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LAPD Concert Band

by Christina Challey

If you happen to be a tuba player, as is our featured LAPD band member, Steve Yerkes, you will probably know of the musical piece called “Tubby the Tuba.” This piece, written for band or orchestra, incorporates a narrator as well as a tuba soloist.



Playing at the LAPD recruit graduation.

Steve tells a great story about this piece, but first, here’s a little history on how Steve became part of this tale.

Steve grew up in Iowa in a family that loved to sing. He said his mother would sing all day while doing housework. Today, Steve sings tenor in the Cathedral Choir at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. But just how did he come to play the tuba?

Steve began taking accordion lessons at age 5 and even played a couple of pieces on local radio. Somehow the accordion didn’t last, and longing to play with his friends in the school band, he started playing the saxophone in the seventh grade. That went well for about a year, until the band director stated he needed a tuba player. Steve said he “jumped for it and never looked back.” He would often play

tuba solos in his high school band and was First Chair All-State Player by his junior year! He later studied with the late, great Arnold Jacobs, a tubist with the Chicago Symphony and a brilliant musician and teacher. Steve said, “Professionals in all the performing arts from around the world came to study breathing and ‘artistic thinking’ with him.”

After studying music at Drake University, Steve became a high school band director. Then in his second year of teaching, he got drafted and was assigned to the Fifth U.S. Army Band based in Chicago. In 1968, the band played for a concert celebrating the rebuilding of Poe Lock, one of the four major locks that enable ships to travel between Lake Superior and the lower Great Lakes. It was at this concert that the “Tubby the Tuba” story took place.

Steve said the bandstand was right by the Poe Lock, and inside the lock, a large ship was being raised to the new water level. The band began to play “Tubby the Tuba.”

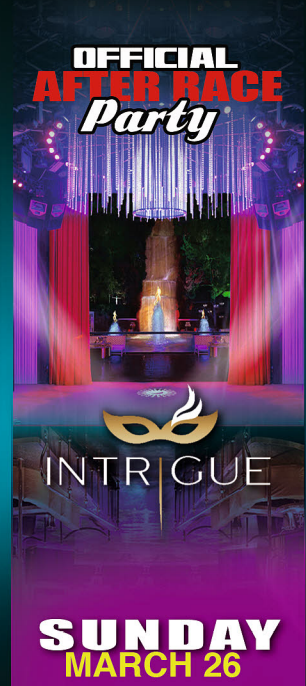
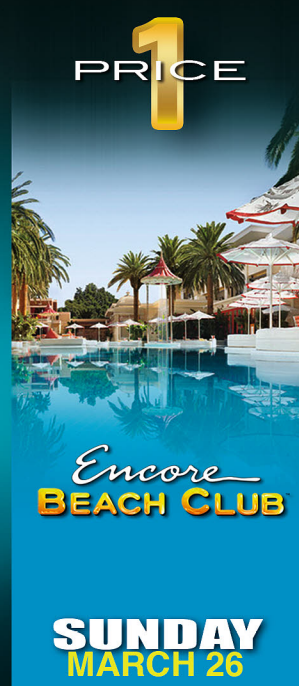
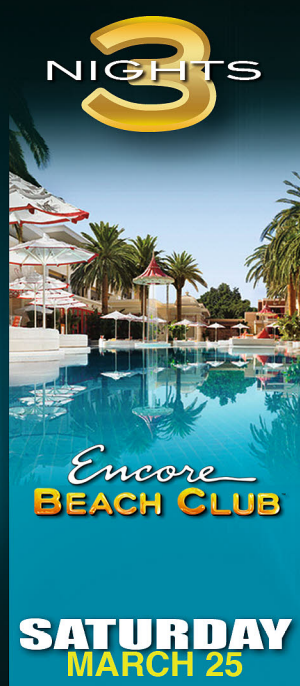
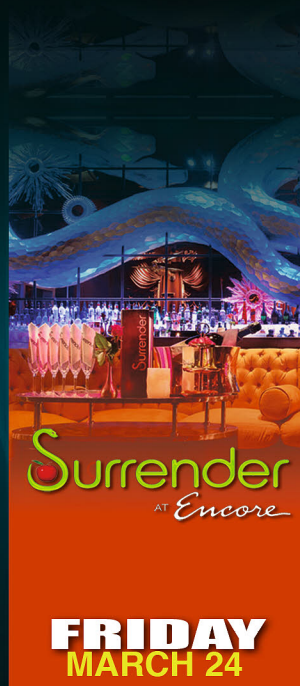
As the piece was coming to the climax, the narrator excitedly announced, “and Tubby said ... just as the tuba player was taking a deep breath to enter his grand finale, the ship’s foghorn did the job!”

Steve said the band would periodically rehearse specific music in preparation for the funeral of former U. S. President Harry Truman, who, at the time, was quite old and often ill. So it was no surprise to the band when, on a cold morning in March 1969, their commanding officer called on the band to prepare their instruments to play for the funeral of “our former President.” However, the funeral turned out to be for former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, not Truman!

Discharged from the Army in December 1969, Steve said it wasn’t the best time to go back to teaching. So he made his career in the music industry. By the 1980s he was president of Miraphone Corporation, which imported 70 percent of all brass instruments coming into the U.S. from Germany. And most of these instruments were tubas! Steve said it was wonderful. He “felt like a mosquito in a nudist colony!”

Steve loves Baroque and Romantic music, but says he’s having a ball with all the marches he plays in the LAPD Band. This July, Steve and his wife, Della, will head to the Midwest for a 50-year reunion of the Fifth Army Band! Will they play “Tubby the Tuba?” ♦

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