

Biography of Diamond Tom Speiss | 1948 - 2011

◆ Early Life

"Diamond" Thomas J. Speiss, Jr. was born on September 7, 1948 in the Bronx borough of New York City to Tom Speiss, Sr. and his young bride Fran (O'Connell). Tom, Sr. had just returned from active duty in the Navy in World War II, where he was a "frogman," which is an underwater warfare specialist trained to scuba dive and swim underwater. Frogmen/combat divers are now known as the Navy SEALs.

◆ Childhood and Teen Years

Tom, Sr. and Fran moved their young sons Tom and Terry, ages 9 and 7, from New York City to Cleveland, where they were raised. Young Tom first began performing at age five to his family and, soon thereafter, began performing in school plays and in front of other live audiences.

Tom worked various jobs, including mowing lawns, in order to save for a Cleveland Browns season ticket, which he was able to purchase beginning at age 12. From age 12 and throughout high school, Tom was a Browns season ticket holder, taking the train to Cleveland Municipal Stadium with neighborhood families and sitting with them.

In high school, after playing trombone in dance and marching bands, Tom fronted a series of bands, singing and performing everything from "doo wop" to early blues and jazz. In addition, Tom was cast as a member of the ensemble dances for Upbeat. Upbeat was a musical variety show produced in Cleveland at WEWS-TV. It aired from 1964 to 1971, and spotlighted performers and their hit songs of the 1960s pop music genre. Many regional performers, such as Eric Carmen and The Bob Seger System, also appeared on the show. The shows can now be seen in an exhibit at the Rock N' Roll Hall of Fame.

◆ Young Adulthood

By the time Tom was 19, his family had grown to six children, which, in addition to brother Terry, included brothers Timothy, Lindsay, Christopher and a young sister, Valerie. At about the time Tom was drafted to serve his country as part of the Vietnam conflict, Tom's parents moved his family to northern Virginia, where they lived for several years. After serving in the Navy, like his father before him, Tom located to northern Virginia himself to be closer to his family.

Tom soon began selling cookware door-to-door. Shortly thereafter, he met and married Beverly (Rohr). Beverly had recently began working as a flight attendant for National Airlines and they met when Tom approached her, and her roommate, to purchase cookware. Within four months of constant companionship and laughter, Tom and Beverly wed in Upper Marlboro, Maryland during the 1969 holidays. Their son, Thomas J. Speiss, III, was born on October 10, 1970 in Washington, D.C.

In 1971, Tom set the then World Record for the most cookware sold by one individual in a calendar year, with about \$200,000 (in 1971 prices) of cookware sold during that year. In June 1972, he met Muhammad Ali in Las Vegas, Nevada immediately prior to Ali's match against Jerry Quarry, as part of a company promotion that he created, and provided him with a free set of cookware.

◆ Adulthood

Throughout the 1970s, Tom and Beverly continued their journey as young parents, first in northern Virginia, and then in Ohio. It was in Ohio that Tom, while continuing his career as a salesman, began singing in local Columbus nightclubs and restaurants, such as the nightclub at The Christopher Inn, which is a still-existing Columbus landmark. Tom regularly performed at The Christopher Inn in the late 1970s. While he took audience requests, Tom routinely sang his own favorites, including the songs of Neil Diamond, Engelbert Humperdink and Frank Sinatra. He also began to develop his love of the Rocky movie franchise, attending in upwards of about 20 different showings of each of Rocky and Rocky II, a story he used for motivation.

Tom simultaneously developed a third career as the character "Leon Dubinsky," which was a recurring character on Phil Neuman's nightly sportstalk program on Columbus-based WBNS-1460 AM. As Leon, Tom's segments were three nights per week. Tom's character Leon was a fictionalized former Philadelphia cab driver that had moved to Columbus with his mother Leona and sister Daisy —Tom also voiced these characters — and their dogs. Phil Neuman went on to have a successful career on Philadelphia's KYW-1060 AM, reporting on Philadelphia sports for several decades.

In the early 1980s, Tom was again promoted by his sales company, National Revenue Corporation, and was moved back to northern Virginia, where he flourished. Tom set several individual and group company records, and rapidly rose to the position of Senior Vice President, a position he earned prior to his 40th birthday. While back in the nation's capital, Tom continued his love of singing and of motivational showmanship, performing at company and family functions. Tom continued to follow local sports teams, often attending Washington Redskins games with his son, Tom.

In early 1990, Tom accomplished his dream of living in southern California. At that time, his company again promoted him and relocated him to Orange County, California. Tom and Beverly first lived in Rancho Santa Margarita and later in Lake Mission Viejo. Subsequently, on a dare, and with assistance from, his soon-to-be daughter-in-law, Sujata, and with additional assistance from Andy Boettner, his vocal coach and himself a former singer in the musical group "Captain and Tennille," Tom developed a full stage show and began to sing at several local Orange County and Houston, Texas- area restaurants. These hot spots included Ciao Pasta Trattoria in San Juan Capistrano, The Vintage Steakhouse, also in San Juan Capistrano, Scarantino's Sicilian Cafe in Lake Forest, The Fish House in Mission Viejo, the Saddleback Valley Mission Viejo Elks Lodge, also in Mission Viejo, and the great Madras Pavilion in Sugar Land, Texas. Tom has also played at other special events, including for Toys For Tots and the American Heart Association, and on New York City's Broadway, in a special benefit concert at the Abingdon Theatre, located in the heart of The City.

Within the past few years, Tom and his granddaughter, Natasha, often would sing songs to each other and do comedic impersonations for each other. Their eyes lit up when they saw each other and they would sit side-by-side talking non-stop. Natasha, who shares her grandfather's love of singing and theatre, recently acted in her first play at Cal State-Northridge.

◆ Passing and Survivorship

On December 4, 2011, after a gallant fight, Tom passed away from complications of pulmonary fibrosis. Assisting him with his fight were his friends at the UCLA Medical Center, who performed a successful lung transplant on him in February 2010. Through this lung transplant, which was one of the first of its kind, Tom's family was able to have the gift of bonus time with Tom for almost two full extra years.

Tom is survived by his wife Beverly, son Tom, daughter-in-law Sujata, granddaughter Natasha, and his five siblings and their eight children and three grandchildren.

◆ Donations

In lieu of flowers, please send donations in furtherance of the research being conducted by Dr. Rajeev Saggarr, who was Tom's treating heart and lung physician at the UCLA Medical Center, who became Tom's good friend.. His research efforts are now being conducted through St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona. The donations should be sent to:

St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center

Heart & Lung Center

500 W. Thomas Road, Suite 500

Phoenix, Arizona 85013

Attn: Alison Ralbovsky

E: Alison.Ralbovsky@CHW.edu

The donations should be made payable to:

St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center

Thoracic Disease

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