

Meet US Army Accordionist, Sergeant Major Manuel Bobenrieth

By Joan Grauman, AAA Archivist

Just about everyone who regularly attends the annual AAA festivals has met AAA Governing Board member, Manny Bobenrieth. Manny is a personable and humorous emcee, a caring adjudicator, an excellent workshop presenter and a very popular, memorable performer. What many do not know is the extensive accomplishments of this versatile musician, arranger and director.

Born in Concepcion, Chile, Manny is one of eight children, most of whom studied music in their youth. Strongly encouraged by his father, Manny began taking accordion lessons at age five while the family was living in Minnesota for a few years. In 1966, when he was seven years old, the family moved back to Chile where he continued to study accordion. The Bobenrieths returned permanently to the United States in 1968 to the Washington, DC area, where Manny's father accepted a position with the World Health Organization. Soon, Manny and four of his siblings were studying music at Carmelo Pino's Biviano School of Music. Ten year old Manny studied accordion with Carmelo, as did his sister, while his other siblings studied guitar and trumpet at the studio.

In 1969, with Carmelo's encouragement, Manny began entering accordion competitions, first in the Accordion Association of Metropolitan Washington (AAMW) and later at AAA events. Manny enjoyed the hard work and discipline and did well in the competitions. His first trophy was for a duet played with Carmelo's daughter Marcela playing Maddalena Belfiore's "Pan Polka". The duo won first place. Manny has fond memories of being judged by such greats as Charles Magnante, Maddalena Belfiore, Dr. Jacob Neupauer and Joe Biviano. One memory that stands out for him was the 1976 Coupe Mondiale, a huge gala event that took place at the majestic Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC. Manny played in Carmelo's student ensemble, competed in the duet category and truly enjoyed being a part of this historic event.



Maddalena Belfiore &
Manny
AAMW Contest, 1970

Carmelo Pino's Influence

As a young athlete now in high school, Manny decided that the accordion was getting in the way of other interests he wanted to pursue. He told his father that he wanted to quit playing the accordion. "Tell Mr. Pino" were his father's words. At Manny's next lesson with Carmelo Pino, he announced that this would be his last lesson. "You're not quitting!" said Carmelo, and that ended that. Carmelo introduced Manny to the classical accordion repertoire with works of Bach, Creston, Hovhaness and works by Carmelo himself. Carmelo also took Manny with him on his jobs. Manny would sit next to Carmelo on gigs with the Gene Donati Orchestra as well as with other small ensembles. He learned the commercial pop repertoire and he learned how to contribute musically in a band situation. "It was the perfect way to learn how to be a musician, not just an accordionist", said Manny.

Manny attributes all of his musical accomplishments to the constant encouragement and guidance of Carmelo Pino. He remembers his teacher's words, "To earn a living as a performer, you must make yourself as indispensable as possible to as many people as possible. Make sure read well so you can follow a conductor, play in a pit and classical orchestras; learn to transpose; learn the standards, Dixieland, oompah music – learn it all." Carmelo continued to assist Manny in achieving these goals through his college years. Accepted at the University of Maryland as a music major, Manny was told that he would need to major in piano, not the accordion. He did not want to go this route. Carmelo approached the Montgomery (community) College in Rockville, Maryland and was hired to create a two-year program for accordion majors at the college. After Manny graduated from the two-year program, Carmelo approached the music department of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and



Dr. Carmelo Pino and Manny,
2005 AAA Festival

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was hired to create the entire curriculum for accordion majors. In 1982, Manny graduated with a Bachelor's degree in music performance from the Catholic University, becoming the first accordionist to graduate with such a degree from that institution. Carmelo and Manny remained close friends until Carmelo's death in 2013.

Early 1980s

After graduation, Manny performed frequently in restaurants, at weddings and other functions in the Washington, DC area. From 1984 to 1986, he toured Europe and the Caribbean aboard the SS Norway as the accordionist for Norwegian Caribbean Cruise Line. Manny would stroll twice nightly with a violinist. His repertoire grew tremendously during the years on the ship as he would learn the music requested by travelers from all over the world.

United States Army Band

1986 was a turning point in Manny's life. He auditioned for and became a member of The United States Army Band "Pershing's Own", as the accordionist with the US Army Strolling Strings. The same year, he married Maureen Moose and settled in the Washington, DC area.

The US Army Strolling Strings is one of the premiere ensembles of the US Armed Forces, providing music for some of the country's most notable occasions. The ensemble plays frequently at the White House, the Vice President's residence, the State Department and US Capitol. The group has performed for numerous foreign dignitaries to include Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail



Manny with Pres.
George H. Bush

Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, King Hussein, the Emperor of Japan and Nelson Mandela and many others. Manny's 28 years of service with the Army Band has spanned over of five presidents: Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Manny has observed "history in the making" and joyous celebrations at the many White House functions that feature the Strings. On one occasion during the Clinton administration, opera singer and actor Robert Merrill, a guest at the dinner, approached Manny and asked if he could accompany him singing "If I Loved You", from Rodgers & Hammerstein's Carousel, to First Lady Hillary Clinton. It was very well-received, although somewhat stressful for Manny who had to instantly transpose the piece to Merrill's chosen key.

In 2001, Master Sergeant Manny Bobenrieth was promoted to Sergeant Major. In 2004, he became a non-commissioned officer in charge of the US Army Strings. Sergeant Major Bobenrieth is responsible for all the day to day operations of The U.S. Army Strings and oversees all of their commitments. These include not only Strolling Strings engagements, but also orchestral performances, string quartets, string trios, outreach programs, community events and musical support for the highest levels of the government. Manny is also the primary arranger for the Army Strings. His countless arrange-



Manny with Pres. Clinton
and members of the Strings



George W. Bush
with Manny



Manny and
Jenna Bush Hager



US Army Strolling Strings, 2012 AAA Festival, Baltimore, MD

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ments have been featured at the State Department, the Vice President's residence and the White House.

The US Army Strolling Strings have supported several AAA festivals: 1997 in Washington, DC; 2012 in Baltimore, Maryland and at the 2007 Coupe Mondiale in Alexandria, Virginia.



Vice Pres. Joe Biden with Manny

Other Musical Accomplishments

In addition to his work with the US Army Strings, Manny has performed in many different musical contexts including Broadway musicals, Contemporary



Above: Manny, Frank Marocco, Art Van Damme and Lou Coppola, Detroit, MI 1995



Recording with Charlie Byrd, New Orleans, 1997



Manny presenting Frank Marocco with the US flag that flew over the US Capitol on Frank's 80th birthday, with Joan and Dan Grauman, Mesa, AZ 2011

Music Forum, the Kennedy Center Opera House. In 2006, as a member of The United States Army Band "Pershing's Own" he was the featured soloist in an arrangement of "Fiesta Latino" with the Municipal Band of Bilbao, Spain. He has appeared at The Corcoran Gallery of Art with legendary jazz guitarist Charlie Byrd in a tribute to the music of jazz accordionist Art Van Damme. Manny can also be heard on the soundtrack to the Discovery Channel television series, "The Great Chefs" as a guest artist with the Charlie Byrd Trio. In 2000, he formed "The Manny Bobenrieth Ensemble" which consisted of high level performers on accordion, violin, piano, bass, electric guitar and vibes. The group was featured at the world famous Blues Alley Jazz Club in Washington, DC and performed to a sold-out audience. Instantly popular, the ensemble recorded a CD, "Tangata", which featured intricate and passionate interpretations of the music of Astor Piazzolla along with the music of Cole Porter and Brazilian composer A. C. Jobim. It received rave reviews from the Washington Post, JazzReview, Piazzolla Organization, Washington Times, All About Jazz Magazine, Downbeat and others. In 2002, the group was invited to perform at the prestigious "Tango Festival" in Granada, Spain. Sadly, the Manny Bobenrieth Ensemble stopped performing together after the untimely death in 2004 of their pianist, Kathy Burchedeau.



Manny Bobenrieth Ensemble, 2001

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Family Life

Manny and his wife Rene live in Maryland and are the proud parents of two grown children. Emily, a 2011 graduate of the United States Military Academy, West Point, and Vincent, a 2013 graduate of the University of Pittsburgh. Both are commissioned officers in the US Army. Emily's husband, Erik Phillips, a 2009 graduate of West Point, was severely wounded in Afghanistan just months after their wedding. "I am fortunate enough to have one of the best jobs anyone can ask for. I have had the opportunity to travel, witness history in the making and play with some of the greatest musicians in the world. Having said that, the most rewarding part of my

job in the Army is the privilege of playing for our wounded warriors during the holidays at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, in Bethesda, MD. Those young men and women are heroes, who have sacrificed tremendously for our country and who deserve our support." For Manny, seeing these wounded warriors really hits home.

The US Army Strings often have free concerts in and around Washington, DC. Visit their website: <http://www.usarmyband.com/strings/the-us-army-strings.html> for more information and a schedule of events.



The Bobenrieth family:
l to r – Manny, Vincent, Maureen (Rene), Emily Phillips, Erik Phillips