

THE FABULOUS KELLY RICHARDS

If you've ever wandered into Pillars on a Thursday evening during Singers' Open Mic Night, then perhaps you've met the man who playing the piano with melodic perfection. The Fabulous Kelly Richards (as I like to call him), has been such a staple in the Central Florida music scene that he's referred to as the "Orlando Piano Man." I first met Kelly more than twenty years ago while he was playing twice weekly at a piano bar in Orlando. Kelly hosted and accompanied some of the most talented singers I'd had the pleasure of meeting at that point in my life – including Mr. Richards' own distinct and lovely crooning.

Kelly was born Decatur, Indiana in 1960, and started playing piano at the young age of four and a half. His mother, Patricia, taught Kelly how to read music and play the instrument using both hands. "On Sundays," Kelly reminisces, "my grandfather would come over and offer me fifty cent pieces to sing for him. My favorite was 'Puff the Magic Dragon.'" Kelly's mom continued instructing him until he was in the third grade, but she saw his potential and thought it best he began professional training. Lucky for him, Judy Hakes Martin – a graduate from Indiana University – lived just up the street from his house, and he began studying under her tutelage. He even took up a paper route to cover the cost of his lessons, and continued studying

 Brett Dault



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the keys with Judy through 1979, perfecting his growing repertoire of classical and religious music.

By that time, he had won several medals and awards for his playing and singing and spent five years touring with a gospel group, whose performances helped to raise funds for various charitable organizations. In 1980, Kelly enrolled at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, pursuing a degree in music education – focusing on piano and voice. It was there that a friend introduced him to the world of Broadway music. “It was like I’d found a new love in showtunes,” Kelly says. “Every day, my friends and I would pile into a practice room, playing and singing together.”

Kelly relocated to the Sunshine State in 1985 and began working toward completing his degree at the University of Central Florida, while playing piano in several different hotels and other venues around the Orlando area. What began as work to supplement his education expenses evolved into lasting relationships as resident pianist. Kelly worked with the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress for seven years, the Omni ChampionsGate for six years, and the Buena Vista Palace for an astounding twenty-one years.

After completing his degree, graduating in 1998 with a 4.0 average, Kelly recalls, “I was going to get a part time job selling hot dogs on Main Street at Disney, when my friend Jonathan Barr said I should instead audition as a pianist. He gave me a number to call, I set up an audition and got hired on the spot.”

Since, Kelly has played around Disney property, at a ton of great locations including the majestic lobby of The Grand Floridian, leading the always-fun singalong at the Rose & Crown Pub in Epcot’s United Kingdom pavilion, in The Hollywood Brown Derby at Disney’s Hollywood Studios, at Epcot’s The Living Seas and Coral

Reef Restaurant, throughout the Yacht & Beach Club Resort, and with Magic Music Days all around the property. He is also the rehearsal pianist for the Candlelight Processional, one of the most impressive holiday performances around (& yes, they’ve already begun rehearsal for the 2017 holiday season!).

Currently, Kelly’s favorite Disney experience is playing for their Performing Arts Workshops. These intensive educational sessions help students to reinforce performance concepts and fine-tune their techniques through fun, hands-on sessions. “I love working with students to help them achieve their best – and it’s such a fun and collaborative way to do this through the magical music Disney has given us over the years.”

Over the past years, Kelly has also performed for many of Central Florida’s theatrical productions, as well as popular local venues. Along the way, he has played for the casts of *Crazy For You*, *Evita*, *Five Guys Named Moe*, *RENT*, *Altar Boyz*, *Superboy*, and others. He has also had the privilege to play for such celebrities as Paula Zahn, Steve Guttenburg, John Travolta, Billy Joel, Christie Brinkley, Ann Miller and many more. Kelly was recently awarded the 2017 Watermark Award for Variety and Excellence for “Favorite Local Performer: Musician,” celebrating his years of dedication to so many facets of the Central Florida community.

Kelly shared, “music has always been my life. I knew from early on that I wanted to be a musician, despite everyone’s effort to push me to have a ‘real job.’” But Kelly has more than a real job – he works with his passion, therefore he is working his *dream* job.

Kelly has released two CDs, each of which are available on cdbaby.com. The first, titled *Affectionately Yours*, is a collection of piano solos with songs from *Cats*, *Evita*, and *Ice Castles*. His

second, *The Phantom of the Palace* (a nod to his tenure at the Buena Vista Palace hotel) is a collection of piano music and vocals which showcases songs from *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and also features an original song written by Kelly himself.

Kelly shared a quote from friend and previous client, Robert Parr, which sums his abilities up incredibly well. “I am constantly amazed at his ability to play such a wide variety of music. The technique is there – clear, precise, and right on target. What makes Kelly exceptional is the emotion he superimposes in his technique. He and the piano become one. The experience is one of the watching as well as listening. He can tear you up with one song and put you back together with the next one, but something wonderful has happened in between. You are never quite the same person. You are a little better because of the experience. Simply put, Kelly is...something special.”

Indeed, Kelly is something special. Not only does his talent entertain and exhilarate, but his personality and charm makes it all the much better. You can hear Kelly’s magnificent musical stylings each Thursday at Pilars Martini in downtown Winter Garden and each Friday evening at BiCE Ristorante within Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando. To purchase or listen to Kelly’s CDs, visit <http://store.cdbaby.com/Artist/KellyDeWayneRichards>.

