

## The National Arts Centre at 40



**By Gord Atkinson**

In the summer of 1969 Ottawa became the artistic centre of Canada. It was the opening season of the magnificent multi-purpose complex, *The National Arts Centre*. When its doors opened on June 2nd the capital instantly became a major theatrical community.

My recollections of that memorable event and my participation in its grand opening are etched in my mind's eye. The reality of those exciting days and nights brings back vivid memories of old friends and colleagues.

It was my privilege to record the English language commentary for a bilingually taped presentation that guided opening day visitors throughout the massive building. The audio tour included the winding hallways, the performance areas (the opera, theatre, studio, rehearsal rooms) and backstage technical facilities.

Outside on the patios and lawns there was a festive atmosphere as musicians, street performers and thespians entertained the throngs of people. Opening night a sell-out audience was awe-struck when the beautiful massive, multicoloured curtain went up on the stage of the Opera. Director General Hamilton Southam bedazzled the audience. Two commissioned ballets were performed by the National Ballet of Canada. Following the death of Mr. Southam July 1, 2008, the Opera was re-dedicated to honour his memory as Southam Hall.

The NAC's reputation for excellence from its touring productions and well travelled orchestra quickly spread throughout Canada and indeed throughout the world. The NAC Orchestra's stature was quickly established by the guiding hand of its first conductor, Mario Bernardi.

In the past 40 years Canada's premiere artists and the world's most prominent performers have appeared on the stages of the NAC. Ottawa's famous sons, Paul Anka and Rich Little, have made multiple homecoming engagements. International stars were so impressed with the ambience of the NAC and the warmth of Ottawa audiences that they became frequent headliners.

Two of the famous names that became synonymous with our arts centre were Liberace and Harry Belafonte. A short time after its opening, the late pianist, who made the candelabra his identifiable prop, was on stage for the first of his NAC concerts. It was at that time that we first met. I wondered how the candelabra became part of his showbiz persona: "I was very impressed with a movie I saw in 1945 based on the life of Chopin. It was called *A Song to Remember*. The candelabra were prominently displayed and so I started using the candelabra as a luminous stage prop." The flamboyant international star often said that he felt comfortable and at ease in what he described as "the intimate atmosphere of the Opera."

Harry Belafonte was also captivated by the ambience of the stately hall. As recently as a few years ago he was on stage at the NAC, where he received thunderous applause for another of his

trademark, dynamic performances. At the conclusion of our last interview he expressed his gratitude for the support he has received over many years – and especially from his Ottawa audiences. “To me, there’s been nothing more rewarding than the opportunity to stand on a stage to give your gift to an audience and to have them say, ‘thank you we approve of who and what you are.’ That’s the ultimate to me – no artist could even ever ask for a more meaningful endorsement.”

On a personal note, I will long remember the thrill of hosting musical presentations and introducing old showbiz friends on stage at the NAC. The camaraderie of my media friends at Arts Centre functions was always pleasurable and special. Time has reduced our ranks, but not our memories. A most pleasant and respected member of our NAC fraternity was my friend of over 50 years, Mildred MacDonald, who left us recently after enduring a long illness. We were co-workers back in the early 1950s at CFRA. At the CBC, where she was a popular broadcaster for over five decades, she always had a smile in her voice for all her friends and countless radio listeners. It was my great pleasure to be her colleague for over 20 years on the pages of *Forever Young*.

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