



Joe Gilchrist lived a full and fun life, and he knew it

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By Fran Thompson

His nephews Lane and Mike were already friends and I knew his brother Lane from covering City Council for the old Gulf Breeze Sentinel in the 1980's. I had tossed mullets from Florida into Alabama and joined the boys for Flora-'Bama detours on the way back to Pensacola Beach from rugby games at Battleship Park. But I didn't become part of Joe Gilchrist's Flora-Bama family until I made the bistro my living room when I moved four miles to the east of the now world famous bistro and stayed there for the 14 years that preceded Hurricane Ivan.

The Point Restaurant was as close as we had to a community center back then. The owner was David Lively. Bonnie Powell ran the Point front end for Dave, and she was Innerarity Point's grandmother. Exactly like Joe, Bonnie knew that you can never have too many best friends or new friends.

Joe had help throughout his journey of trying to live the spectacularly fun life that was a direct result of the institution he owned on the state line. In the early days, Joe borrowed funds from

Dave to get his employees through the winter. He was able to buy the Flora-Bama from his childhood friends Bubba and Connie Tampary only because they allowed him a workable payment plan. They signed the contract on April 17, 1978 – Joe’s birthday. Joe would want me to mention all of this because he remained fiercely thankful to those men. Joe carried forward gratitude, not grudges. That was just one of his many gifts.

Ken Lambert, the ‘Bama’s first musician, was with Joe at his recent 80th birthday party. So was J Hawkins. Those two, Darrel Roberts and Jimmy Louis are the early ‘Bama possible-probables. They were songwriters as well as characters. Jimmy hitchhiked from Fort Walton for his first ‘Bama gig. Joe knew Jimmy was his kind of entertainer when he saw him moon the audience from the stage and then walk off over in Fort Walton. Darrel, in addition to writing songs with Dean Dillon and Buddy Cannon, worked as a trauma nurse. Ken lived in a van and Darrel and Jimmy on sailboats across the street from the ‘Bama. Post closing-time target practice on the beach behind the lounge was not uncommon.

Surely drawn by the unique sensitivities of the owner and the musicians on stage, other assorted characters began frequenting the ‘Bama. Some owned penthouse condos in what was then an emerging market. Others lived in campers. It made no difference to Joe or his patrons, which from the beginning included the NAS Pensacola community. Joe was unwavering in his universal support for our military. He used to run shuttles back and forth from NAS Pensacola to the Flora-Bama to pick up sailors. I’m not sure if it was just my joke that the bus picked passengers up in front of the NAS purser’s office.

In the early days, the Flora-Bama was a popular place for construction crews to cash payroll checks on Fridays, which I thought was a wonderful marketing tool to add to the happy hour crowd.

By the time I became a regular, the Flora-Bama was busy during the summer and always on weekend afternoons with Rusty McHugh and Jezebel’s Chillin’ trading sets. But there were winter Sundays even in the early 1990’s when only a handful of people would hear Larry T. Wilson, Chris Penese and John Joiner play world class music they often penned themselves. What made Joe different from the beginning was not his willingness to lose money by paying musicians on slow nights. He was different because he encouraged them to play their own songs. And eventually it worked. Jimmy Buffett, Jimmy Hall and John Prine played there in the early years. Kenny Chesney, John Rich and Tanya Tucker came later. I’m still in awe that I was able to hear Midland play a no cover show there on a Saturday afternoon a couple months before they played the CMTs.

Friends like Rock Killough would bring in Nashcats Red Lane and Hank Cochran to the beach for post tourist season weekends. Other hit songwriters followed. So, Joe decided to rent out the Pensacola Saenger to showcase these hall-of-famers. After one year, 1984, he wisely decided it would be more fun to lose \$75K throwing a songwriters fest at his own bar.

The Frank Brown Songwriters Fest was too good an idea to not share with the rest of the Gulf Coast, but the eight or so years when the only stage was in that still richly intimate inside room at the 'Bama are particularly special. Joe would almost always end the evenings by buying a last call round. It's where locals got to know Billy Joe Shaver, Larry Jon Wilson and Alan Rhody on stage and in the audience. On those nights, I didn't think there was anybody in the world having more fun than we were. Joe tried to make every day like that, as one of his many euphonisms was his belief that "fun is fair."

There didn't seem to be any separation between how Joe ran his business and how he lived his life. He was always about community service and being fair to everybody. During the 10 years we were both on the Perdido Chamber Board, Joe was always the first to step up and sponsor everything from snowbird welcome parties to live music at chamber socials to military appreciation galas.

An original member of the Pirates of Lost Treasure, he may have the record for the total number of krewes that he graced with his presence at their balls. Maybe he did stress over things. But I never saw it. I would tease him that he was more of a stress conduit, passing it on to his equally kind assistant, Connie Bloom. Joe's solution to most dilemmas was to buy a round of beverages, ask Ken to get up and play a few songs and look at the situation from a new perspective.

The Flora-Bama got exponentially busier after Alan Jackson, Clint Black, Travis Tritt, Hank Jr. and especially Garth Brooks made country cool to the masses in 1993. Everybody wanted "friends in low places." And the 'Bama was at sea level.

Bad investment choices after Hurricane Ivan almost cost Joe the Flora-Bama. For those that were not here, the Flora-Bama was leveled. Perdido Key Dr. washed away. It was during that long Ivan recovery process that Joe did his best work as a community leader. I specifically remember a block party almost immediately after FDOT put up a temporary road from the Key to Innerarity. The 'Bama possible-probables played music from a flatbed parked in what is now a Publix parking lot while we sipped on booze that was recovered from the 'Bama. I was still picking up newspaper stands from people's yards. But Joe stayed after me to get my newspaper back in print, making it very clear that I should let him know if I needed financial help to do so.

I don't know if it was irony, luck or fate, but the man who would make sure the Flora-Bama would remain a honky-tonk helped me connect again with our readership. A mutual friend, the late John Brunick, told me John McInnis was the man to talk to about distributing my newspapers from the toll both at the Foley Beach Express. John's company built the toll road. One phone call is all it took for a man that I had never met to give me reason enough to get back to work.

My first post Ivan issue is still my all-time favorite. The cover had a picture of Joe's great

friends, Blitz Poston and Randy Cudd, in front of the Welcome to Perdido Key sign at the west end of the Theo Barrs Bridge. The cutline: "Excuse our Mess. We are remodeling." Joe loved it. He knew there was healing power in a good laugh.

It was not a certainty that the Flora-Bama was going to come back. There could be a condo there now. Thank goodness new majority owner John McInnis wanted to rebuild the bar so it would closely resemble what it looked like before Ivan leveled it. Remember, John had to re-build the main bar 18 ft. up in the air. But those are the original bricks on the outside front walls. It's the same bar slab, and many of the same pictures are in the same places, including a couple hundred of mine. Some of the bras hanging around might even be pre-Ivan. Pat McClellan, the man Joe snatched from Seville Quarter and gave equity to in the 1980's, and Joe are still part of the ownership group. The fourth partner, Cam Price, is an Army Ranger and as devoted to honoring our military as Joe and Pat.

Joe said he brought Pat in to run the back of the house while he schmoozed out front only to realize Pat was a world class schmoozer himself. But with partners who were great businessmen and fellow humanitarians, Pat and Joe were free to schmooze away when the place re-opened. I took pictures of Joe three times this past April: At a release party for Mike Cotton's documentary about him, at the Mullet Toss and at his birthday party. We talked about taking a group to San Diego this fall. We talked about a bet we made about whether Joe Biden would make it through his four year term or not. Like always, Joe bought beverages for everybody that was within a 10 yard radius of him.

I remember a couple of years back telling J Hawkins that Joe hasn't changed much since I've known him. He always partied harder than any other six people I know. He is still maybe the most generous person I ever met, and he was always egalitarian in nature right down to his core. I saw that just about every time I was around him. He liked people and he was curious about their lives, be they prince or pauper.

Certainly J and I can both be right. And we agree that Joe did more to support and promote live music and songwriting as a creative art on the Al-FL Gulf Coast than any other person ever. Joe took musicians with him to France to party with the artist Nall twice. He took musicians and a group of friends to NYC as soon as possible after 9-11 to support that city and its first responders.

I saw the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, in front of about 40,000 people, change the words to their signature song at City Stages: There's a better world awaiting "down at The Flora-Bama." Jimmy Buffett gave Joe a shout out from the stage at a sold out Madison Square Garden. Hundreds of times I jumped up on stage at the 'Bama to sing obscure Irish ballads when my possible/probable friends would take a break. Joe would offer to pay my tab if I promised not to sing.

One year I scraped together sponsorship money for one of the songwriter's fest nights at the 'Bama. It was very cool. They gave me my own reserved table, a poster behind the stage and a few minutes of mic time. I promised Joe I would not sing. But I lied. Of course, I was not going to use that precious time in front of a full house to talk about our advertising options.

George Ridder who played music, and, I believe, was also the first person to serve burgers at the 'Bama (From an RV he set up in back. – "Eat Here. One Million Flies Can't Be Wrong"), tells a story about Joe finding almost all the possible-probables in the front bar during the Mullet Toss and asking why, as I was singing on the other side of the window, that on the busiest day of the year, with a dozen or so musicians on the clock, "Fran is the only person on stage."

But Joe couldn't stay mad at any of us.

I would think, he could drive whatever vehicle he wanted even back in 1990. But Joe was happy with his old truck and his beat up convertible. He's been known to pull over to pick up trash on Perdido Key Dr.

Joe was a prodigiously generous tipper. I don't know how many employees he has helped through emergencies or how many musicians he has supported with everything from shelter to studio time. I don't know how many kids whose college education he paid for or how many fellow businesses he helped out if only as a way to pay forward what the Tampary brothers did for him. Let's just say it was a lot. He just loved people, including his old friend Danny Henderson, with whom he had many entertaining (for us) debates.

Pensacola Beach was still a laid back beach town in the early 1980's. Via DeLuna was still a two-lane road. Rents were reasonable. I liked it over there. But PB did not have the Flora-Bama and it's incredible array of characters. So living on The Key was immediately and infinitely more fun for the simple reason that I was only four miles from the coolest bar in the world. Because of Joe, I was able to sit amongst hilariously interesting characters nightly. I was able to use a perfect quote, "No sir, but I saw him spit it out," in a story about Billy Walker. I was able to have conversations with Kenny Stabler, my football hero as a teen. I was able to have my name included in a Rusty McHugh song. I was able to hear musicians from Wet Willie to Gatemouth Brown to Kenny Chesney.

Probably the only specific business advice Joe ever gave me was to make sure I charged an appropriate fee for advertising. And I did charge Joe for the full page he bought apologizing for his negativity before Kenny Chesney's nationally televised Flora-Bama Jama that brought 40,000 folks together on the Flora-Bama beach in August of 2014. It was spectacular and will now go down as part of Joe's legacy even though he did not like the idea. A picture of Joe's musical hero, Mickey Newbury that I put on our cover still hangs behind a stage at the 'Bama. Another of Joe's favorites is a shot of Joe, Pat and the most famous bartender in Pensacola history, Trader Jon, holding up mullets before the Toss. Seeing that pic, another customer asked me how much I charged for covers. When I told him I didn't sell our covers, he pointed to Trader Jon and asked if I thought it was an advertisement for the Flora-Bama. I sold him five and sold

about 600 other covers before easing off in the past year or so. Thanks for the advice Joe. A couple years back I was having my usual great time there when John turned to me and said he couldn't imagine the Flora-Bama without music. Well, neither can I and thanks to John and his vision about continuing what Joe started, we don't have to. Joe would always say that everybody is entitled to a mistake or three in their life. We all make them. The key is to reflect instead on the joy and the fun. And it is so easy to smile when it comes to reflecting on good times at the 'Bama.

I am glad Joe was able to see himself and his band of gal pals on the cover of this year's Mullet Toss issue. OBHS winning its second consecutive softball championship is a huge story on Pleasure Island this week, but I am going with a shot of Joe, his daughter Marjorie and grandkids Hannah and Olivia from his birthday party.

We did not speak for long that day. But Joe specifically mentioned that he especially loved being there with his daughter and grandkids and how lucky he was to have so many of the "characters" that were always drawn to him around him (and vice-versa) that day.

We were lucky to have you around us as well Joe.

RIP my friend.