

The Day Liberace Played Baraboo

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Imagine, just for this article, that it is May, 1940. No World War II yet, the Depression is fading into memory, and you are having the following conversation:

“Honey, that concert is at the High School tonight”.

“What concert?”

“Some piano player from Milwaukee. Walter, uh, Lie-bear- achooie. Also some violinist. The Civic Concert Club is putting it on. They want 75 cents/”

“I never heard of him. Why can’t they get somebody like Eddie Duchin on the piano?”

“Can’t afford to. The high school assembly only seats about 200, and this guy's not famous enough to play the Al Ringling. What do you think?”

“ Jack Benny’s on the radio, lets stay home and save the money.”

Liberace in Baraboo

Well, there is a reason we made up this likely conversation, as will become evident in the article. The fact is, we now learn, that the soon-to-be-famous Liberace did indeed perform in Baraboo on May 10, 1940. Carol Hultstrom not only attended, but remembers it well and has a program and other items about the evening. No one knew that this aspiring pianist from Milwaukee, only recently out of high school, would soon be the toast of the entertainment world.

Carol remembers the concert with favor, and remarked in a letter to a friend, that Liberace was “painfully shy”, hard to believe for those who recall him strutting on Television and in Las Vegas later on. . In 1940 stage theatre had perhaps reached a new low in Baraboo, after the giddy Broadway shows presented by the Al Ringling Theatre in the twenties and thirties. The movies now presented fabulous extravaganzas, and attracted larger audiences—most people forgot about the magic of live theatre.

Live stage was not dead, however, and a small group had formed the Baraboo Civic Concert Club. The 1940 season was so successful that the Liberace appearance was added as a bonus at the end of the season, free to members. It was stated that “this young artist was “grateful to Baraboo for including him on the program, thus giving him an opportunity to perform in concert.” If you remember his outrageous costumes in later years, Carol notes that he appeared that night in a navy blue business suit, white shirt and tie. I wonder if he ever remembered Baraboo.

The Tiny School Auditorium

As was noted above, he appeared not in the palatial Ringling Theatre, which would have suited his later style, but in the high school auditorium, This space, which had only about 200 hard wooden seats, is now occupied by the boys and girls club, in what is now the Civic Center. The seats are gone. It is hard to believe that the school

Baraboo
Civic Concert Club

Presents

George Szpinalski, Violinist
with Accompanist

and

Walter Liberace, Pianist

(Management—Ty Tyson Concert Service)

in a

Joint Concert

High School Auditorium

Friday, May 10, 1940

PROGRAM

I

Sonata—Op. 31, No. 2..... Beethoven
Allegro
Allegretto
Adagio
Valse—A Flat Major Op. 42 Chopin
Mr. Liberace

II

Melody Gluck-Kreisler
Rondo Mozart-Kreisler
Mr. Szpinalski

III

Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor..... Brahms
Waldersrauschen (Forest Murmurs) Liszt
Etude—C Sharp Minor—Op. 10, No. 4..... Chopin
Mr. Liberace

IV

Nana De Falla
Spanish Dance Granados-Kreisler
Longing..... Granados-Prager
Mr. Szpinalski

V

Prelude—E Minor..... MacDowell
Chant D'Amour (Love Song)..... Stojowski
Toccata—C Sharp Minor Florence Bettray Kelly
Mr. Liberace

VI

From the Homeland..... Smetana
Czardosz Mont
Mr. Szpinalski

Season
1939-40

**THE
MORE
MEMBERS
THE
MORE AND
BETTER
ATTRACTIONS**

**BRING
THE BEST
TO
BARABOO**

had a suitable piano—perhaps it was even an upright model that Liberace played!

So why did we introduce this article with an imaginary conversation in 1940? We wanted to call attention to the performers offered now in Baraboo. As can be seen, the marquee of the Ringling this week is crowded with three performances. In addition, the Theatre Guild is opening its dinner theatre play, *Everyone Loves Opal*, for a two week run. Will one or more of these entertainers reach the heights of entertainment as did Liberace? Will you have been there?

Will a future historian discover that another artist played in Baraboo as an unknown aspirant to success and fame?? And will you and your spouse or friend decide to sit at home and watch some forgettable show on television? Baraboo has remarkably interesting cultural presentations--check out frequent appearances at the Library, the Historical Society, the Cabin Fever Series, Boo-U, the Booksmith, and others I have failed to mention. Baraboo folks saw Liberace for 75 cents, and within a couple years people were paying hundreds for good seats. .

Allan Paschen

There's more to the Liberace story. As reported in a 1987 feature story in this newspaper, the Liberace family were friends and neighbors to the Paschen family in Milwaukee, and are well remembered by Allan Paschen as a youth. Though Wladzui (Walter) Liberace was a few years older, Allan was a visitor in the Liberace home. That family operated an ice cream shop across the street from the office of Dr. Paschen, Allan's father.

Allan recalls that Liberace, known then as Lee, was big and tall for his age, but did not dress peculiarly, though he did later as a performer. He played gratis for neighborhood groups, utilizing both classical and modern tunes. Our current entertainers at the Ringling, the Farm Kitchen Dinner Theatre, and other venues may or may not make it big. They are good at what they do, and Baraboo is fortunate to offer such good alternatives to the wasteland called TV.