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Get To Know: Gregg Cagno

Guitarist, vocalist and award-winning songwriter, **Gregg Cagno** is a studied and experienced performer and entertainer. Comfortable and warm with an audience, he's as creative an interpreter of other's works as he is his own. Whether performing on a festival stage or an intimate gathering, his clear, earnest baritone voice communicates joy, wit and love without pretense. We sat down with Gregg Cagno to hear more about his experience as a musician, his artistic inspiration, and his love of practice.





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What are your earliest musical memories and what kind of music did you hear at home when you were growing up?

I recall being very young and listening to Casey Kasem's top 40 countdown on the radio in my Mom's car in the driveway (AM radio of course, this was the early 70s). Thinking about it now I can almost smell the warm sun on the seats of her VW 1500S squareback. At home there was an 8-track player in the stereo on which, once I learned to operate, I kept a steady stream of *Elvis' Gold Records* or the 1975 live album *An Evening with John Denver* going on a loop. When we'd visit my Grandmother Taverna in Brooklyn, my brother and I would play records on her 'Hi-Fi' and do our own top 40 countdown with 45s that had been collected by my Aunt Carol (Mom's younger sister) I believe it was here I first heard the Beatles, as our #1 pick as always was the double A-side of Penny Lane/Strawberry Fields Forever.

How did you first get into playing guitar and what attracted you to want to do that?

Listening to Presley & Denver led to me wanting to play guitar and sing. Somewhere in there I saw a clip of Elvis on the Ed Sullivan show and that sealed the deal. When I was quarantined with chickenpox my Dad brought me home a ukulele to help pass the time. A few years later when I was in 5th grade there was an after-school guitar class offered by a new teacher that year, Roger Jinks. Equipped with enthusiasm, patience, a Mel Bay book and an overhead projector, he taught about 20 or so of us the basics all at once. Guitar clicked with me like it was unlocking something I already knew, and I was off and running.

Do you remember your first professional gig as a musician?

Good question! Professional in this sense means one I got paid for, so I'm going to go with 'Dickens Days' 1985. My friend Christian Bauman & I were hired as buskers (with bonus irony) to sing in a courtyard on Main Street of my hometown Clinton, NJ. The local newspaper was there and snapped a shot of our 15yr old selves laughing our way through a set which included Riverside by America, which is still one of my favorites.

As a songwriter and performer of original music, you've received some accolades and appeared on prestigious stages. Tell us a little about that?





winner you'd be invited back the following year for a full set. Either way you get your songs out there and continue to develop your audience so it's a win win. There are those who disagree with the concept of making songwriting competitive, but I found it was a great way to network and meet fellow troubadours on the journey, which led to more gigs (and couches to crash on when on tour). I played Kerrville Fest in Texas, the Falcon Ridge Fest in upstate NY, the South Florida Folk Fest, the Rocky Mountain Fest in Colorado and plenty of others. I was a finalist at a bunch and even won a few times. I received an ASCAP award twice in the folk genre, have gotten to play at the Kennedy Center in D.C. (thanks to someone who heard me at the Florida Festival) and I've had the good fortune to open for a few of my favorites along the way such as James Taylor, John Gorka, Richie Havens and America.

You perform in many different settings from clubs, to festivals, private parties, corporate events and weddings. What is the key to a successful event?

Prior preparation is the key. Practice not only until you get it right but until you can't get it wrong.

Test your equipment at home and carry a spare of your essential cables. Don't just show up on time for the gig, show up early. If something can go wrong, it will. Leave enough time so that a problem discovered at soundcheck doesn't become an emergency. Leave an hour earlier than you need to if you can so you can set up slowly and have enough time to soundcheck. Your blood pressure will appreciate it and your performance will be better and therefore you'll enjoy the gig more if you start from a centered place, confident that your equipment is all dialed in and tuned up.

For private parties and weddings, you perform a wide range of material. Give us some examples of the artists you include in your setlists.

Off the top of my head: Bill Withers, The Beatles, Cat Stevens, Frank Sinatra, Frankie Valli, Joni Mitchell, John Mayer, Amy Winehouse, Stevie Wonder, Jason Mraz, Norah Jones, Hoagy Carmichael, Sade and James Taylor.

How do you choose new material to keep your repertoire fresh?

I like seasonal songs that are in the collective unconscious and try to add a few each season. This week I've been working up the original French version of Autumn Leaves (Les Feuilles Mortes). I keep a 'Learn' playlist going on Spotify and whenever I hear something that sounds like it'd be fun as an acoustic version I put it on there..

Weddings can be a unique challenge as they bring together different generations and musical tastes. How do you approach your musical selection and keep people entertained?

After a while you develop your skill to read the room and when to play a standard or a staple. They are called that for a reason. You get the feel of when people are just wanting to listen, when they want to hear something they can sing along to or when they're ready to dance. I'm always open to taking requests, it helps keep people engaged and invested in listening. I love being able to put my own spin on a familiar song.





right to the heart with its use of opposing forces.

“All around your island, there’s a barricade, that keeps out the danger and holds in the pain.

Sometimes you’re happy, sometimes you cry. Half of me is ocean and half of me is sky.”

4 chords and the truth...