

# No recognition in double life

By Joe Cannariato

Not getting respect has propelled a major comedian to great success, but for many individuals in the entertainment industry that joke is a nasty fact of life.

In Milwaukee, George Busateri bears testimony to that.

By day, Busateri works as an arranger, producer and songwriter for a number of entertainers based here and in Las Vegas, including Sha Na Na member Johnny Contardo.

It's largely unheralded work.

By night, Busateri leads the talented yet relatively unknown George Busateri Trio. The group is the house band Wednesday through Sunday at Sardino's (1617 N. Farwell Ave.), one of Milwaukee's few remaining havens for a full-time club musician.

As a producer-arranger, Busateri loves the behind-the-scenes work but admits it sometimes is frustrating.

"When your job is to make other people look good, it upsets you sometimes when it's all finished and you don't receive any recognition," he said.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm happy with what I do. What bugs me is people are so naive in thinking that musicians do it all themselves."

The public tends to believe that stars are just — born. They are not. People with talent are. Stars are created by energetic individuals like Busateri who devote long hours to produce a single that may run just 2½ minutes.

The 33-year-old arranger agreed with that observation during an interview at Cornerstone Studios, a South Side recording facility. Busateri gestured expansively over his mixing board and confided, "I've resurrected more junk (music) in this place."

One of his recent production projects was a country-flavored, middle-of-the-road single, "Loving On Borrowed Time," that's receiving airplay on several local radio stations.

Busateri's five weekly gigs at Sardino's are a refreshing catharsis for him.

The trio features Busateri on piano, organ and vocals, Jay Herman on bass and vocals and Scott Wenzel (a member of Magewind as well) on drums. The trio struck out on its own last September after six years of backing various performers here and on the road.

"At first we just weren't together at all because we were so used to a front person," Busateri explained. "We started from the most embryonic stage a group can be in and blossomed into what I consider a strong trio."



Singer-keyboardist George Busateri cooks at the piano bar at Sardino's on Farwell.

— Photo by David Vigue

## MILWAUKEE BEAT

Initial skepticism about the trio quickly evaporates when Sardino's intimate atmosphere combines with the band's skilled musicianship and excellent audience rapport.

One word aptly describes the trio. Professional. Whether playing to a packed house on a Saturday night or 10 people lined up along the glass-topped piano bar on a snowy Thursday night, the band gives the same high caliber performance.

"Sardino's is a good place for us, they let us do what we want," Busateri said.

The trio easily handles widely varied musical styles. One night gives listeners the chance to hear high quality pop, rock, blues, jazz, reggae, bebop, R&B, golden oldies and old standards.

"If it's a good song, period, we do it," Busateri explained.

But the band is caught in a vicious circle of anonymity-versus-employment.

"We're here cranking out but nobody knows it because the owners can't afford to advertise," Busateri said. "If they advertise then there wouldn't be enough money to pay musicians. Then people ask why aren't the good musicians working today."

Busateri believes the late '70s disco craze mortally wounded club musicians and forced them out, leaving noth-

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Busateri rehearses in the Cornerstone recording studio with Sha Na Na's Johnny Contardo.

— Sentinel photo

ing more than a void now that disco has died a long overdue death.

"People say Milwaukee music stinks, but give 15 bands a place to play regularly and it would be all right," he declared.

Busateri's dues-paying began with nun-taught piano lessons at age 7, high school bands, a University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee music degree with a correspondence course from Juilliard, music director for the old "Funny Farm" morning show, six years on the road and many gigs in Milwaukee in the past few years.

His addiction to music has sustained him through the valleys. That addiction has never waned.

"I admit I probably have a distorted view of life," Busateri said. "There's a lot of things I'd give up for music, including marriage. I'm organized when it comes to my business, music. It's when it comes to the rest of my life that I'm in disarray."