

**Van Cliburn, other
 Celebrity's played
 Baraboo
 Tales of Earlier Days
 By Bob Dewel**

Regular readers will recall our recent revelation that Liberace, the famous eccentric and well-paid pianist of the mid-twentieth century, once performed in Baraboo. Soon he became rich and famous.

Well. It's happened again. Now we have confirmation that Van Cliburn, the pianist famous for his Moscow appearance during the height of the cold war, also played Baraboo in a somewhat different venue. I also learned that Barbara Mandrell is reported to have appeared at the County Fair.

Templeton and Liebert

With our appetite for celebrities whetted, we sought out Mary Farrell Stieve at the venerable Sauk County Historical Society. To our amazement, Mary produced a folder of some twenty-five programs featuring artists who appeared here from the 1930's to the 1960's. I was surprised to find celebrities such as Alex Templeton the gifted but totally blind pianist of the pre-war years. He was becoming nationally famous at the time.

Another amazing find was the Dick Liebert, the organist at Radio City Music Hall. He played in the Ringling Theatre, in 1937. I paid good money to hear him that very summer in New York at Radio City, no doubt playing some of the same tunes he played here. These included popular tunes such as Begin the Beguine by Cole Porter, Three Gershwin tunes, and three from Showboat by Jerome Kern.

Why was Baraboo favored over the years by such talented and soon-to-be famous entertainers? Much credit, of

course, goes to our good fortune of having such an outstanding facility as the Al. Ringling Theatre, "America's Pretties Playhouse".

Mentioned in its early years as "The envy of Broadway", Al's gift to the city hosted such early stage heavyweights as Lionel Barrymore, Fiske O'hare, and others who once were famous but are nearly forgotten now. Fame is fleeting in the entertainment business. You also need a core of local aficionados of the world of entertainment, and Baraboo always seems to have had such citizens.

Liberace and Mandrell

Not all credit goes to the theatre. Liberace appeared in the small assembly room of the old high school, now the location of the Boys and Girls Club in the Civic Center. It is possible that he, who was soon to become famous, played on an upright piano, hardly commensurate with his talent.

Barbara Mandrell appeared on a miserable night at the fairgrounds in the mid-sixties following a downpour. Judge James Karch tells me that the infield and track were so flooded that Barbara's father carried her across the water to the grandstand. She sang before about 15 persons, according to Karch, and probably has poor memories, if any, of her Baraboo appearance.

Van Cliburn

With regard to Van Cliburn, his Baraboo appearance was in the spring of 1956. In less than two years he brought down the house in Moscow during the height of the Cold War. Like the Liberace show in about 1940, the Baraboo appearance is well remembered by Carol Hultstrom, a local pianist and piano teacher, as well as by Judge Karch. The sponsor of all of these events was the Baraboo Civic Concert Club, which rented the theatre for the occasion. We suspect that the memorable butterfly curtain was still intact, and perhaps was used as a backdrop.

In question, however, was what piano was used. The theatre has for years, if not for all of its existence, had one or two baby grand pianos, but when a pianist of note is featured today, a full grand piano is rented from a Madison music store. Was this done for Cliburn, the soon-to-be internationally famous young pianist, or did he play on the less prestigious stage piano? It does appear that Templeton brought his own Steinway.

A Texan, young Cliburn was born on July 21, 1934. He began playing at age three, and his Mother was his teacher until he was 17, when he studied at the Juliar School of music. That triumphant appearance in Moscow in 1958 broke the ice in US-Soviet relations!

Significance and Opportunity

So, why do we devote another article to piano or organ players who later became famous? The point is that it may be our good fortune to see and hear now, in Baraboo, at paltry prices, new young artists that in the future may soon command hundreds or thousands for a performance in a world class venue. Such was the case for Liberace and Cliburn and Mandrell. Templeton and Liebert also. Our community and theatre have a rich history of relationship with the arts in their many forms.

Moreover, we don't have to wait until they are famous. Perhaps the Spanish brass, showing recently, will achieve fame. Will "Gilligan's Island", with songs written by Paul McCartney's lead guitarist, make the front page of Billboard? That show appears here this Saturday night, March 14th.

Will Johnny Cash's stepdaughter, Carlene Carter, who appears March 28, achieve fame and a write-up by a future News-Republic columnist? It seems we in the Baraboo area could have the privilege of seeing soon-to-be famous artists now while the prices are low!