

# Above par

Gary U.S. Bonds gives his all on stage and on the fairway

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Like a lot of performers who find themselves suddenly thrust into the national spotlight, Gary U.S. Bonds was faced with a choice back in 1960, when his single, "New Orleans," started to earn him national attention. He was just 20 years old.

A talented amateur golfer, Bonds had successfully gone through qualifying school and was ready to join the professional golf circuit, such as it was, in 1960. There weren't a lot of African-American golfers on the tour back then, he recalled in a phone interview from his Long Island home.

Bonds began playing golf at age 9 and grew up just a few blocks from a community golf course in Norfolk, Va. But when he was 12, his mother took him to see Ivory Joe Hunter and Benjamin "Bullmoose" Jackson at a local theater in Norfolk.

## GARY U.S. BONDS

With John  
Eddie  
Benefit show  
for Ricky  
Ashmore,  
8-year-old with  
Duchenne's  
Muscular  
Dystrophy  
8 tonight  
Count Basie  
Theatre  
99 Monmouth  
St, Red Bank  
\$35-\$100  
(732)  
842-9000

As talented a singer as he was a golfer, Bonds — or Gary Anderson, as he was known then — had a choice to make. Fortunately for his fans, and for him, he chose music.

"At that time, it was a no-brainer," Bonds said with a laugh, regarding his decision to drop the golf clubs and get off the driving range in favor of grabbing the microphone and jumping onstage.

"I was a scratch golfer, had gone through qualifying school and was ready to join the tour," he recalled, "but then the record came out, and a friend said to me, 'Well, what are you gonna do?' And I said, 'Well, I don't know, what do you think?' And he said, 'Well, let's see, let me name the black golfers out here that are makin' money . . . He named like, two guys, and they're not makin' that much.' And then he said, 'Well let me name the black singers that are out here makin' money.' OK, I got the idea," Bonds recalled.

In 1959, Bonds, who previously led a group called The Turks as Gary Anderson, recorded a single, "New Orleans," for the tiny Legend Records, run by record-store owner Frank Guida, also of Norfolk.



Jersey Alive photo by MARK R. SULLIVAN/Staff Photographer

His love of golf notwithstanding, Gary U.S. Bonds has found that the musical life fits him to a tee.

"Nobody really played it at first, 'cause all the DJs thought it was a pretty funky sound. It didn't sound like the rest of the guys, and a lot of people thought it was a promotion for United States Savings Bonds," he recalled of the single, which had "Buy U.S. Bonds" inscribed on the sleeve. The record had been out about a year before Guida got the attention of Philadelphia-based impresario Dick Clark, who hosted the television program "American Bandstand."

"The first day Dick Clark played it on his television show, he played it twice and that was unheard of," Bonds recalled. "He got a terrific response, and from then on in, the disc jockeys were like, 'Wow, it must be good, Dick Clark played it.'"

## HIT MAKER

Several weeks later, Bonds — an anomaly in those days because he also wrote his own songs — was asked to appear on the show. He became a frequent visitor through the early and mid-1960s. Other hits followed, including "Quarter to Three," No. 1 in 1961, "School Is Out," No. 5 that same year, "Dear Lady Twist," No. 9 in 1962, "Seven Day Weekend," No. 27 in 1962. In 1981, after languishing as a lounge singer and getting little royalty money for his 1960s hits for most of the 1970s, Bonds again topped the charts with Bruce Springsteen's help. Springsteen's bandmate, Steven Van Zandt, produced "This Little Girl," a tune written by Springsteen, and it rose to No. 11 in 1981. A single produced by Springsteen and Van Zandt, "Out of Work," reached No. 21 in 1982.

Bonds, 60, is busy recording a blues album that will include songs by Louis Jordan and others that he sang as a teen-ager in clubs around Norfolk. His forthcoming blues-flavored album will also have some of his original tunes.

"This record has been the most fun I've had in my life," Bonds said, "because blues is not too far from what I do, and what I've always

done, and it's much more fun. It ain't real blues, it's party blues, swing blues," he added.

These days, Bonds does a lot of national and overseas tours, thanks to the mid-life career boost he got from Springsteen and company in the 1980s. He also gets a lot of invitations to play in charity and celebrity golf outings around the U.S., England and Scotland. He also does a lot of benefit concerts, and tonight's concert at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank is no exception. Proceeds will help pay for medical expenses of 8-year-old Ricky Ashmore, a Keansburg boy with Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy.

"I never feel like I can do too many benefits," Bonds said, "I'm at that age now where I may have to ask someone to reciprocate in the next week or two," he added, laughing.

At the Count Basie, Bonds' group will include Mark Leimbach on guitar; Gary Weiss, drums; Zerrick Foster, bass; Joey Stan and Danny Cipriano, saxophones; Jim Wecker, keyboards; and "my daughter Laurie and my wife, Laurie, and Nicole Powell on backing vocals," said Bonds.

Asked about his long relationship with music and golf and how they're intertwined, Bonds agreed that recording and golf are both Zen-like pursuits.

The golfer is forever seeking that perfect round that he or she never quite achieves. It's a lot like what happens when recording an album, Bonds said.

"On the golf course, I'm still going for that perfect round," he explained, "I got as close as a 68," he said, (several strokes under par) "but that was years ago when I was a scratch player. Now, I'm an 8-handicap," he said with laugh.

Still, not bad for a 60-year-old man.

And because Bonds puts 110 percent into every concert and every round of golf, the audience at the Count Basie Theatre should be in for a superb show.