



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Three generations of cool: Swing Xing!, from left to right: Vinny Raniolo, Bucky Pizzarelli and Frank Vignola.

# Swing Xing! do their thing

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**OLDSAYBROOK** » What's the secret to making it in the music business?

According to 89-year-old rhythm guitar great Bucky Pizzarelli, who will be appearing at The Kate this Saturday night as part of Swing Xing! (pronounced Swing Crossing), a reference to the three-generation group that includes fellow guitar wizards Frank Vignola and Vinny Raniolo, it's really quite simple.

"You have to be able to play live for people," the well-decorated maestro of the seven-string guitar told NPR in 2009; he employs the extra string for baselines to enrich his sound. "You can make 25 takes on one record before you get it right. But when you do it live, you gotta do it right, and if you make any mistakes or you go in the wrong direction, you have to know how to wiggle out of those situations and make it work."

If that sounds tantalizingly incomplete, his bandmate Vignola, reached at his home in Long Island, offered another clue on the enduring success of Pizzarelli who, over the last seven decades, has played with a veritable Who's Who of bandleaders and performers, including Benny Goodman, Frank Sinatra, and Tony Bennett and did a stint as a member of the Doc Severinsen band on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" in the 1960s.

And that's not even counting his performances at the White House for Presidents Reagan and Clinton.

"Bucky still practices four hours a day," Vignola said. "He's 89, he has everything he ever wanted, and he still practices four hours a day."

Vignola, who first met Pizzarelli at a show in Arizona in 1997 — "it was love at first note," he said — can speak with some authority on Pizzarelli's chops, and not just because the two have been playing about 20 shows a year since then.

For one thing, the 49-year-old's



Frank Vignola, left, Bucky Pizzarelli and Vinny Raniolo.

dazzling skill has made him one of the most in-demand session players for many of the world's top musicians, from Ringo Starr to Madonna to Wynton Marsalis to the Boston Pops.

For another, the late Les Paul recognized Vignola, who played in the guitar legend's trio, on his "Five Most Admired Guitarists List" in the Wall Street Journal.

While the night "Paul McCartney walked in was probably the highlight" of the five years he worked with Les Paul, the Long Island native said, recalling how the two "stayed up all night after the show jamming," the nights playing with Swing Xing! are just as sweet.

"Bucky's slowed down on his appearances now, so it's a real special occasion when you're performing alongside him, when you get to hear every riff, every nuance, every ghost note," he said with palpable enthusiasm in his voice. "You have the rhythm guitar essentially replacing the drums, and the other guitars playing melody and the combinations melting into each other, and it's beautiful."

As for his 30-year-old sidekick Raniolo, Vignola, who plays close to 150 shows with him a year, saw from the beginning "desire, great practice habits," and, above all, "a born musician," with a breathtaking facility for running arpeggios

up and down his fret board in a seemingly effortless display of virtuosity. "It's a calling," he said, adding that he so thrilled to Pizzarelli's music on his father's record player at age five, he never considered doing anything else.

Indeed, listen to a live recording of the three performing a 1920s standard and you'll hear guitarists playfully trading solos—Vignola with his lightning-quick gypsy-Django-esque stylings, Raniolo, investing the melody with a bluesy, lyrical turn, and Pizzarelli, positively crackling with whimsical flair.

No wonder, with the spellbinding technique and vaudevillian showmanship with which they pull off a range of arrangements from Beethoven's Fifth to Doris Day's "Dream a Little Dream of Me" to Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," the New York Times deemed them "stars of guitar."

"Working with Les Paul and some of the real innovators of the music, I'd see the way they would entertain an audience," Vignola said. "Yeah, they wanted to get it right, but what they really wanted was the audience to enjoy what they were doing. It was very important that the audience went home happy."

Sounds like a recipe for a long and sustaining career.

Swing Xing! with Frank Vignola, Vinny Raniolo & Bucky Pizzarelli will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook, at 8 p.m. on Saturday, March 21. For tickets and information, visit [katharinehepburntheater.org](http://katharinehepburntheater.org) or call 877-503-1286.

*Lisa Reisman, a regular contributor to the ShoreLine Times, will read from her memoir "5 Months 10 Years 2 Hours" at R.J. Julia Booksellers, 768 Boston Post Road, Madison, at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, March 24. Register at [rjjulia.com](http://rjjulia.com). For more information, visit [lisareismanauthor.com](http://lisareismanauthor.com).*