

GARY PUCKETT

Howland High School band members play backup for Gary Puckett of Gary Puckett and the Union Gap fame

Photos by Gina Collins, John F. Kennedy High School



By ALISON KEMP
Howland High School

Mariano Longo graduated a semester early from Howland High School because he was playing music professionally in hotels across the country. He was 17.

Longo is now pianist and arranger for Gary Puckett, a 1960s rock star with the band Gary Puckett and the Union Gap. Longo arranged for 10 Howland High School band members to perform live with Puckett last month.

Longo plays piano and guitar and in the early '70s was recruited to play trombone by Charles Tewksbury, a previous Howland band director. "I had no trombone lessons. I sat in the section and listened and watched their slides," said Longo.

"You didn't say no to Charles Tewksbury. I still respect him to this day," Longo added.

Eventually Longo learned to read music. He never went to college, Longo said. "I happen to be one of the guys who made it through a barity."

Longo has become a journeyman, someone who makes his or her living playing music, at whatever job he or she is called to. "I could play in a showroom one night, a blues club the next, then a studio recording session, and a wedding," continued Longo.

Longo has conducted and written for Lesley Gore, who sang "I'll Cry if I Want To." He has also played with Sonny Turner and the Platters, Bobby Rydell, Little Anthony and the Imperials, and numerous other showroom performers in Las Vegas.

"I really like working with Gary because he was the first pop artist of the 60s whose music was fully orchestrated: strings, brass, woodwinds," I've always been interested in arranging," said Longo.

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I got to perform live with a rock star.
Ten students from Howland High School were given the opportunity of a lifetime. We were asked to perform live with Gary Puckett of Gary Puckett and the Union Gap fame.

Most teen readers are probably thinking, "Who is Gary Puckett?" Ask your parents.

I remember the day that Nancy Moore, Howland band director, asked my friend Dominique

Fabrizio and me if we would like to perform with Gary Puckett on Sept. 12. It was May 17, the Monday after returning from our Disney band trip. We said yes immediately.

Mariano Longo, Puckett's pianist and arranger, is a 1973 Howland graduate. He wanted to do something in return to Howland, and his idea was for a horn section to perform with Puckett's band.

Longo and Puckett want to get involved in the educational system, most likely the college level. They want to raise awareness and money for the bands that they perform with.

The big day was coming closer and closer. We were to perform at eight o'clock at the Wayne County Fair in Wooster.

The Wednesday and Thursday before the performance we practiced for two hours after school. We had 15 songs that we would be performing.

By Thursday Longo decided that it would be best for the band if we cut half the songs. I actually began to feel comfortable playing my trombone. I was really enjoying myself.

Longo was excited about the process of us playing with Puckett. He explained that this is an experience that will help prepare us for the real world and for anyone who wants to become a professional musician. We will know if we never want to be in the music business, or we will know how much we have to prepare ourselves to ever survive as a journeyman.

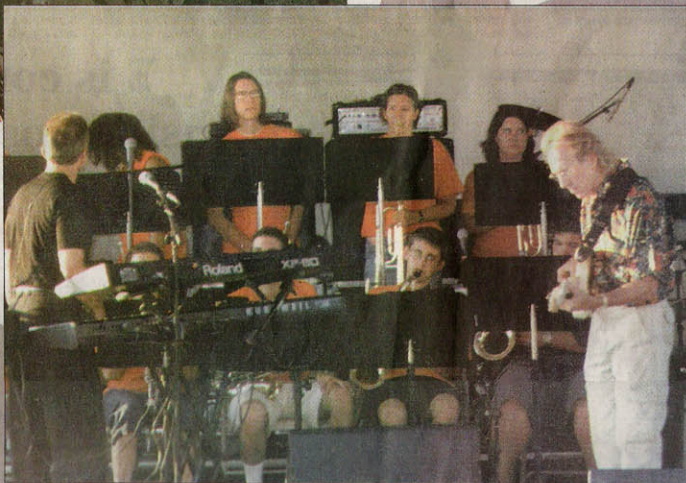
He told me that he wanted the ten of us to know this: "If only I had had this kind of opportunity to actually meet and perform with people who were touring as professional musicians, it might have saved me, you know, five years of garage band kind of experience."

The music was not easy. The songs were written for a singer and guitarist. I told Longo, "Trombones don't play in five sharps." He said, "You do now."

Saturday afternoon we had another three-hour practice. We played through the whole show after working out a few sections of most of the songs. I was having so much fun.

Sunday was the big day. We met Longo at a hotel in Wooster. The 10 of us were given some last-minute instructions. Longo said that we needed a name for our band and we liked what he picked: the Howlin' Horns from Howland, Ohio. I got to make the sign that was taped to the stage floor so Puckett knew what to call us.

While I was eating mashed potatoes and chicken, I noticed a man walking past the table I was sitting at, heading toward the stage. I froze.



FAR LEFT: Kirsten McCale plays an instrument during the performance.

ABOVE: The Howland band performs with Gary Puckett of Gary Puckett and the Union Gap fame.

I said, "It's him." I just knew it. The others sitting with me looked up too.

A couple minutes later, we disregarded the food and went to meet Puckett. He was excited about performing with us.

Around 6:45 our sound check began. It was quite confusing since everyone talked with what I am calling "sound check jargon."

After we got changed into concert black, Puckett asked us to leave the dressing room because he needed to change. I shared a dressing room with Gary Puckett!

I was not nervous when our time finally came to perform. As soon as I stepped on stage, a smile never left my face. I was so excited.

I have never had so much fun playing my trombone in my life. My favorite song was "Adam and Eve" where Dominique and I were the only instruments playing. It was amazing.

As the show went on, songs were cut that we did not play in. The last song we performed was "Young Girl." Puckett surprised us with having us sing a chorus to the song. This was definitely the second best moment of the performance.

After the performance many pictures were taken with Puckett. He also signed my Gary Puckett and the Union Gap records.

The week after my performance with Puckett, I set up a time to interview him. I answered the phone, and Puckett said, "Hello, Alison. This is Gary Puckett." I could not believe that I was on the phone with someone famous.

Puckett immediately said, "It was terrific. I was having such a good time." He continued, "I never had this. This was a really good opportunity to experience from the inside."

Not only did the students enjoy the performance, but Puckett also had many good comments from the audience.

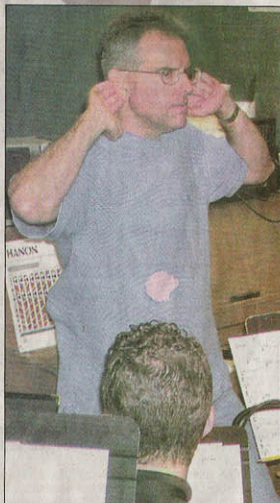
Puckett was not worried about us knowing the music. He was confident.

He had heard high school bands before; both of his daughters have been in high school bands. "You were pretty darn good, all in all," said Puckett.

Puckett started playing piano at age six. His mom is a pianist and his father is a saxophonist. His parents sang in barbershop choirs, which was his first experience with music.

At 15 he found a guitar in his grandmother's attic. He taught himself how to play. In high school Puckett was in a rock and roll band.

Puckett hopes that this experience sticks with us. "I think about the impact on your desires about music," said Puckett.



MARIANO LONGO