

Piano Man

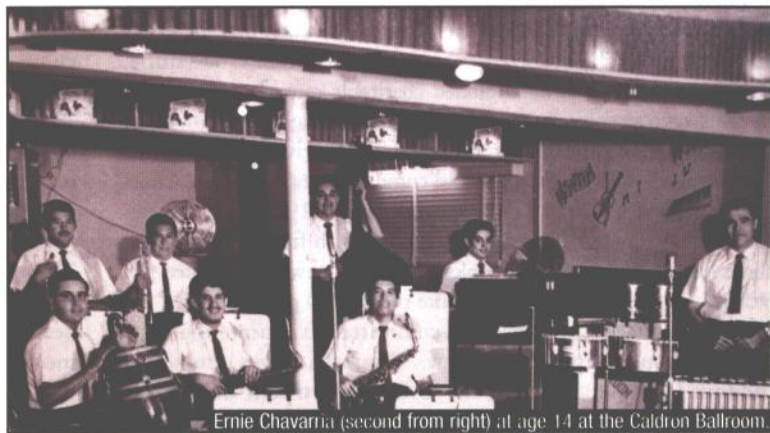
Classically trained lounge pianist **Ernie Chavarria** started playing at 13 for his father's house band at the **Caldron Ballroom** in South Phoenix. While still in high school, he competed against and beat the best college students in California and Arizona. After college, he toured the world's top resorts and played for three presidents. Now, after 48 years, Chavarria has given up the road and come home, where he now teaches an impressive band of students. "I remember saying, 'Man, if there was ever an ungrateful job, it's being a teacher,'" Chavarria says. "But money wasn't really much to me, and it was just time to come home."

At first, Chavarria was frustrated. Then one day **Joey Nevarrow**, who would go on to play with **Connie Cole** (**Nat King Cole's** sister), knocked on the door. "He looked at me and he had that sad look in his face," Chavarria says. "I saw myself a long way back in South Phoenix. I said, 'Don't say any more, you're tired of getting your butt kicked on your own keyboard. One day other people are going to go through this feeling and you're going to put them there. Now let's get to work.' He started to cry."

Since that time, Chavarria's students have gone on to play with **Tower of Power**, **Stevie Nicks**, **Elton John** and **Julio Iglesias**. "Three years ago I saw three of my kids on the Oscars and five of my kids on the Grammy's," Chavarria says. One of his students, **Jason Southard**, won the **Jimmi Hendrix** guitar competition last year and a full scholarship to the Musicians Institute in Los Angeles.

Chavarria also prepares his students for the profession, with lessons ranging from ethics to contract management. "They respect me because I've been there," Chavarria says. "They've already started. The lights just get brighter and the stages just get bigger."

For more information, call 480-345-4005.



Ernie Chavarria (second from right) at age 14 at the Caldron Ballroom.

— Dan Marek