressing room at the Tropicana lounge), he presses the flesh with fans sitting around the bar.

Butera's sharkskin shuffle backed by a chorus of casino coin recalls creates Edsel-era images: when fallout shelters were bigger than tax shelters, when Kerouac successfully caught the dream while politicians successfully caught the

skirt.

Louis Prima and Sam Butera migrated to Vegas in the mid-'50s, when they quickly became the toast of the town. In a 1985 interview, Wayne Newton told me, "Louis Prima was the premiere lounge act when I was a loungist here. I remember appearing at a lounge in Lake Tahoe when I was 17, and Louis Prima and Keely Smith (Prima's vocalist and fourth wife from 1948 until their divorce in 1961) were across the street at Harrah's. I used to sneak in to watch their midnight shows. I found their act humorous and enlightening at the same time." Newton often sings a loyal cover of "Just A Gigolo/I Ain't Got Nobody" in his own sets.

How did Vegas swing in the '50s and '60s?

"Oh, man," said Butera, chortling during a conversation in his hotel room between sets. "Everybody came into the place. We first played the Casbar Theater at the Sahara Hotel. That was the name of the lounge. Frank Sinatra would come up and sing. Johnny Carson would sit in on drums. Danny Thomas would come up and sing. Vic Damone would come by. Howard Hughes came in once - not often - just one time. He was wearing a dirty brown suit, a white dress shirt with black around the collar, no tie and dirty sneakers." (In 1955, Hughes endorsed Prima and Smith in a Variety ad, where he said, "The more I see them, the more I enjoy them.")

"Everybody loved the show because it was fun," Butera said. "We'd clown around, but it was always good music."

Butera stopped and looked around the smoke-filled hotel room.

"I'll give you an example of how wild it was," he said with a devilish grin. "One night Sammy Davis comes running in, 'Sam, stop the show, I've got a song for Louis!' I go, 'What is it, Sam? What song you comin' from?' He said, 'Chantilly Lace.' So we broke into it. That's the way it went. Carefree - one big riff." (Butera and Davis later collaborated on a little-known jazz-rock album "Sam Meets Sam.")

"And Sinatra adored Louis. Louis had a flair for alligator shoes. He got hip. He used to have a lavender suit, so he had lavender alligator shoes made. That was his thing. So one night he had a white suit on with white alligator shoes. And Frank was there.

"Well, Frank was pretty loose - he had had a few tastes," Butera said with a laugh. "He got up on the stage, and he was gonna sing, 'I Got You Under My Skin.' Louis didn't see the drink in his hand. Frank poured the drink all over Louis's white shoes. Louis wasn't upset. At least he didn't show he was upset."

Sometimes the threads spun the story.

"Wild," Butera said with a laugh. "Just plain wild. One time Louis brought me this

wild zebra sportcoat with matching black pants. He also had black and white calfskin shoes with the hair on it. It was the wildest thing you ever saw in your life. And Louis loved horses. Remember big wide neckties? Louis used to paint horses on those neckties. He had more of those god- - - ties."

As for the most dramatic changes in Vegas, Butera singled out the influx of corporations. Vegas musical mainstays think the corporations view entertainment as a necessary evil. Newton - who has played Vegas since 1959 - told me, "With the corporate setup, you're always subject to having the number of stage hands cut or the number of band members cut, because the first place they want to cut is entertainment. They don't understand it, and if they could do without it, they certainly would."

Butera is more succinct. "They've cut the lounges out in most the places, and that's what people enjoyed more than the main shows. You'd see youngsters that you'd never heard of doing their thing. Like, here at the Trop, they brought us back. There's a couple of others that are going back that way."

Before the Tropicana, Butera played the lounge at the Barbary Coast. And before that, the Frontier. And before that, the Four Queens.

And before that, God created Louis Prima.

Butera met Prima in the early '50s when Sam played with Louis's brother at the (still-standing) 500 Club on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. "Louis came into the joint one night and heard me play. At that time things weren't going too well for him. He said if he got something happening, he'd call me. And sure enough, six months later, he called and said, 'Boy, we're in Las Vegas, and it's happening. Bring your (three-piece) rhythm section, and you and we can get it going.' I started jobbing here on Dec. 26, 1954. That's also when I started writing all his arrangements."

Butera said Prima would create the shuffle for the song, while Butera wrote the arrangement by anchoring the shuffle beat. "He'd show me the style of the groove he wanted, and I'd always write with that in mind," he said.

Nothing was safe from Butera and Prima. They even set hip rhythms to Prima's gleeby reading of the Robin Hood fairy tale. "Awh, all I did was update the chart," Butera said. "It's still Robin Hood, man."

Like Prima, Butera grew up in New Orleans, but wasn't overly influenced by the rich Crescent City music heritage. "When I started coming up as a kid, I first started playing Dixieland music, but when I got into a hipper vein, I started playing bebop," he said. "Then when rock 'n' roll came out with the honkin' jazz tenor (saxophone), everybody was diggin' tenor sax. So I went to that style and cultivated that kind of music with bebop and jazz. I tried to combine the three of them together. It stayed that way when I joined Louis - a hard-charging type of saxophone sound." That is

the closest reference to a working definition of gleeby rhythm.

Butera has fond memories of Prima, who he said could turn an audience on unlike anyone else he has met. "It was timing, the way he sang and his mind worked in such a creative way," he said. "He played good horn in his own style. A lot of people thought he couldn't play, but I thought he could play. All that was secondary. He was a premiere entertainer. And he must have been if all these guys came in, looked at him and laughed their asses off.

"When he got sick (with a brain tumor), it was a shame," Butera said with a sigh. "He didn't know how bad off he was. We were working here at the Tropicana. He used to take five or six Tylenols before the show because of his headaches. He got to the point where he couldn't reach any high notes. He thought he was cold and getting laryngitis. But it was the tumor in his brain that was pushing down on his vocal chords. He'd say, 'Sam, you have to bring these arrangements down and bring the keys down so I can make it.' "

And for a short while, the arrangements were restrained.

But gleeby rhythm always rises with the devotion of the desert sun.