



Photograph by Chi Kwong Chow

Brothers Skip Kershner (left) and Craig Kershner (right) flank bandmate Bill Vainer (center) at a recent performance of their band Sage.

# 40 and Fabulous

## Sage celebrates four decades of rock 'n' roll

By MARIANNE L. HAMILTON

Over 1,800 appearances. Nearly 6,500 hours on stage. Four CDs, multiple citations as “Outstanding Cover Band” and “Last Band Standing.” And a trunkload of Hawaiian shirts.

It's all on a spreadsheet on Sage

bandleader Frank Anzalone's iMac. These days, before tracing the group's history on his monitor, Anzalone must first pull on a pair of reading glasses. Then again, a lot of data crowds the screen: It's been 40 years since Sage first started

performing.

For their first professional gig back in 1966, Frank and his brother Russell each received a whopping \$5. Providing background music for a fashion show at Villa Felice in Los Gatos, Frank (then

11) wielded an accordion, while 8-year-old Russ played drums.

More than four decades later, the Anzalones—as well as brothers Craig and Keith (Skip) Kershner, and their junior high classmate Bill Vainer—are still packing clubs

and outdoor festivals as five of the eight-member Sage, arguably the South Bay's most popular R&B dance band. This month the group is celebrating its anniversary with a gala Aug. 20 performance capping Campbell's Thursday-night

Over the course of its history, the founding quintet has seen close to 30 other musicians rotate in and out of the band's three additional slots. But for the past several years, Sage has featured a solid line-up that includes lead vocalist Lou Soliz, guitarist Joe Ryan and Joel Gonzalez on bass. Long ago, Frank traded his accordion for keyboards. Russ still hits the skins, with Sage's original horn section—Craig on trumpet, Skip on trombone, and Bill on sax—rounding out the roster.

It would hardly be a stretch to say the band has performed at every teen club, middle school dance and high school prom from Mendocino to Monterey, as well as literally hundreds of weddings, corporate events and club dates from Alaska to L.A.

In the converted garage of his Campbell home that serves as the band's practice room-cum-recording studio, Frank lugs out the four bulging scrapbooks he's kept since the band's earliest days. Inside are thousands of snapshots, napkins bearing the names of long-forgotten brides and grooms, postcards from the side-of-the-road towns the band has played, swizzle sticks and other mementos.

"Yes, I'm a total packrat," he laughs, "but I sort of became the band's historian a while back, and it's really been fun keeping these books."

As he leafs through the pages, the older Anzalone sibling can't help but chuckle. Silver has crept into the dark hair and beads that he and his bandmates sported in hundreds of publicity photos. Wincing at the sight of the white dinner jackets and zeppelin-sized collars they once wore when aiming for more corporate gigs, he notes that the band's transition to Hawaiian shirts occurred in the early '80s.

"When guys get older, they tend to fall in love with the whole Tommy Bahama lifestyle, and that relaxed mentality," Anzalone says, grinning. "The shirts get looser, you become more casual, and you leave the belts behind. Lately we've noticed that we used to talk about tequila shots and women, now it's all about 401Ks and 'Hey, does anyone have an Advil?'"

Encroaching years aside, Sage remains at the forefront of Bay Area dance music. As a testament to the group's longevity, when the Los Gatos High School class of 1978 had its 30-year reunion last year, Sage was asked to perform. A member of the class brought along a yearbook, and inside were photographs of a three-decades-younger incarnation of the band, playing at the '78 senior prom. "We have people telling us we



played at their junior high school dances, and now they're bringing their grandkids to hear us play," Anzalone says. "The funny thing is that some of these same guys used to give us a ration of grief, because we were kind of considered nerds back then. No one had a horn section; we were always sort of different."

Sage's funk-infused horns have been the band's trademark throughout its 40-year run. The choice to add the brass was aided

in large part by the Anzalones' music teacher at Blackford High School, Frank says.

"Chicago was starting to peak at the time, and our teacher told us we should try playing like them. So we added the two horns and the sax and became Sage," he says.

"The Sage horn section is modeled after Chicago's," Craig confirms. "We first played with Sage on October 5, 1973, at Cypress Junior High School. Russ and I were both juniors at Blackford

Photographs courtesy of Sage

**Sage band members (above, from left) Frank Anzalone, Bill Vainer, Russ Anzalone, Joe Ryan, Lou Soliz, Keith Kershner, Joel Gonzalez and Craig Kershner celebrate 40 years of playing together. Band members looked just a little different back in 1975 when they posed for a group photo atop an old Dodge truck. Members in the photo at left included (clockwise from bottom left) Frank Anzalone, Russ Anzalone (in truck), Bill Vanier, Keith Kershner (wearing the baseball cap), Bill Crooks (no longer with the band), Chip Olson (no longer with the band) and Craig Kershner (top of truck).**

High, which is how we all met."

Here Vainer picks up the tale. "I knew Craig and Skip because they played Little League with my brother, so I went to watch them play at a junior high school dance. Skip was this crazy dancer; at one point he accidentally kicked out a footlight. There was this big explosion, and everyone started clapping ... so he kicked all of them out. I thought, 'These guys are awesome; they kick out lights! I gotta be in this band!'"

What scientific process led to the selection of the band's name? Anzalone says that at the age of 15, he had a summer job working for his father at Bank of America in San Francisco, organizing old account files. Without much to do on his lunch hour, the teen would grab a long yellow tablet and jot down ideas for band names.

"At first we were Sage, LTD, because I thought it sounded classy. Then it became just plain Sage. It doesn't mean anything at all; it's just a word that was short and sweet, and it's worked for us all of these years."

From the get-go, Sage aimed to please its audiences with danceable covers of popular songs. According to Soliz, who was the group's first lead singer in the mid-1970s then returned in 1999, making the fans happy has been their perennial priority.

"My job as the front man has always been to share the stage with my good friends, get the crowd involved and interact with the music and dancers," Soliz says.

It's this lack of ego that has helped drive Sage's success. Anzalone adds. "Sure, the lead singer is usually seen as the focal point, but Lou is great at grasping that the audience is really the focal point."

In addition to the covers, Sage has proved adept at writing and recording original tunes. With the release this month of their 40th anniversary commemorative CD, they again pay homage to their friends (and musical influences) across the Bay, Tower of Power. Several members of TOP perform on the three-song disc, along with American Idol band trumpet player (and Vainer's younger brother) Andy Winer.

Joe Ryan, the band's newest member, is a British transplant. Like his bandmates, he was elated when TOP agreed to sit in on the latest CD.

"When I came to the U.S., Tower of Power was my favorite band. After Sage completed 'Funksway' with Tower of Power in 2007, that was a milestone for me. And now I'm with them playing on the new CD, it's all come full circle. ... Plus, my old band-

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mates in the U.K. think it's pretty cool."

On the surface, a Sage concert appears to be a two-hour party. The band actually labors long and hard to create just such an illusion.

"All of us try to keep it light on stage," Vainer says. "That's why the horn section makes up the goofy dances we do. I think our audiences always know they're going to have a good time, because we don't take ourselves too seriously."

Still, behind the scenes, Anzalone gently cracks the whip to ensure the highest possible level of professionalism.

"I think one of the reasons we're still together is that I've never shoved anything down anyone's throat. But I tell everyone, if I book a gig, you'd better commit to being there on time and doing a professional job ... and everyone always does," Anzalone says.

It helps that every member of Sage is either in a long-term marriage or a committed relationship of many years' duration, and has a day job. Anzalone keeps busy doing commercial photography for such clients as Disney and Santana Row while waiting for the mortgage brokerage industry to recover. His brother Russ teaches math and an Afro-Brazilian percussion class at San Jose's Ida Price Middle School, while Soliz owns and operates a barber shop/hair salon in Sunnyvale. Also running a middle school music program is Craig Kershner; his brother Skip is an IRS employee. Bassist Gonzalez just wrapped up a 28-year career with the San Jose Police Department, Ryan is a software engineer, and Vainer has maintained a dental practice in Campbell for over 20 years.

It was Vainer's stint in dental school, in fact, that accounted for one of the band's two brief hiatuses from performing. Marriage followed Vainer's graduation from USC's dental program; in attendance (but not playing) at the reception were his former bandmates.

"During the reception we all started saying, 'Let's get the band back together!'" Vainer laughs. "The very next week we started practicing. Our first gig together again was actually for a dental society party."

As they consider their four decades together, each member of Sage is quick to give credit to his colleagues for the band's longevity. Common themes of camaraderie and brotherhood surface in their descriptions of their time together.

"It's unusual to be in a band where the guys you play with are not only musically talented but



Photograph by George Sakkestad

### Sage founder Frank Anzalone sits at the keyboard in his home studio.

great friends as well," Craig says. "It's so true: The key to our success after all of these years is the relationships we have with each other. We are brothers in every sense of the word."

"The main reason why we're all still together is that we're such good friends, and have always gotten along great," Vainer adds. "Also, we've avoided the problems with drugs and other stuff that other bands have had. It helps that Frank and Russ are two of the straightest guys on the planet."

Ryan clearly remembers a moment early in his Sage career that encapsulated his fondness for his mates. Appearing at the Mushroom Mardi Gras in Morgan Hill, the band launched into "Beginnings," Chicago's signature tune.

"When that song first came out in the '70s, I played it over and over again in my bedroom. To finally play it live with this band ... well, it was really emotional; it brought tears to my eyes. We'd played that song before, but in that moment, it felt like we rolled all of the tumblers into the right slot."

All agree that performing never has, and never will, make them wealthy. Looking at his spreadsheet, Anzalone dissolves into

laughter. "Look at all this money we've supposedly made; where did it all go? And why didn't I buy a private jet? But seriously, it's all about the passion. We do it because we all love playing together."

Sifting through the photos and memorabilia from Sage's past, his brother Russ ponders the future.

"Our friends sometimes ask us when we're going to stop playing," he muses. "We just look at them and say, 'Why do we have to?' We

all enjoy each other's company, so as long as people keep hiring us, we'll keep playing. And even when they don't, we'll find someplace to play together."

Then, lest the conversation become too weighty, Vainer adds, "Craig and I always talk about how much longer we can do this, and he says it's like leaving a party at its peak: You don't want to wait until everyone's drunk and throwing up. But we're so far

past that point ... they're going to have to drag me off the stage, kicking and screaming. Until then I intend to bleed this to death."

*Sage will appear from 6 to 8 p.m. on Aug. 20 on the Orchard City Green, between Campbell City Hall and the library. For more information, visit [www.ci.campbell.ca.us/recreation/activitiyguide/summer09](http://www.ci.campbell.ca.us/recreation/activitiyguide/summer09).*

## Sage CD to benefit music school programs

By MARIANNE L. HAMILTON

The *Sage: 40th Anniversary Edition* 2009 CD will be on sale at the Campbell concert on Aug. 20, with 100 percent of all proceeds being donated to local children's music programs. All three songs on the compilation were written and produced by Sage, and feature its distinctive blend of R&B, funk and soul. The CD is a "pre-release" to a full-length disc due out next summer.

In addition to the regular Sage lineup, the anniversary CD features guest appearances by three members of Tower of Power (Tom Politzer on sax, Mic Gillette on trumpet and "Doc" Kupka on baritone sax), along with *American Idol* band trumpet player Andy Winer.

Two members of Sage are middle school music teachers and all say they are committed to helping keep music programs alive in the local school system.

"We were very fortunate to cut our teeth on teen club gath-

erings and school dances," says Sage bandleader Frank Anzalone. "But kids today don't have that option anymore, and with school music classes being cut, where will the musicians of tomorrow learn to perform? This CD is our way of giving back to a community that helped us get started, and helping the next generation of performers."

*The 40th anniversary CD will be available for sale for \$6 at all upcoming Sage concerts, and can be purchased online at [www.sagemusic.com](http://www.sagemusic.com).*