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CONCERTS



Clint Datchuk/Contributor

Now retired but still a rock fan, legendary music promoter Jack Orbin relaxes at home last week. With two friends, he formed Stone City Attractions.

Orbin's greatest hits

Promoter recalls rocking S.A., bringing in the greats before they were stars

By Richard A. Marini STAFF WRITER

One of the scariest phone calls Jack Orbin ever received came in 1982, when Sharon Arden, Ozzy Osbourne's manager and nowwife, called with distressing news. Black Sabbath's lead singer and the self-proclaimed "Prince of Darkness" had been arrested for public intoxication after being caught urinating on the Alamo Cenotaph.

'He was an alcoholic, and he just had to go to the bathroom," recalled Orbin, at the time president of the San Antonio-based concert promotion company Stone City Attractions. "Sharon said we needed to get him out of jail because he had to play a soldout HemisFair Arena show that night."



Orbin gets a lift from the Van Halen brothers in 1979 after the band sold out its first Texas arena.

While Orbin put up Osbourne's \$40 bail, he never got the satisfaction of yelling at the guy.

"When you deal with rock stars you have to put up with these sorts of things all the time," said Orbin, who, by booking acts from AC/DC to ZZ Top, helped make San Antonio, for a time, the heavy metal capital of the United States. "Ozzy thought the whole thing was hysterical. Sharon didn't because she's a businesswoman."

The desecration of the Alamo, combined with the near-riot that broke out during the evening's concert, resulted in Osbourne being barred from performing in San Antonio for 10 years, a prohibition lifted only after he wrote a \$10,000 check to the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, at the time the caretakers of the Alamo.

Promoter continues on E5

Jazz pianist's shape-shifting style to challenge competition finalists

By Deborah Martin STAFF WRITER

Aaron Prado strives to balance his work as a composer and a jazz

pianist, but that can be tricky. "When I'm composing, it takes so much time, effort and concentration that it's hard to do the same kinds of things that I would do if I was just trying to make myself a better piano player, like sit and work on technique or do

transcription or play Bach for two

hours," said Prado, 44. "You don't

have time to do the whole thing.

"So I came out of my composition period and I went to go play a gig, and I was like, 'My hands don't work anymore!' I had been playing a lot, but it's a different kind of thing."

Prado spent a lot of time last year focused on "El Colibri y la Cempasúchil," a new work commissioned by Musical Bridges Around the World for the Gurwitz International Piano Competition. The piece will be played by the finalists in the third round of the competition, which takes place today through Feb. 4.

"It's nice to be asked to write things for other people to play," Prado said. "It feels like a big deal."

Pianists from around the world vie to take part in the competition, which was founded in 1983. This year, 76 applied, a field that the jury winnowed down to 12. That lineup will be further trimmed over the course of four rounds, with three finalists ultimately competing for gold, silver and bronze medals.

The addition of a commis-Prado continues on E5



Jessica Phelps/Staff photographer

Jazz musician and composer Aaron Prado was commissioned to compose a piece for the Gurwitz International Piano Competition.



PROMOTER

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It was Orbin's commitment to rock 'n' roll and to artists such as Osbourne that has made him a legendary figure in the history of San Antonio music.

'Jack was a great promoter because he loved the music, he loved the bands and because he thought it was fun," said Adam Lind, manager of Trans-Siberian Orchestra, whose concerts Orbin has been promoting for almost 25 years. "He was one of the few people who 'got' TSO from the very beginning. I wanted him to continue promoting us even after he closed Stone City in 2015 because I didn't want to lose his passion for the music.'

Music and meditation

Orbin was 9 years old and living in Michigan's upper peninsula in 1956 when his father, an Army captain, developed colon cancer. The family moved to San Antonio so he could be treated at Brooke Army Medical Center, but he eventually succumbed to the disease. When Orbin's mother couldn't afford the move back to Michigan, they decided to stay.

'She raised me, my older brother and my younger sister here in San Antonio," said Orbin while sitting in his office in the North Side home he shares with his second wife, Christine, and their grandson Connor, 12, whom they adopted in 2015.

A former Army brat, Orbin joined the ROTC while at the University of Texas at Austin. But as the Vietnam War raged and what he calls his "hippie tendencies" began to emerge Orbin found himself increasingly at odds with the military organization, eventually telling his commanding officer he wanted to quit.

"When he refused, I told him I was going to go to an anti-war protest in my uniform," said Orbin, now 76. "He said, 'OK, you're out."

After the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., however, Orbin turned his back on politics and began following his interest in

music instead. He'd been listening to rock 'n' roll most of his life, appearing on "Swingtime," San Antonio's answer to "American Bandstand," and dabbling in booking bands for fraternity parties while at UT. As big a music fan as he was, however, he was never a performer or had the

urge to play in a band. After graduating in 1970, he and some friends rented cabins in the Colorado mountains, where he grew his hair long and sold hand-dipped candles he and his girlfriend made. With help from a guru he learned to meditate and search for enlightenment. Still, he continued listening to music.

"The cabins didn't have running water, but they did have



Together, Jack Orbin, left, and promoter Bill Graham brought the Rolling Stones to the Cotton Bowl in 1981.

electricity," he said. "So I could play my albums."

He also had an open-door policy, letting anyone who wanted to stay in his cabin. Guests included the likes of Jerry Corbetta from Sugarloaf ("Green-Eyed Lady") and Tommy Bolin of Deep Purple.

In 1972, however, he returned from a trip to find the cabin burned down and just about everything he owned destroyed, including his record collection.

With \$500 in his pocket, he returned to San Antonio, where he and two high school friends, Carl Schwartz and Greg Wilson, began promoting concerts, with the proceeds going to antiwar groups such as the War Resisters League and local food banks.

Working the market

Eventually, they formed Stone City Attractions, named not for any illicit drug use but instead for the large boulders that line the road between Bailey and Boulder in Colorado. They specializing in promoting smaller groups just getting started.

At the time, San Antonio was one of only a few cities that had radio stations such as KISS-FM and KMAC-AM willing to play what came to be known as heavy metal music. Orbin had a good relationship with the sta-

"He'd pick up on all the bands we were playing," said San Antonio radio veteran Tom "T-Bone" Scheppke. "He got a lot of up-and-coming bands to come to San Antonio. He really knew how to work the market.'

Some of the biggest bands Orbin helped break in were Rush and AC/DC in the 1970s and Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe in the '80s, according to Scheppke, who hosts "T-Bone's Prime Cuts" and plays classic rock on Saturdays on KSYM-

Orbin often had to play the long game, however, convincing acts that had a following in San Antonio to also play cities such as Dallas, Houston, Austin or Oklahoma City, where they weren't as well known.

'Someone like Ronnie James Dio would do 4,000 to 6,000 people here but only 400 elsewhere," he said. "But the San Antonio shows helped build their audiences in those other

Orbin also booked smaller



Photos courtesy Jack Orbin

Orbin and Carlos Santana display a proclamation designating Carlos Santana Day after the guitarist donated \$50,000 to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

acts into clubs first so that as they became more popular, they might play larger venues, such as the Municipal Auditorium and HemisFair Arena down the road.

That's exactly what happened in 1981 when he booked a thenunknown band from Ireland into clubs in Houston and Dallas. U2's first-ever Texas shows were so historic, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame asked Orbin for the contracts so they could be added to the archives.

But perhaps his most successful strategy was in combining well-known headliners with lesser-knowns.

In 1977, for example he put together a show headlined by REO Speedwagon with Judas Priest as the support act and Journey as the opener.

"A year later we were headlining Journey," he said.

Not everything worked, of course. In 1973 he combined Terry Reed, Tracy Nelson, Michael Quatro and Jay Boy Adams on the same bill not because they were overly successful but because they were all favorites of his.

The lineup drew 700 when we needed 2,000," he said. "I almost lost it all on that show."

After Rod Stewart played the Freeman Coliseum in 1977, he complained that the lingering smell of the recently departed rodeo was so bad he'd never let Orbin book him again. Apparently a forgiving sort, Stewart returned to San Antonio in 1984 for a Stone City Attractions snow.

Orbin also took a leading role in the fight against rock music censorship back in the 1980s, debating then-Mayor Henry Cisneros on NBC's "Today," and getting Gene Simmons of Kiss to convince the watchdog group Parents Against Subliminal Seduction that the band's songs did not contain hidden satanic messages.

"Gene told them, 'We're not devil worshippers," Orbin recalled with a sly grin. "Then he added, 'But if I were you, I'd hide my daughters because we are after them."

Perhaps the highlight of Orbin's career was promoting the Rolling Stones' Cotton Bowl concerts in 1981. Two nights, 80,000 people each night, with the only glitch coming the night before, when ZZ Top's manager Bill Ham called demanding that since ZZ Top was such a Texas band, they should close the show, not the Stones.

"I called (tour director) Bill Graham and told him what Bill had said," Orbin said. "He told me to call Bill back and tell him he had five minutes to confirm that ZZ Top would play where they were supposed play or they'd be off the show. And click - he hung up.'

Taking a deep breath, Orbin phoned Ham and relayed Graham's not-so-veiled threat

"He called me back quickly and said they'd play where they were supposed to. I think I lost a couple of years off my life in those five minutes.'

By the late '80s and early '90s, as companies consolidated, the concert promotion business began to change. Ticket prices, which Stone City had always worked to keep reasonable, soared, and managers, wanting to promote only their own bands, insisted on putting together concert lineups. While Stone City remained independent, Orbin could read the writing on the walls.

"The music business became more about the business and less about the music," he said.

It was also during this period, after his first marriage ended in divorce, that he was awarded custody of his two young children. The extra responsibility meant he was no longer able to book as many shows in Dallas, Houston and other cities be-

JACK ORBIN'S FAVORITE CONCERTS

Krackerjack, Antonian Ballroom, April 18, 1972: "The first show I ever promoted. We made \$714."

Rush/Thin Lizzy/Styx,

Municipal Auditorium, June 7, 1976: "First time we promoted Rush in a major venue."

Van Halen, Convention Center Arena, July 17, 1979: "First time Van Halen sold out a Texas arena."

Judas Priest/Point Blank/Axe, Convention Center Arena, Oct. 6, 1979: "The lead singer came onstage riding a motorcycle. Floored me.'

Bon Jovi/Cinderella, Houston Summit, Feb. 2, 1981: "Memorable for the party we had after the show.

Rolling Stones/ZZ

Top/Fabulous Thunderbirds, Cotton Bowl, Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 1981: "The biggest show Stone City ever promoted."

Santana/Eric Johnson, Sunken Gardens Theater, Sept. 4-5, 1987: "Carlos thanked me for for turning him on to guitarist Eric Johnson."

Michael Schenker Group/Black Crowes, The Showcase, May 18, 1990: "This was the concert where I met my

wife, Christine. Scorpions/Alice Cooper, Alamodome, June 8, 1996: "One of our first shows at the

Alamodome. The after-party was

great, too.

Eric Clapton, Alamodome, May 23, 1998: "First time meeting one of my music heroes. We sat and discussed music."

Journey, Municipal Auditorium, Dec. 14, 1998: "Journey donated \$5,000 to the Wheatley Heights neighborhood to help recovery efforts following the 1998 floods."

Trans-Siberian Orchestra,

Municipal Auditorium, Dec. 21, 2001: "First time promoting TSO and the beginning of a beautiful relationship."

cause he couldn't be away from home overnight. That left openings for other promoters to move into his former territories. Eventually, as the number of

concerts he promoted dwindled, Orbin decided in 2015 to close up shop so he could spend more time with his family and pursue other interests, such as competitive senior softball.

While he remains an avid fan of rock 'n' roll, he recognizes that the genre is no longer the cultural bellwether it once was and that hip-hop has the attention of those in younger generations, like his 12-year-old.

"That's all Connor cares about," he said. "When I told him the Express-News was coming over to talk about all the rock 'n' roll stuff that I've done, he asked, 'What for?'

"But you know," he continued optimistically, "that pendulum is going to swing."

PRADO

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sioned work played in the third round was one of the changes Musical Bridges made when it began producing the competition in 2017. The work has to include a section in which the pianists are asked to improvise.

"This is a unique round in the world of classical piano competitions because we are commissioning a piece with a very heavy skew toward nonclassical," said pianist Anya Grokhovski, artistic director and CEO of Musical Bridges.

The finalists will play Prado's piece with members of the Mexico City Philharmonic Orchestra.

We thought he would do great piece for a mariachi-ish group," Grokhovski said. "Since he is a fabulous pianist himself, we just told him, make it hard so the pianists can show off what they can

"El Colibri y la Cempasúchil" was inspired by an Aztec myth that is part of the origins of Día de los Muertos. It tells of a couple whose romance takes a tragic turn when the man dies in battle. His beloved pleads with the god Tonatiuh to bring him back. In response, the deity transforms her into a marigold that blooms atop a mountain and brings her partner back as a hummingbird who visits her there.

Prado wove elements of different Latin music forms throughout the piece as a way to capture the couple's metamorphosis.

"There's this theme that comes back again and again, and each time, it's a little bit different," he said. "It's like a ranchera you might hear in rural Mexico, and it's very simple rustic kind of thing. And the piece is scored for violins, trumpet and sort of suggests a mariachi kind of style.

"As the piece unfolds, you hear the theme again, and it's been transformed into an Afro Cuban kind of a thing. A little bit later on, it's got sort of a tango flavor to it. And then, the end brings out sort of the much more lush harmony and intricate rhythms of samba."

The roughly three-minute improvisational passage comes at a climactic point late in the piece.

"Each pianist will then have to come up with not only something interesting to play, but artistically, what does the piece need at this moment?," said Prado, who will be attending a rehearsal and the performance of the piece. "I think to see what each pianist is going to do is going to be a really interesting insight into their artistry, who they are as a performer, as a person. I'm really excited about that particular part of it, to see what they do.'

Prado took part in piano competitions when he was in high school but soon gave it up. He got

too nervous. "I'm not as into the music as competition thing, but it's awesome that we have this opportunity to hear players from around the world," he said. "There have to be winners and losers in this kind of a thing, but ultimately, we're all winners, because we get to hear these great players."

His previous high-profile compositions include "San Antonio Suite," which he wrote for a big band and a string quartet, and debuted in 2011; "The Hero's Journey," which premiered at Luminaria in 2018; and "Sister Cities," which was commissioned by Musical Bridges and debuted as part of the city's 300th anniversary celebration.

His performance schedule these days tends to revolve around private events, many of which he plays with his father, indemand bassist George Prado.

He also teaches at Northwest Vista College and hosts "Aaron Prado Presents" on Trinity University's jazz station KRTU from 2 to 4 p.m. Sundays.

Though he's known as a jazz guy, Prado's musical interests are far-ranging. When he's choosing music to listen to, he said, he's as likely to play Beethoven or Mozart as he is Cage or Coltrane. And for nearly a year, he and his eponymous quartet have played a regular '90s rock night at Jazz,

It's the stuff he listened to as a teenager when he was studying classical piano and first exploring jazz in a serious way.

'When I was that age, I didn't play it," he said. "But now, for the first time, I get to play all these songs that back then, I would go to sleep listening to. I've got a contemporary of mine who is the same age, Andrew Bergmann,

GURWITZ INTERNATIONAL PIANO COMPETITION

The competition kicks off with performances by the jury panel, food and bubbly from Bistr09, and the drawing of the order in which the contestants will perform. 7 p.m. today, Coates Chapel, UTSA Southwest Campus, 300 Augusta. \$75 at musicalbridges.org/gurwitz.

COMPETITION

The competition unfolds in four rounds, all open to the public. Snacks will be available during breaks. Admission is free, but registration is

Round 1 and 2: 1-4 p.m. and 6-9 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Diane Bennack Concert Hall, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

required at musicalbridges.org/gurwitz.

Round 3: The three finalists will play a new work by Aaron Prado and a piece of their choosing composed after 1950. 7 p.m. Thursday, Jo Long Theatre, Carver Community Cultural Center, 226 N. Hackberry.

Round 4: The three finalists will perform a concerto with Mexico City Philharmonic Orchestra, and the winners will be announced. 7 p.m. Feb. 3, H-E-B Performance Hall, Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, 100 Auditorium Circle.

CONCERTS

Dionne Warwick: The iconic performer, honorary chair for the competition, will perform at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Majestic Theatre, 224 E. Houston. Tickets cost \$49 to \$370 at majesticempire.com and at the theater box office.

Marta Sánchez: The jazz pianist will give a free, hour-long concert. 7 p.m. Feb. 2, Coates Chapel, UTSA Southwest Campus, 300 Augusta. Register for tickets at musicalbridges.org/gurwitz.

he's writing arrangements, I'm writing arrangements of Alice in Chains, Soundgarden, we did a Bjork song the other day. It was crazy."

The show has a devoted following, and he's having a good time doing it.

"When I started, I didn't know how to play this stuff. The chords are totally different, the structure is totally different — it was kind of like jumping into the unknown," he said. "And it's fun in that way.

"I'm just lucky I get to do all this different kinds of stuff, writing for the piano competition, playing with my dad all the time. It's all good."