GENE NORDAN, AN ENTERTAINING MAN

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Kerry Gene Nordan, who has lived most of his life on the ocean side of Jacksonville, Florida, enjoys deep North Carolina roots. He first saw the light of day on Tuesday, January 19, 1943 in Duke Hospital in Durham, fourteen miles from the family home in Hillsborough, the county seat of Orange County. His father, Edward Kerry Nordan, was born in Cumberland County in 1918; his mother, Laura Ruth Dandridge Nordan, was born in Alamance in 1927, less than thirty miles from Hillsborough.
Eno [Cone] Mill, Hillsborough, NC ca. 1950

Source¹ Orange County, North Carolina historic information cache

They lived in a duplex with no running water nor inside toilets which they rented from their employer, Cone Mills. As mill workers, they earned little money but they were frugal and their church, the charismatic Church of God, served both their religious and social needs. Two year old Gene began singing in church on Sundays at age two; his musical talent was so obvious that, four years later, in 1949, the pastor recommended that his father buy him a piano. He was an only child then and clearly talented, so his parents bought him an old upright on the installment plan and arranged for lessons. The sacrifice paid off immediately. After his first lesson in 1951, he showed his parents that he could play the first song in the lesson from memory! Gene’s knowledge and skill progressed to the point that they bought him a new Wurlitzer spinet piano, again paying in installments.²

¹ http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~orangecountync/.

² “Cone Mills Corporation was a world leader in textile manufacturing of corduroy, flannel, denim and other cotton fabrics for most of the 20th century. The company was based in Greensboro, North Carolina and its mills were mostly in North and South Carolina. The company was known as the world’s largest producer of denim. It was disestablished in 2004.”
He made music his entrée to a better life. Hours of listening, study, and practice paid off. The piano served many functions. It helped him make friends with his “townie” classmates. In the 1950s, people often gathered around a piano in a home or a church and sang. He made friends with college-bound peers and became one himself. His music teacher fostered his talent and encouraged his ambitions. Entry into competitions, including those at Duke University, honed his skills, and, more importantly, helped him realize that he could compete with the best, both musically and socially. As he was finishing Hillsborough High, his teacher got him a scholarship to the Sherwood Music School in Chicago, founded by noted pianist William H. Sherwood in the late 1800s. It was more than a conservatory; it had a collegiate component as well. Alas, young love changed his plans. Leaving his girlfriend behind was too much in 1961; he was an eighteen year old male. He declined the scholarship and entered the University of North Carolina through the auspices of a friend who was executive secretary of admissions. Ironically, or not, he and his girlfriend parted ways that summer of 1961.

He had almost no money, only $300 in savings, but he did have talent and pluck. That a major state university and his home were in the same county was fortunate. He was blessed with parental and sibling support. Gene, however, would never have succeeded unless he had grit. Determination and hard work make a difference. He had both.

It was the early 60s and the rock ‘n roll revolution in music was well underway; he formed a band composed of three African American and two white musicians. A racially integrated band was unusual in the first half of the Sixties but teenagers were more concerned about the music than race. They got gigs at places like bars and fraternity houses. Nordan was not a rock ‘n roller at heart; he was being trained in classical music with a side of Tin Pan Alley tunes. So he went solo playing in the private Durham City Club and hotel lounges. He learned the popular music genres while studying classical music. As he said, “this was my "real" education because I switched from classical to popular music." He sung in the University Chorus so he had vocal training as well.


He only got Sunday nights off but he still graduated in four years with a double major in English and Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures.4

![Kerry Gene Nordan, 1965](image)

For two years, 1965-1967, Nordan played piano and sang for the national Jack Tar Hotel chain and in its private clubs. They hosted a monied clientele which enjoyed ballads, show music, and mellow music.5 Pictured below is the hotel in Durham. The chain owned hotels and clubs within the United States and the Caribbean. The work paid well enough, but moving from venue to venue was not suitable for a newlywed.

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5 [WASHINGTON DUKE HOTEL / JACK TAR HOTEL | Open Durham.](open Durham)
He married the twenty-one year old Candace C. Carroll in 1965. She is the daughter of Walter Carroll and Mary Smith. Smith was one of the two daughters of Betty Smith who wrote the famous novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in 1943. Betty Smith wrote other novels—*Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1948), *Maggie-now* (1958), and *Joy in the Morning* (1963). Betty Smith taught creative writing at UNC. Nordan said:

I had the pleasure of knowing Betty Smith very well and she was quite a character. She had a white cat that sat in her lap while she typed with both index fingers. She smoked, but like Bill Clinton, she never inhaled. The ashes on the cigarette would grow longer and longer until they would sprinkle on the cat. When she finished her writing session her white cat was a gray cat.

They moved to Atlanta where he performed at the Banknote Club in Underground Atlanta and the Dinkler Plaza Hotel. Underground Atlanta opened on April 8, 1969 and the Banknote Club became one of its legendary places to
Presidents of the United States and many other dignitaries stayed at the Dinkler Plaza. The Dinkler family had enough self-confidence to integrate its clientele. Because it was prestigious, such a policy change was easier. So life was good for a piano man. Four years out of college in 1969, Lovett Records of Atlanta, Georgia released a 45 RPM record of his “Dreams of Her” and “If I’m Not Myself.” He was married with steady work at fine venues.

Florida came calling and changed his life. One night a man and his fiancé from McDonough, Georgia, heard him at the Bank Note Club. Buddy Welch called his future father-in-law, Preben Johansen of Atlantic Beach, Florida. Johansen was a very successful restauranteur in the Jacksonville area who had remodeled LeChateau after its oceanfront side was destroyed by Hurricane Dora in early September, 1964.

With a federal government loan Johansen reopened a year later. His establishment was even more elegant than the original, including a very nice and profitable piano bar. His piano player had left not long before; Johansen


7 Gene Nordan, A: Dreams of Her B: If I'm Not Myself. Lovett USA 45-LV-69711 1969 7".
got lucky when Welch found Nordan. Johansen flew to Atlanta, threw his business card on the piano, and invited Nordan to come work for him in Florida.

So he joined Le Chateau Restaurant in Atlantic Beach, Florida in 1970; very quickly, he achieved fame at its piano bar. The postcard below shows him at his piano with an adoring crowd listening attentively to his singing and playing. Nordan attracted many customers, including such visiting luminaries as Liberace, Barry Goldwater, Betty Grable, Jane Russell, Mamie Van Doren, Victor Borge, Prince Andrew, David and Julie Eisenhower, and Taylor Caldwell. Nordan played there until it closed in 1983. He and the bar passed into legend. Years later, after Le Chateau and its famous bar were gone, Nordan wrote the songs and starred in “Piano Bar,” a musical he wrote which has been staged more than once locally by Players By The Sea.

While performing at Le Chateau, he purchased the King House in Mayport from Clara and Gloria King, who had inherited it in 1977 from John King. John had fun for years telling the gullible and others stories of ghosts and strange occurrences. Nordan and his wife Candace never experienced
anything supernatural when they owned the buildings. Nordan removed the very old Arnau house attached to the rear of the King house as well as the watch tower in the back yard which had been used to see ships entering the St. Johns River. His plans to convert it into a restaurant with piano bar went awry when his surveyor revealed that he lacked enough room to build a parking lot large enough to get a liquor license according to local government rules. Profits from liquor were essential. Nordan moved quickly, selling the house to Ray Dillmon (Harbour Lights Restaurant) and an attorney for $36,000 thirty days after buying it. He earned a small profit.

Le Chateau closed in 1983, so he took his talents to the piano bar at the Sea Turtle Hotel and Restaurant on the ocean front in Atlantic Beach. The Turtle was originally founded and owned by Alpha O. Paynter. Restaurateur Joe Adeeb bought and remodeled it in June, 1951. He enjoyed a good run there under several owners but left. Sea Turtle Associates of Massachusetts and WFC Realty Company, Inc. had agreed to pay his health insurance but reneged. When he found out he had been without health insurance for a year, he sued for breach of contract and won a judgment in 1993 to the tune of $10,207, including court costs and attorney fees.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Final Judgment, Case Number 93-00244 CC, Duval County, Florida, Circuit Court, May 13, 1993.
Nordan lived on Beach Avenue since the 1970s; his talents brought him success and his home was a far cry from his parents' rented duplex when he was born. He released his album “The Island” in 1985. In total, he has fourteen CDs to his credit; he’s written dozens of original songs; and he has written or helped to write four musicals (The Piano Bar at the Chateau, The Green Room, Fetterhoff, and Talking Shoes). His songs and albums include:

“The Island”, released by Genesis Records in 1985; “I’m Calling Your Bluff” (1992); “Dance around the fire” (1993); and “Long Gone Baby” from the “Drinking Wine in the Summertime” album (Genesis Records), which is on YouTube.
He met Lyell B. Clay, a very wealthy benefactor of West Virginia University, at the Plantation Country Club in Ponte Vedra and they became close friends. Nordan met Phil Faini, Dean of the College of Creative Arts of West Virginia University, in 1996, when he was performing at the YMCA Auditorium in Charleston, West Virginia at the invitation of Clay, who would soon be responsible for the Lyell B. Clay Concert Theatre. Faini and Nordan would have foyers named after them.

After a two-year collaboration with by Frank Gagliano, who held a chair in Theatre, the musical “Piano Bar” premiered on April 23, 1998 at West Virginia University. Nordan not only wrote the music but also played the lead. Gagliano wrote the book. “Piano Bar” was a hit and was revived for other venues. Renamed “Piano Bar at Le Chateau”, the musical was performed at Players-by-the-Sea in Jacksonville Beach in 2000, 2004, 2006, and 2009. Players-by-the-Sea posted video excerpts on YouTube.

Love of music united Nordan and Clay in spite of the fact that Clay was a very prominent, highly educated, and wealthy businessman. Clay graduated from the elite Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, N.J. in 1942; Williams College in 1944; University of Virginia Law School, graduating in 1948 after serving in the Marine Corps, and then graduate degrees—M. A. degree from Marshall University in 1956 and a MBA from West Virginia in 1975. He involved himself in public office before joining the Charleston Daily Mail. Eventually, his Clay Communications, Inc. (co-owned with his brother) had four newspapers West Virginia and North Carolina and four television stations. Lyell also owned two radio stations in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Lyell’s lifelong interest in music ranges from jazz to opera and has resulted in the composition of approximately 30 copyrighted songs and eight CDs. Lyell also was active in the past in barbershop music as a member of the Cavalairs Quartet at U.Va. while in law school and played banjo and bass with the Lawrenceville Dance Band.  

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The Atlantic Beach Experimental Theatre (ABET) produced his musical “Fetterhoff For Hire” in 2012. As ABET described it:

It’s 1946, LA, WWII is over and private eye, Harry Fetterhoff, faces the most puzzling case of his career; a client with a dual personality, a murder that reaches into the highest echelons of the film industry and clues that seem to go nowhere. His world is packed with colorful characters starting with Ginger, his girl Friday; a studio head; a night club chanteuse; and a mentally unbalanced woman on a mission. Will he put the pieces of the puzzle together in time to solve it all or not in this tuneful and nostalgic tribute to film noir?  

Nordan was never short of work. Around 2000, he started playing in Ponte Vera Beach at Gio’s Café and then at Mackenzies Steak House and Piano Bar, both in Sawgrass Village. He owned ten percent of Mackenzie’s. His professional life was going well but his personal life encountered a bump in the road. He and Candace divorced on February 21, 1987. His professional life continued and he

11 Correspondence with Gene Nordan; Florida Time-Union, May 22, 2002.

12 Circuit Clerk, Duval County, Florida has a good public records search engine. http://oncore.duvalclerk.com/Search.aspx
displayed his talent in many places. From 2005 through 2015, he performed for CSX the Corporation on the Governor's Train at the Kentucky Derby. CSX booked him for The Ryder Cup, St. Patrick’s Day in Savannah many times, the Georgia-Tennessee football game, and in Athens, Georgia. He played at a golf resort for a month in Tavira, Portugal. He took his own group of thirty-four people to perform in Michael's Pub on a Celebrity Cruise Line to Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. He is a member of Tree Publishers owned by Jack Stapp as a staff writer in Nashville. For the last three summers, he escapes the Florida heat and humidity by performing for Linville Ridge Golf community, Grandfather Mountain, NC. ¹³ He assesses his career thusly:

I've had a couple of brushes with the big time. An agent hooked me up with RCA records but at the last minute before they signed, I was dropped. On another occasion, an agent from Las Vegas came to Le Chateau and asked me to come and sign a contract. He said he was going to make me a "star" in Vegas. So I decided to take the train to Miami instead of flying. I didn't sleep at all on the way and I went to bed for a nap at 7 AM. When the agent called me at 10 AM I couldn't wake up and I was talking in-coherently to him. Needless to say, he hung up and never contacted me again. I'm sure the thought I was a druggie when in reality I've never done drugs and I never drink more than 1 or 2 drinks per week if that.

The Beaches gained as a result. The Beaches Area Historical Society honored him in 2014 as a Beaches Legend.

Since 1994, he has been helped in his endeavors by his second wife, María Elena Lozano Nordan. She was born in Barcelona, Spain in December, 1953, and immigrated to the United States seven years later. Her first marriage was to Steven H. Mullen but they divorced in February 11, 1992. The Nordans owned 1417 Ferris Street from December, 1995 until January, 2009 but their home has been Atlantic Beach. He and María live in the former Daniels House of Mayport. They moved the house to an empty 112 x 50 foot lot on Beach Avenue, Atlantic Beach, next to the house he owned. He got the house from the City of Jacksonville for the cost of moving it, a task that included obtaining permission to truck it across the runway of Naval Station Mayport! The City had sold it in

¹³ http://www.linvilleridge.com/
order to make more room at the public boat ramp but was willing to give it away when the purchaser reneged on the deal. Time became important.

The Nordans renovated the old house, turning it into a showplace. It has 9’ ceilings, a fireplace, and twenty-six beautiful windows. Nordan also hung two chandeliers from the Chateau Restaurant. He also used eight of its dining chairs. One outstanding feature is the use of front door diamond panes from architect Henry Klutho’s original house. Klutho designed many of Jacksonville’s finest buildings after the great fire of 1901.

Former Daniels house, Mayport, Florida  Photo by María Nordan
In 2011, he attended the 50th reunion of his high school class, visiting with classmates, and, of course, played the piano.¹⁴

He never stops. On January 30-31, 2015, he performed “An evening with Gene Nordan & Friends”, a fundraiser for Players by the Sea. He played a grand piano with three accompanists (bass, percussion, saxophone, flute, and clarinet). Various singers came to sing standards as well as some songs from “The Piano Bar at Le Chateau”. A few days later on February 5th, he played for Nina Johansen’s 90th birthday at Vicker’s Landing retirement in Ponte Vedra. Then he and Maria traveled to India and Nepal in February. He played at the Sawgrass Country Club through May, 2015 before leaving for Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina to work and play golf.

Gene is an energetic, entertaining man.

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16 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMrXCltoZtE.