A key figure: Lehigh Valley remembers jazz piano man Dave Roper

By Craig Larimer
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Dave Roper, unassuming and formal in person, could instantly quiet a room when he sat behind a piano and started playing jazz classics, especially his signature version of “Rhapsody in Blue.”

The Lehigh Valley music favorite and esteemed educator continues to be mourned and remembered by friends, audiences and students he warmly welcomed over a 60-year career.

Roper died April 8 in Bethlehem following lingering health issues. He was 82.

He was one of the region's best-loved musicians. The sharp-witted, understated and personable entertainer built an impressive following — attributable to a 15-year stint at Dorneyville's King George Inn from 1972 to 1987.

Roper played every Friday and Saturday night during that stretch. No one can recall him missing a show.

“You get a gig with me ... it’s pretty long term,” Roper once noted with a wry smile.

He started playing professionally as a solo act at venues in the Easton area during his senior year at Lafayette College. Roper earned degrees in government, English and education from Lafayette and Lehigh University.

Following a stint with the Buddy Harrison Trio, Roper formed his own group in 1961 and performed at the Cellar Door cocktail lounge in Allentown until 1965.

He continued playing throughout the Valley at lounges including Easton’s Intrigue and Bethlehem's Intimate. Then came his extraordinary run at the King George.
Through years playing together in the early '70s, Roper, Nick Diehm (drums) and Charlie Siegfried (bass) developed a comfy relationship resulting in a natural blend of sound.

On a typical weekend evening of music at the time, Roper’s trio delivered crowd favorites like “But Beautiful,” “Satin Doll,” “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” “Send in the Clowns” and his signature encore, Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.”

The Yorkshire Room at the King George was better known as “The Roper Room” or “Dave’s Room.” For 15 years, the cozy space was home for the trio’s musicianship, improvisation and playfulness.

Diehm, a former Saucon Valley High School teacher, baseball and soccer coach, remembers his first encounter with Roper’s music. “I was really impressed. Oh my god, I thought, ‘Boy, someday I would love to be a part of that trio.’ They played everything I like, and all the tunes I was familiar with playing.

“As time went on, the band’s drummer (Joe Conahan) was having some health issues. Dave asked me if I’d like to sit in. Then when Joe decided to retire, Dave called me and said, ‘Well, the job’s yours if you want to come aboard.’ And that was how things started for me.

“I was with Dave for 33 years. It got to the point where I would know what Dave was going to do on stage before he did it. He always told me that,” Diehm recalls. “He wasn’t big on conversation but he talked and loved sports. And like any successful sports team, good chemistry is what you need when you play music together. We had that. I liked to complement what he was doing.

“The trick was, it was fun! I enjoyed the anticipation of every time I was going to play with him. The same way as when I’m coaching or playing sports. I enjoyed being on the field and on the bandstand with Dave.”

The Dave Roper Trio, with only a few lineup changes on drums and bass, proceeded to play around the area for decades — most recently at Hotel Bethlehem, Kirkland Village, occasional Christmas functions and weddings and a dozen special engagements as part of the Jazz Upstairs Series at Miller Symphony Hall in Allentown.

“He had such appeal,” notes Ethel Drayton-Craig, Jazz Upstairs Committee Chair and Allentown Symphony Association board member. “He was low-key and quiet but had such humor. He would play and set up the next song with a tongue-in-cheek turn of phrase, and the whole room would be laughing.

“Plus, he reached such a wide range of people — not just older people. Sure, people had nostalgia for some songs, but he attracted a younger crowd too — music students, jazz fans. And it would be captivating. You could hear a pin drop when he played at our Jazz Upstairs shows.”

Roper’s most recent bass player in the trio was Paul Rostock, a freelance musician who has toured with Frank Sinatra Jr.’s band and currently teaches music at Moravian College. Rostock fondly looks back on his first gig with Roper.

“Dave called me ... and I didn’t really know him that well. It was right around New Year’s and it fell on a weekend. He said there was a birthday party — these were King George people — at Morton’s Steakhouse in Philadelphia. He said they invited him to play and wondered if I was interested. I was really skeptical because I didn’t really know Dave that well. I’m thinking, ‘Ooooh, I’ve gotta drive to Philly and blah, blah, blah?’
"And Dave was all business and formal-like, you know? Like an English teacher? He said, 'Well, Paul ... before you turn me down ... you should know that the venue will be providing valet service for the car and will serve us a nice dinner ..."

“So I drive to Bethlehem to pick up Nick Diehm and we travel down to center city Philly. Sure enough, the wait staff comes out and unloads the car. It was this really nice dinner and the people could not be more surprised to see me because they were used to seeing (former bass player) Charlie Siegfried. So Dave had to explain me, this bearded guy, who showed up. And at the end of it, the host tipped us this huge, generous — I mean, beyond generous — tip.

"I'll never forget Dave's face when he handed me the check. He's just like, 'Oh, here's the tip ... and the gas money.' Nick and I drove back to Bethlehem and we were just like, 'Wow! We made this much money?''"

Drummer Gary Rissmiller — a music teacher at Muhlenberg College who played with Roper for the last few years — remembers how he got his start with the trio. “Dave was actually a substitute teacher of mine in junior high school. And I used to give him such a hard time (laughs). Years later, we used to go to the King George, and Dave and Nick (Diehm) would let me sit in on drums.

“Then years later, Dave calls me up and says, ‘Believe it or not, I had a dream last night about a new band with you on drums and Paul (Rostock) on bass.’

“So this gig comes up at Moravian College and it's me on drums and Paul on bass. We played and Dave loved it so much that he started using us as regulars. And I said to him, ‘Do you remember me from junior high? And you still want to hire me?’ Haha. Then we played together for the better part of 10 years.”

Judith Harris, an Allentown attorney and Allentown Symphony Association board member, replays her earliest acquaintances with Roper.

“Growing up on Allentown's west side, my parents loved taking us to the King George. They loved hearing Dave Roper and his trio. I was a William Allen High School graduate and I had the privilege of being on our Scholastic Scrimmage team. Dave was Emmaus High School's Scholastic Scrimmage coach. He was a very well-loved English teacher. He has a huge, huge fan base among his former students.”

Harris reflects on Roper's presence at the King George Inn. “I remember being overwhelmed in this small room by the incredible quality of music. Dave's a very witty guy and so literate. Hearing him introduce their numbers was as delightful as hearing the performance itself. Wow!

“One of the biggest joys of my life was that ... Dave knew I loved when he played ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’ And every time I sponsored a concert in the Rodale Room at Symphony Hall, he would play the Gershwin classic. And his last time playing there, he dedicated it to me. I will never forget that.”
“He had such smart and clever things to say. Just seeing the interaction with his trio ... in later days with Paul (Rostock) and Gary (Rissmiller) and the way he assembled his melange of works ... He could just kind of make things flow.

"He was hip. He was classical. He was everything in between. He could play anything. And that's what was so amazing about him."

Editor's note: Roper is survived by his wife Barbara, of Bethlehem; brother-in-law, Lloyd Wright; niece, Lisa King. The family requests that you show your support by planting a tree in memory of Dave.

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