

The organ never went out of style for a musician who always has plenty of work.



HOLLY McQUEEN / REGISTER PHOTOS

# Play it again, Sam

By KYLE MUNSON  
REGISTER MUSIC CRITIC

**B**oth of them were born in Chicago. Both are rugged survivors of the nightclub music circuit.

Both have become synonymous with a repertoire where jazz, blues, funk and soul meet on the street corner. Where Ray Charles, Jimmy Smith and Stevie Wonder commingle. Where sin and salvation always are just a few chords removed.

This is the story on the one hand of Sam Salomone, born Dec. 20, 1942, in the Chicago suburb of Elmwood Park. As a jazz and blues organist based in Des Moines for decades, he has become one of Iowa's most revered and recognizable working musicians. He was inducted into the Des Moines Jazz Hall of Fame in 2001 and

**Stays in key:** Sam Salomone is a fan of organ music and he takes exceptional care of this instrument. When necessary, a Minnesota repairman does work to keep the music flowing smoothly.

into the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame the following year. You can currently hear him at weekly gigs Sunday and Monday nights in the Des Moines metro, and at even more concerts around the state with the Cedar Falls-based Blue Band.

But this is also the story of Salomone's chosen instrument: the Hammond organ model B-3 that was born Oct. 14, 1954, in one of Laurens Hammond's Chicago factories.

"It's not everybody for the organ," Salomone will admit, even though he has devoted his life to this specific, vintage instrument.

### Electric motor

The Hammond company was making clocks and other gadgets long before it debuted its first organ in 1935. It was the synchronous electric motor that Hammond developed for its clocks that would become the key to creating its organs' signature sound. By nature of its sturdiness and the percussion sounds that were added, the B-3 came to be adopted by jazz and blues musicians as the Holy Grail of organs.

"That proved to be the most popular Hammond ever built," said Harvey Olsen, who serves as keeper of Hammond lore in Chicago. "It wasn't radical. It wasn't like this wonderful new design. It was just a progression of the stuff they had done going back to the 1930s."

Salomone still owns a B-3 that he houses at a recording studio in Des Moines. But for the last six years he has played a modified A-100 built in 1970 — the same guts as the B-3, or "a B-3 in a slightly narrower case," as Olsen put it.

His A-100 is the "first organ of choice" as far as Salomone is concerned. He worships its "clarity" and that it has "more bottom to it."

He's been chasing the perfect Hammond sound all his life. Salomone's first Hammond organ was a smaller L100 Spinnet model, purchased secondhand in Waterloo, where he lived after graduating from high school in Tama, Ia.

### See, hear Sam Salomone

#### Leading his own trios:

- 7-10:30 p.m. Sundays at Trostel's Dish, 12851 University Ave., Suite 400, Clive.
- 8-11:30 p.m. Mondays at Court Avenue Brewing Co., 309 Court Ave.
- Also check [www.samsalomone.com](http://www.samsalomone.com)

#### With the Blue Band:

- 8-11 p.m. Thursday (Thanksgiving) at Connie's Lounge, 3839 Merle Hay Road.
- 8 p.m.-midnight Saturday at Sundown Lounge, Williamsburg.
- 8-11 p.m. Dec. 2 at the Opera House, Fort Dodge.
- 4-7 p.m. Dec. 9 at "Windsor Wonderland," in the parking lot of Sam's Club, Windsor Heights (yes, an outdoors gig).
- 10-11 a.m. Dec. 23 at the Java House in Iowa City, broadcast live on Iowa Public Radio's "Talk of Iowa Live from the Java House."
- Dec. 31 at Hotel Fort Des Moines in a New Year's Eve bash with many other bands.
- Also check [www.theblueband.com](http://www.theblueband.com)



**Travel:** Sam Salomone, right, finds it easy to move the organ, especially with help from fellow band member Nathan Peeples.



# Musician, instrument share Chicago roots

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"I wasn't gifted," he said about his early forays on the keyboard. "Stickin' with it, not giving up, that's what it is. Someday you're probably going to get it right."

Salomone and his A-100 organ

today live at the same address in Des Moines, but the 400-pound organ by necessity is relegated to the road-weary minivan (with 155,000 miles on the odometer) parked in the driveway, kept under wraps and behind tinted windows. It weathers temperature extremes

with minimal fuss.

Salomone's recent Saturday gig at Mickey's Irish Pub in Waukee with Bob Dorr's Blue Band was a blustery night, not cold enough to turn the organ sluggish. He started occasionally sitting in with Dorr's group a decade ago, and has been

a full-time member of it for the last five years.

On Saturday, Salomone backed his minivan up to Mickey's door. First he hauled out his Leslie speaker — the vintage brand that is as important to the Hammond sound as the organ itself. Then came the cushioned bench. Then the bass pedals, disconnected from the organ for easier transport.

Finally the organ itself, wrapped in a black cloth, was rolled out on a dolly with four hand grips.

Saxophonist Nathan Peeples, 26, helped Salomone get situated in the cramped corner of the bar, snaking cords from the organ to the mixing board. The two musicians are frequent travel companions to Blue Band gigs, swapping the favorite music of each other's generation.

"If he sucked, I wouldn't be so happy to do it," Peeples joked about hoisting the organ, and also mentioned Salomone's "legendary record collection."

"I love my old 45s," Salomone admitted.

## Center Street clubs

Watching Jerry Lee Lewis pound a piano keyboard on TV was Salomone's personal equivalent, as a swell lad, of the Beatles on Ed Sullivan.

Hearing Ray Charles' "What'd I

Say" helped seal the deal.

Salomone took early lessons from legendary Des Moines pianist Ernest "Speck" Redd.

His father (who owned and operated the Tick-Tock Lounge in Waterloo) bankrolled Salomone's first B-3, purchased in 1965 from Stoner Piano in Des Moines.

It was Jimmy Smith's definitive jazz recordings with a B-3 that left Salomone entranced. The nascent organist first saw Smith in concert in 1967 in Chicago — a breakthrough in his development.

"Then at least I knew how he did it," said Salomone, who watched Smith's left hand grind out the bass line while the right hand played melody.

That's how Salomone today can fulfill two slots as part of the Blue Band — organist and bassist.

He worked the predominantly black Center Street clubs in Des Moines in the 1960s under the name Sam Anthony — going by his middle name, since there was so much confusion about whether to stress the "e" at the end of his surname. (Don't, according to the original Chicago pronunciation of Salomone. Say sal-oh-MONE.)

Salomone attended Grand View College in Des Moines 1971-72 to study harmony and theory after a stint in Kansas City left him

## Sam Salomone

Sam's age: 62

Organ's age: 51

Sam Salomone's top recommended organ albums: Anything by Larry Young, whom Salomone and others refer to as the "John Coltrane of the organ."

Songs that have probably been performed most on the organ: Jimmy Smith's "The Sermon" or "T-Bone Steak"

What the organ runs on: Electricity, vacuum tubes

What Salomone runs on: Camel Lights 100s, coffee and Jolt chewing gum

smarting for not being able to read a music chart.

"I wanted to quit. I just wanted to quit," he said.

But the organ remained the focus of his career. Salomone tried selling organs for a while at a store in Valley West Mall in West Des Moines: "I could draw a hell of a crowd, but could I sell? No," he said.

## Company's decline

As Salomone honed his craft, the Hammond organ's evolution stalled in the 1970s. The original company fell by the wayside.

"People's tastes were changing," said Hammond historian Olsen. "They were listening to disco, doing other things than sitting home playing the organ. They had no interest in carrying on this home-organ thing, mom and pop and the kids, everyone sitting around the organ. It was the old continuation of the parlor pianos from the turn of the 20th century."

The vintage B-3 sound had fallen out of favor by the '80s in lieu of more modern, synthesized tones, mirroring the company's decline.

Salomone had switched to electric piano, playing fusion jazz in the lineage of Miles Davis' "Bitches Brew." He often performed with three keyboards.

But in the early '90s, the Hammond sound mounted a comeback with new generations of players, and Salomone vowed to perform with no other keyboard.

Vintage Hammonds are in such demand, that current Hammond-Suzuki President Dennis Capiga said that "our greatest competition is our past." (The Hammond line was salvaged in the '70s and '80s by investors in Asia and Australia and again today is based in the Chicago area: Addison, Ill.)

## On the Web

Salomone recorded his new album, "VooDoo Bop," over the course of a year with his A-100, laying down a couple tunes at a time.

He also just this year added another keyboard to his arsenal: the computer keyboard. He launched his first official Web site ([www.samsalomone.com](http://www.samsalomone.com)) for the new album, and has been combing through his back catalog of live recordings stretching to 1968, posting some as free "treasures from the archives" for download.

Salomone spends hours online seeking out choice jazz and blues bootlegs. And he keeps gigging. As long as he's healthy, he said, "there's no reason to stop." But in the next breath he might dismiss himself as a relic. "It's all youth-oriented, anyway," Salomone is prone to say about the live-music business. "It's a tough thing."

But like the Hammond, sometimes being vintage can be an asset.