

Niagara Falls Music Hall of Fame

Thom Rotella Induction Speech 2021

It's funny to me that this whole music thing started very early in my life and has just kept going. At 70 I still feel like I'm at the beginning! This induction into the HOF with so many of my friends, teachers and heroes has made me to stop for the first time and look back on all the great things that have happened and all of the incredible experiences a life in music has brought me. It took a lot of loving, giving people and experiences to help me get here.

First off my parents, Tom and Norma who supported me no matter how crazy I sounded to them. They spent years saving money for my college education and when, after a few semesters of music school, I decided to quit and go on the road with some lounge band, they didn't even blink. (By the way Tony Finelli was the keyboard player that got me into that band.--thanks Tony).

After I left the road and came back to NF I started gigging around town with Joe Calato, Hank Hamam, Lou Morrel, Frank Rotella and sitting in at the OH with Johnny Hartsman. I was making \$80 a week and living with my parents in the bedroom I grew up in. My dad sensed I was getting antsy and one day said to me "you seem ready to go to LA". Well, within a month we were on a cross country road trip into the unknown...

Years later, after I had some degree of success, my mom reminded me as we sat at the kitchen table that "when you

were little we would sit at this table and you would tell me how you were going to go to LA and be a musician—it broke my heart because I thought most dreams like this don't come true"....Well Mom, thanks to you and Dad I got to live my dream....and it's still going.

So many times when I thought my career was washed up, some door somewhere would open and I'd be on to a whole new chapter....

So my long list of thank yous...

My paternal grandparents Maria and Anthony Rotella for leaving that poor little hillside town in Calabria to risk everything to come to America to make a better life, not for themselves but for their children and the generations to come...

My mother's parents Al and Ella Nicholas. All those Sunday nights with my grandfather and his brothers joyfully playing music. When I was around 5 or 6 my grandmother would let me play with my grandfather's guitar while he was working at the the barbershop, and he'd come home and complain that she let that kid mess his guitar up—by the way I still have that guitar!

My uncle Tony "Pooch" Nicholas who taught me my first one string melodies....

My cousin/brother Jim Plumeri who was a great artist and rose to the top as an art director in the NY book publishing world creating covers for Stephen King, Lee Iococca and the

list goes on and on. He was a great example of what was possible and how to enjoy life.

My cousin Carol DeFranco, a poet and an inspiration.

My first teacher John Morell who didn't make guitar playing fun but taught me the basics...I can still remember what it felt like to stand in his studio looking at the pictures on his wall of Tommy Tedesco, Lou Morell, John Morell, Tom Morell and Joe DeRose...that got me dreaming.

He told me Tommy Tedesco took the longest of any of his students to finish the first music book and that I finished it the fastest. Goes to show, the fastest is not always the best—Tommy laughed when I told him that and I think he agreed with me!

Charlie Chiarenza, who made guitar playing fun.
Pete Cicero, who showed me the heart in music.
Wally Whetham, who taught me so much about guitar and advanced theory.

Carmen Mosier, who taught me how to play octaves and inspired me when I used to see him play at the high school jazz concerts

My early music teachers in school—Mrs. Kincaid and Mrs. Abescher.

Buddy Brundo, who gave me my first Wes Montgomery album, a teaching gig at the store and a fake work pass when I was a senior so I could skip afternoon school and hang out at the store and practice.

My musical brother Rich DelZoppo. We would play together every day for hours when we weren't in school. He inspired me, pushed me and turned me on to a lot of great music. My mother said to me one day "Can't you play the guitar pretty like Richard—you're always banging on it." Well Mom, I still am!!!

And Alonzo "Slick" Bradley, who taught all of us the meaning of "soul".

As I was making my way into the LA music scene, through some nefarious plotting by Joe Calato and my father, I eventually met my and every guitar player in NF's idol, Tommy Tedesco. I was a bit stunned when he answered his door in a pair of lime green silk pajama bottoms and nothing else. Little did I know my life would change very quickly. I spent a couple of hours with him, and he and Carmee invited me to Sunday dinner. That was my initiation into the family and I became the 5th child. I'm an only child but I was lucky to have my family AND the Tedescos as my second family.

Tommy mentored me, counseled me on life matters and after I was having my own successes he told me "you're doing it on your own now and it's time for me help someone else, so if you hear that I didn't recommend you for a gig that's why." Tommy—always looking for who he could help next. Nobody and I mean nobody have I met in the music business (or anywhere) who has helped more people than Tommy. And not only guitar players or people from NF—I mean anybody that was lucky enough to cross his path.

In closing I want to address an important and beautiful aspect

of the NF music scene that goes to the heart of what made me who I am as a musician and person. Over the years I've met many people and they ask me what I do and I say "I'm a musician" and they ask "do you make a living at it?" Well, after a guilty pause I say "that's a yes". Most tell me they played music in bands when they were kids like we did and then tell me how much they miss it and how lucky I am to be doing what I love. And then I tell them about all the guys here in NF— Rich DelZoppo, Carl Filbert, Frankie G, Frank Fricassi, Frank and Tony Grizanti and on and on and how they never let anything get in the way of their love of music. They've worked regular jobs their whole lives and still continued to play music because that's who they are and they love it. When I talk with these guys we are all as excited about music as we were when we were kids. This inspires me. That is a beautiful, powerful thing and that love for music is what makes this music community such a wonderful group to be a part of...I mean how many towns have enough working musicians our age to even think of having a Hall of Fame? All of you inspire me, and those early life experiences are a big part of who I am musically and personally and always will be. I may have left Niagara Falls a long time ago but Niagara Falls has never left me....Thanks to all of you who made my life as a musician possible and so much damn fun!!!