

A One Man Band Called Luigi

By Dennis Knight

Even the name was an act, because he wasn't an Italian named Luigi at all, but Ludvik Jurenic, a Serbian American who was born and lived his life in Butte, Montana. He was the proprietor of Luigi's bar in the historic uptown business district on a slope leaning tenuously against the void of Berkeley Pit, the world's largest open pit mine. Eventually Lew moved his business and its unique assets down to Harrison Street, where it continued as a must-see destination for visitors, and where I met the establishment.

Lighted neon outside proclaimed Luigi and his Dancing Dolls, and inside Lew *was* Luigi, choreographer of his domain and a one-man band of twenty-four instruments. Exotic dolls, spinning ballerinas, clowns, monkeys and puppets populated his walls. Geese flapped from the ceiling and bugs and spiders dropped on customers. An airplane zoomed across Luigi's sky, and in a corner sat Sally, a mannequin who might rise and flop about on any Luigi cue.

I can only wonder how many mischievous, gleeful hours Lew spent in the attic and basement stringing and organizing cables and counterweights that connected the puppets and everything else in his world to pedals that simultaneously crashed the cymbals, clapped the clappers, rang the cowbells and drummed the drums. At his side was a xylophone, on his lap a squeezebox, and hanging at his reach were levers and horns and noisemakers. He wore zany hats and sometimes a skunk on his shoulder. It was a cacophony of sight and noise that might never have found a common beat, but made a symphony.

Patrons soon learned they had better not go to the restroom while Luigi was on. The *Him* and *Her* doors were at opposite corners of the stage, and as soon as a him or her entered one, the polka would stop cold, and Luigi would heckle the poor absentee until she or he came out. Few would be gone (or should I say "going?") for long, and the return dash from john to barstool would be very quick. I know, because I was a red-faced Luigi victim.

A teenaged Lew and his kid brothers had already formed an accordion polka band when their young father died, and they earned money for the family at weddings and dances. They practiced in a hayloft with loose floorboards to which Lew nailed milk pails with rocks rattling on the bottom. When the boys tapped time, the pails played percussion. That was the genus of the one-man-band called Luigi.

I lived and worked in Montana in 1969, but only long enough to get to Luigi's twice. The first was a busy Saturday night when the house was bouncing. The second was on a quiet weekday afternoon when I had the day off, and I found Luigi affably pouring beers and enjoying his world. He played a set from his bandstand for the few patrons, and later a tune with brass bells he had lined on the bar. That afternoon I met and chatted with his lovely wife, Pearl, who was the business brain and helped manage the fascinating eccentricities of her husband. I'm sure Luigi's Bar would never have made it without her.

There is much more to the seventy-seven years of Ludvik Juranic, but I'll conclude with the lyric of his life, which was Luigi's life, "Growing old is mandatory. Growing up is optional. Yabba Dabba Doo!"