

The Mastrianni Quartet

Starting young may be an understatement for the Mastrianni Quartet – Alfred Mastrianni Jr. was the oldest of the four siblings and still only 11-years-old when the group made their debut performance. Growing up in Plainville, the Mastrianni siblings - Alfred Jr., Michael (Mickey), Catherine, and Mary Lou - never thought of themselves as extraordinary; they played with the neighborhood kids during the summer, attended Plainville schools during the school year, came home and did their homework just as any other kid would. However, there was one thing that set them apart: in between the mundane tasks of a normal childhood, the Mastrianni siblings were accomplished musician beloved by the Plainville community and beyond.

It all began when Alfred, practicing guitar in the family's kitchen, encouraged Catherine to sing along to what he was playing. When their mother heard, she recognized their talent immediately and was quick to encourage and foster it. Before long, Alfred and Catherine found themselves on stage at their first performance – a dinner honoring Governor John H. Trumbull. The Mastrianni's went on to play many shows, sometimes two or three a night. Over time, they grew from a duo to a trio and, finally, the Mastrianni Quartet with the additions of brother, Mickey, and sister, Mary Lou, respectively.



Most notably, the Mastrianni Quartet performed on Major Bowe's Amateur Hour appearing as the Mastrianni Four in 1939. Major Bowe's Amateur Hour was a radio program during which host, Major Bowes, would feature acts from across the country in a talent-show style variety show, The Original Amateur Hour was named the-most-listened-to program in the United States.

The siblings' mother had written to the show making a case for the Quartet and soon, they were invited to audition. The family drove to New York City where they found themselves not only accepted onto the show but asked to perform that

very same night. Out of the 10-12 acts that usually competed and performed on Major Bowes, The Mastrianni Quartet won and, what is more, were invited back to perform on the show a second time – and won again. The Quartet's performance on Major Bowes demonstrated what was so special about the siblings; not only were they extremely talented at such a young age, but they were professionals at charming their audiences and anyone who had the pleasure of meeting them.

Indeed, it is clear there was no lack of personality among the siblings. Catherine and Mickey lovingly recount the difficulties Mary Lou ran into during their second performance on Major Bowes. Upon arrival, four-year-old Mary Lou vehemently refused to perform her part though would not divulge why. Alfred, Catherine, Mickey, and Major Bowes himself tried to figure out what was wrong until finally, Mary Lou let them all know she was hungry. Major Bowes sent the family on their way with an hour and \$50 to buy dinner, after which Mary Lou happily performed.

Other notable shows included a performance at Lake Compounce, Radio Station WICC, and their New Year's Eve performance at the Seaview Hotel in New Haven. The Seaview Hotel was an extremely popular hotel in New Haven at Savin Rock – a popular amusement park in the nineteen twenties and thirties. The Mastrianni's were invited to play in the upstairs portion of the hotel at midnight to celebrate the New Year. However, upon hearing them upstairs, the downstairs crowd requested that they come down and play for them as well. It was evident that anyone who had the privilege of hearing the siblings perform were captivated.



However, the Mastrianni kids were doing more for their family and the community than just delighting them with their talent. During the nineteen thirties and forties it was common for audience to “tip” performing musicians by throwing money onto the stage – these tips and the occasional payment the children received for their shows helped support their family financially. In fact, the Quartet was so loved that by the end of most shows the money thrown on stage would fill up Mickey and Alfred's ten-gallon hats, providing income. However, their impact extended beyond their own household, in addition to many local fundraisers, The Mastrianni Quartet participated in multiple bond rallies to help raise bonds for World War II. In fact, Mickey's signature performance tie, along with the chance to a request a song for the Quartet to perform was auctioned off for a pledge of \$1,000.

As the children grew up, shows became fewer and farther between, before the Mastrianni Quartet finally came to end in 1945 when Alfred was drafted in World War II. However, the official end to the band did not mean the siblings lost their love for music, nor their bond with one another. The Mastrianni siblings continued to play music together for family and friends whenever they got the chance.