

# Lenneeee Deeeeee!

Treasure Island's favorite organ picker packs them in with corny jokes, old songs and one-pound pork chops

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TREASURE ISLAND — Lenny Dee's organ, a white Hammond Model A, was built in 1935 for about \$1,200. It has an old dashboard of customized gadgets, a vibraphone in its bench and keyboards that light up red and green.

When something goes wrong with the Model A, Lenny calls repairman Bob Tyo. Bob lives in Columbus, Ohio.

"If I can't fix it myself, I'll fly Bob down here," Lenny says. "He's the only one I'll let mess with it."

They don't make 'em like the Model A anymore. You can tell by looking at it — up close or through the 5-by-6-foot mirror angled overhead at Lenny Dee's Kings Inn, the musician's supper club, also known as the Home of the One-Pound Pork Chop. ("Oh, man, that pork chop is something else! You can cut that baby with a fork," Lenny says.)

FOR THAT MATTER, they don't make 'em like Lenny Dee anymore, either. The demand for organ-playing comedians has long since subsided. You know it. I know it. But, if that's so, why are people being turned away from the Kings Inn even on weekday evenings? Why is the dance floor packed? Why, oh why, is everyone laughing so hard?

It's not the pork chops, to be sure. No, it's the Lenny Dee Entertainment Factor — a combination of food, comedy, dancing and music that's keeping the old Gulf Beach nightlife young with the sound of tourists. Happy, spending tourists.

Lenny Dee keeps most of the older folks up late by taking them back. Dee, short for the Flemish name DeStoppelaire, has recorded 56 albums of pop organ music, first on the Decca label, then with MCA. He cut the last one in Nashville four years ago "right before the record industry went bust."

Although you might need a search party to find them outside the Kings Inn, Dee's records have helped make him a wealthy man. In 1955, he says, the song *Plantation Boogie* earned him a quarter of a million dollars. They've also won him a hardy brigade of snowbird fans who turn up winter after winter to see him perform.

In the old days, when he wasn't recording in Nashville or New York, Dee toured extensively with the Model A. He rattles off the stops like a railroad conductor on a commuter local: the Rooster Tail in Detroit, the Harbor Castle Hilton in Toronto, the Greater Pittsburgh Airport, the Thomas Jefferson Hotel in Tampa.

THE DEE FAMILY hails from Chicago, where young Lenny played accordion in his father's Logan Square gin mill on the northwest side. That was the famous era of the Big Bands, but Lenny wasn't interested in being a bandsman. He was looking for the spotlight.

"The accordion isn't a band instrument. Neither is the organ," said Dee, 60, drinking iced tea last week at his club on Gulf Boulevard. "I always sold myself as a complete performer and that's what I am."

"Everyone associates organ music with weddings and funerals. But when they come to see Lenny Dee, they're gonna' get a little bit of everything — some laughs, some music, some singing and good food."

This is peak season for the Gulf Beaches and for the Kings Inn, which faces the saltwater just a few keyboards south of the Treasure Island Causeway. Across Gulf Boulevard, the parking lots are swamped at the Bilmar Beach Resort and the Thunderbird Resort Motel. A few doors away, regulars gather for Mexican food and beer at the VIP Lounge.

Inside the Kings Inn, nightclubbers listen and dance to the Pete Brady Trio. It's a capacity Tuesday-night crowd of 300. A lot of pork chops, indeed. (The menu does offer other food.) The Kings Inn decor is overrun with red, the same color as Lenny's Mercedes. The atmosphere is dinner-theater kitsch: One wall sports photographs of Lenny with old showbiz friends. A large sign on another wall reads "I Am A Fire Door." The johns are labeled Elton and Olivia-Newton.

The red-and-white checkerboard dance floor clears and Lenny takes the stage. With his cigarette smoking in a black cigarette holder, Dee launches into a long, flattering introduction that ends: "*Ladies and gentlemen, the Tony Bennett of the West Coast of Florida — Pete Brady.*"

The singer doesn't look like Bennett, but Brady seems perfect for the stage nonetheless. He's tall, friendly and ruggedly handsome. His silver-black hair is brilliantined back. And he's good.

When he doesn't sound like Bennett, he leans to Sinatra. Brady croons a popular medley of hits — *Kansas City*, *I Left My Heart in San Francisco*, *New York, New York*, *My Kind of Town*.

The crowd obviously loves him. He talks basketball to the men and sings eye-to-eye to the ladies: "*I wanna' be around, to pick up the pieces, when somebody breaks your heart . . .*" The women may be too old to swoon, but mentally they're dropping like flies.

Brady concludes his set and returns the boss' flattering introduction: "*And now, folks, it's showtime! Will you*

**LENNY HITS** the stage skipping, dangling a big ball microphone. His smile twinkles a little like the teeny diamonds in his watch. But, for the moment, all the crowd sees is jacket: It's white with rhinestones and red roses and American Eagles.

It's Lenny and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Actually, it's his Bicentennial jacket, handmade at Nudie's, in North Hollywood for \$1,100. Compliment the coat later, and Lenny agrees, "Oh, yeah, it's real flashy, man. You ain't kiddin'!" Lenny says "man" a lot.

ter Borge. He warms up the snowbirds with jokes, many of which have simple, unoffensive sexual connotations. No one, almost no place, is spared.

He kids St. Petersburg, calling it "The Geritol Proving Grounds" and "Sciatica City."

He's a one-man Suncoast Chamber of Commerce. "The weatherman said it's gonna' be 80 degrees tomorrow — 40 degrees in the morning, 40 degrees in the afternoon."

During his monologue, proud vacationers shout out their hometowns — Fort Wayne! Dayton! Evanston! Grand Rapids! Invariably, Dee has played them and he usually responds with the name of a local club or hotel.

"Yeah, it's a wonderful hotel," he says. "A clean hotel—you can hear them washing up all hours of the night."

Old jokes, maybe. But the laughs are brand new.

Twenty minutes later, it's organ time. Lenny slides onto the bench and removes the white monogrammed "L D" cover that protects the Hammond Model A. Before playing, he changes eyeglasses.

"When you get past 50, your eyes are the second thing that goes."

Lenny fiddles with some knobs and levers. Then he unbuttons the Dreamcoat, dons a railroad engineer's cap, places a tiny red lantern atop the dashboard and turns the organ into a locomotive for *Freight Train*. A few stories and silly hats later, he's playing *Southern Nights* and *Mule Train*. Each number seems to have an accompanying monologue. He prefaces *Plantation Boogie* by calling it "the one that started it all."

Earlier, Lenny was asked what made the instrumental such a big hit. "Bill Haley and the Comets had just come out with rock 'n' roll," he explained, and then grasped for another analogy. "It must have been the timing, man."

**AT THE END** of his set, Lenny thanks the audience for its patience and sense of humor. Some of his bluer jokes have clearly disturbed a customer or two.

although they're not really vulgar. The apology is similar to the one Don Rickles uses after he's finished insulting people. It seems to smooth the few ruffled feathers and Dee leaves the stage prescribing more fun:

"We've got the biggest dance floor in the club."

Brady reappears onstage. "Lenny Dee, let's hear it, the man works hard!"

Nobody knows better than Lenny Dee how hard Lenny Dee works. He has played the Kings Inn five nights a week for the past five years. Before that, he appeared at his Dolphin Den on St. Petersburg Beach for a decade. And before that, it was the Desert Ranch Motel's Hawaiian Inn for six years.

He has watched the beach nightlife change for the worse. "Twenty years ago, places on the beach would be crowded to closing time. Today, midnight comes and you couldn't get them to watch Jesus Christ ride a bicycle on Gulf Boulevard. Tourists, you see, they want to get some rest so they can walk on the beach at 7 a.m."

Dee has no immediate plans to retire, but in the same breath he mentions that "the right price" — up in Seven-Figure City — could persuade him pretty quickly to sell the club. But not the Model A.

"When I wrap it up, it's coming home to the house. It's not for sale. It's like my right hand."

**LATER, LENNY SAYS** he'd like to play down the retirement stuff. He's still looking ahead. Thinking about making a record with Brady. Wanting to expand the Kings Inn clientele. Trying to make the good life a little better for him and his wife Hendrica, a former Miss Holland. He has five children, ages 39 to 19, from two marriages. The Dees and their youngest daughter live in a large house on Bayway Isles.

"I don't know, I don't really need the money," he says, when pressed about his performing future. "I guess performing just stays in the old blood. Some nights you just don't feel like partying but, what the hell, you get out there and do it. That's show biz, man."





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