

Lou Coppola – AAA US Virtuoso Champion in the 1950s is still making great music six decades later

By Joan Grauman, AAA Archivist



I would like to begin by saying how very fitting and extraordinary it is to have Lou Coppola and his delightful Stereo Strings serenading us this Saturday night at the banquet celebrating the 75th anniversary of the AAA. Lou was the first person to win the AAA's US Virtuoso

Competition four times, taking his first trophy when he was 15 years old. His last first place status, at the age of 18, was his ticket for entrance into the Coupe Mondiale. Lou was the first AAA US Virtuoso Champion to be sent to this renowned international classical accordion solo competition (the ATG sent Joan C. Sommers the same year, another first). The year was 1955 and the event was being held in Brighton, England. This was an exciting moment for the AAA! Lou did not take home the first place trophy, but his skills were highly praised by the judges and the audiences in England. Lou came home from this exhilarating experience determined that he would spend his life as an accordionist, and he has certainly done just that. His incredible skills, warmth and musical interpretations have pleased audiences through the decades, all over the world, whether playing as a soloist, with the US Air Force Strolling Strings, or with his Stereo Strings. Since his teen years, Lou has been an active supporter of the AAA and we are so pleased to have him as a featured performer at our 75th anniversary celebration!



Lou Coppola at age 18, 1955

Growing Up in Bridgeport, Connecticut

A bet with his mother changed Lou's life forever. A member of a music-loving Italian family, Lou had taken a couple of lessons from his mother on the piano and a few from his father on banjo and mandolin. But this 11 year old boy much preferred playing baseball outside every day instead of being inside practicing music. One

day, recognizing unique skills in her son, Lou's mother approached him. "I want you to take accordion lessons for one month. If you don't enjoy it, you can quit, and you will never have to study music again." Lou agreed to this bet to please his mother. He was brought to the studio of the highly regarded accordion instructor, Rudy Molinaro. With Rudy's skillful coaching and talent for bonding with young people, the month turned into years, and playing the accordion became his lifelong vocation and avocation. Lou reverently credits Rudy for his outstanding training that has served him so well during his extraordinary career.

Rudy Molinaro's studio was a home away from home for the kids in the Bridgeport area in those days. AAA President, Linda Soley Reed, also studied with Rudy and shared her memories of young Lou:

"Each year, Rudy would leave during the summer months and go back to Italy to visit family and do some touring. He left all of us in the hands of the slightly older, more seasoned students - in particular, Lou Coppola. My mother used to complain, 'I hate paying some kid to give you lessons.' But I could hardly wait for Rudy to leave so I could con Lou into giving me all of the advanced pieces that Rudy felt I wasn't quite ready for - but at the age of 11, I thought I could do it all. And Lou was so adorable in those days -- not that he isn't still adorable!"

When Lou received the position with the US Air Force Band, we were all so proud. To Rudy, that was the epitome of his own career - a student leading the US Air Force Strolling Strings. Rudy carried that famous "Camelot" photo of the Stereo Strings at the White House performing for President and Jackie Kennedy with him always. In case anybody missed the article, Rudy always had a copy of it tucked away in his pocket. "

The US Air Force Strolling Strings

After Lou returned from England, he settled into teaching at Rudy's studio, performing locally and preparing for college. Lou was the first accordionist to be accepted by the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. However, he never ended up going to the college. There was an opening for an

accordionist with the US Air Force Band in Washington, DC and Rudy urged Lou to audition. "You'll travel the world," Rudy told his protégé.



CMSgt Lou Coppola

On October 23, 1956, Lou was accepted into this most exclusive group of instrumentalists in the US Air Force Band: the accordionists. Rudy's prediction came true. Lou traveled the world during his 28 year tenure with the Air Force Strolling Strings. Lou, who earned the distinction of being the



first non-string player to become non-commissioned officer-in-charge of the US Air Force Strings, took this elite group of musicians all over Europe and Asia frequently. The Strings performed for military audiences,

for kings, queens, sultans and heads of state, but his most memorable experience was having the opportunity to perform for nine US Presidents at the White House. The Strings performed for State Dinners and official parties many times a year. "I will always treasure the unique memories of those evenings. One of my prized possessions is the photo taken by Jackie Kennedy in the White House private quarters. It was very late after a formal dinner when I found myself in the middle of an impromptu performance of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto 3rd movement with Isaac Stern and Leonard Bernstein, when Mrs. Kennedy took the picture. It is hanging in my office and always will!"



During the Kennedy administration, this photo was featured on the cover of Life magazine

And in his "spare" time...

Lou's Air Force trips were frequent, rehearsals were daily, and yet Lou and his then wife, award-winning accordionist Rose-Marie Bruno Coppola, somehow found the time to open an accordion school in their home. Both were conscientious teachers and many of their students won major competitions, including their two sons, Kevin and John. AAA Governing Board member, Dr. Robert Young McMahan, was not only one of Lou's best students, he was also his first student in the Washington, DC area.

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Lou & Rose-Marie Coppola with sons, John (l) & Kevin (r)

In 1960, Lou, Rose-Marie and Carmelo Pino founded the Accordion Association of Metropolitan Washington. The group, whose members were mostly Washington and Baltimore area accordion teachers, held monthly meetings and hosted a large annual competition. They brought in accordion celebrities to perform and judge - including AAA founders, Charles Magnante and Joe Biviano, as well as Maddalena Belfiore, Julie Kasprzyk Cardona, Addie Cere and others.

Lou and Rose-Marie also founded Strolling Strings Associates, Washington, DC's premier string booking agency. They employed hundreds of musicians for many years, performing a wide variety of engagements for top corporations. Lou went on to found "Stereo Strings", which he continues to operate today. Stereo Strings opened the Ronald



Lou with Austria's Maria von Trapp

Reagan Airport with 28 violins, playing for Senators, Congressmen and numerous business leaders at a seated dinner. It was an historic event! The Stereo Strings played weekly at the Fort Myer Officers' Club in Virginia for 44 years as well as the Bolling Officers' Club in Washington, DC for 28 years.

What is Lou doing these days?

In the spring of 2012, much to Lou's surprise, he was invited by George Mason University's music department chairman to teach a course in strolling string music at the college. Lou happily accepted the challenge. By the fall semester, he had structured and was teaching, in a formal course setting, a college course for strolling strings. It was a new world for these young music majors. They had to learn chart memorization, choreography strategy, execute ensemble elements and the importance of a wide smile! The university was thrilled with their inaugural performance at the "Opera Night" dinner.

Lou accepted another challenge this past spring. At the urging of his friend Joan, he played his first solo concert in 56 years for the very fortunate members of the Washington Metropolitan Accordion Society (WMAS). The excitement in the room was like nothing we had ever seen. Lou's entire concert was pure magic! You can hear his solos and his lovely medleys with the Stereo Strings from this event by going to YouTube and typing "Lou Coppola" in the Search box.



Lou and son, John, perform at WMAS in May 2013

If you are visiting the Washington, DC area, you should definitely plan a Sunday brunch at the beautiful Gaylord Conference Center at National Harbor near Alexandria, Virginia, where Lou performs and strolls weekly with a violinist and a bass player.



Lou and the Stereo Strings at the Gaylord Conference Center

Lou and the AAA

The AAA has been a part of Lou's life since he first picked up the accordion. He participated in their annual competitions and, as previously mentioned, was the first accordionist to win four national championships. Lou has been an adjudicator and he has been the unofficial "AAA staff photographer" for decades. Through his special association with the AAA, he has also made many lifelong friendships. In Lou's own words:



Maddalena Belfiore and Lou play an impromptu duet following a competition in New Jersey, 1955

"I credit the AAA for enabling me to reach and surpass many of my goals. The solid support and continual interest in my progress as a youth has contributed substantially to who I am today. I look back and realize that, through the years, the resources of this great organization have been a tremendous asset to my development as a music professional. The administrators, adjudicators, colleagues and friends of this group were, and are, very important to me! I would not be the same player or person without all of you. You have a special place in my heart. Thank you, AAA!"

A special thank you to Lou from the author

I would be remiss if I didn't thank Lou for the hours and hours he put in helping me gather photographs and historical information on the AAA when I took the job as the Archivist. I cannot imagine how I would have dealt with this enormous undertaking if I didn't have him helping me every step of the way. Aside from my husband, no one supports me and my musical efforts for the AAA and WMAS more than Lou. I appreciate his support, encouragement and friendship more than he will ever know.



Mary Tokarski, Lou and Joan Grauman at Gaylord Conference Center, 2011