



Pressy his own ‘Syncopated Clock’ through more than 2,500 games at Wrigley Field organ

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Even though they have copiously honored Gary Pressy for ability and uncommon endurance, the Cubs may not know what they truly have in their generation-long organist.

Just celebrating 2,500 consecutive games at which he has performed from his Wrigley Field career debut on Opening Day 1987, Pressy could be the reigning “rain man” of baseball history and pop culture on any given day at Clark and Addison.

Ed Hartig is the figure filbert of Cubs stats and milestones going back a century-plus. But the Pressy ability to recall events long forgotten by almost all those who enjoy his keyboard artistry is the underlying basis of his talent. He lived Cubs history, did not forget it and can revive it at any time on his Lowery Heritage organ.

How many remember Gene Hiser’s two-out, game-tying last-of-the-ninth pinch homer against the Mets that sparked a 4-3, 10-inning win at Wrigley on June 29, 1973? Pressy rues the fact the Cubs could have played 10 under .500 from that point on and still won an NL East captured by those same Mets with an 82-79 mark. Instead, the Cubs screwed up big-time with a 6-29 mid-summer collapse from which they did not recover. Despite the World Series title that earned Pressy a ring with 10 carats and 108 diamonds, the huge pratfall – one of a score in the Seventies and Eighties – still pains Pressy.

In the same thread, why does Pressy remember the mid-season WGN-TV special from 1967, when the 103-loss Cubs from the previous year unexpectedly zoomed to first place



Gary Pressy, showing off his Cubs championship ring, prepares to sing in the seventh inning of his 2,500th consecutive game.

Mike Ditka and Ozzy Osbourne seventh-inning botch jobs, and playing for the aborted first-night game extravaganza and President Ronald Reagan's visit, only 1 1/2 months apart in 1988.

Pressy is playing on his third Wrigley organ, whose doodads include "everything but a microwave oven." He just had a basic message board hanging from the ancient center field scoreboard and an iffy PA system to complement his music in 1987. "They'd play cassettes of Top 40 songs," he said as a prelude to his own work in his rookie season. Now he has to coordinate his efforts with the sound-and-light show from the big new left-field video board and recorded walk-up songs for the Cubs' matinee idols.

Mother Virginia Pressy, 93, and brother Glenn Pressy remember how Gary veered off from the Sox familial tilt in their home at 46th and Albany, just a few miles west of old Comiskey Park. Once again, Phil Wrigley's most adept move in a franchise he otherwise ran into the ground paid off with yet another Cubs fan – and all-time Wrigley Field contributor.

"The Cubs were always on (WGN-TV) in the afternoon," said Glenn Pressy. "From the time we'd come back from school in the afternoon, the Cubs filled a need. We'd watch the end of the game and the Tenth Inning."

Father John Pressy took his sons to both ballparks. Young Gary would announce like Jack Brickhouse. He'd watch not only the WGN televised Cubs action, expanded to more than 60 road games in 1968, but also began listening to ballpark organists from around baseball.

Fan of unique Jarry Park organist

Fernand "Fern" Lapierre had his own unique, almost French Canadian sound that prompted fans to dance during games at old Jarry Park in Montreal. "I loved Jarry Park, and I loved the organ," said Pressy.

Ernie Hays took over the sweatbox Busch Stadium organ in 1971, further tormenting the Cubs after Lou Brock, Garry Templeton, Bake McBride or Tony Scott would run out a triple. Hays would play the Budweiser Clydesdale song in rapid cadence with a topping of a siren while the Busch Eagle flapped its wings on the scoreboard. "I enjoyed Ernie even though it was against our team," said Pressy. "I respected his talent and knowledge."

Meanwhile, Helen Dell's Dodger Stadium tunes worked in sequence with baritone-voiced PA announcer John Ramsey. Faust quickly became a fan favorite after she started with the Sox right out of North Park University. Pressy had to settle for audio-only to hear the Blackhawks' Al Melgard on the giant Chicago Stadium organ with home games blacked out. A Boston Bruins fan, he enjoyed the intermission-only organ music out of the old Boston Garden, enabling him to personally connect with recent seventh-inning singer Don Cherry, former Bruins coach and hockey TV analyst.

"I could tell you any organ in any ballpark," said Pressy. "I was blessed to play by sound."

Bottom line, young Pressy wanted to be a stadium organist. Starting out on the piano, he benefited soon from John and Virginia Pressy's purchase of Hammond spinet organ, which had about half the pedals and was 1/3 smaller of his present Lowery model.

Mastering his craft, Pressy's first job was at Southwest Ice Arena in Crestwood in 1976. He played for Loyola University's basketball team in its tiny Rogers Park gym. "If I guy drove for a layup, he'd run over me," Pressy said. He got some major exposure filling in for Faust at Bulls games at the Stadium starting in 1978.

"I also played fashion shows at southwest suburban high schools, and worked for American Music World demonstrating and selling organs," Pressy said of other work.

Breaks in with the Sting

He began pitching John McDonough, the Sting pro soccer team's young marketing exec, for a job around the same time. The Sting were nomads, using Wrigley Field, Comiskey Park and Soldier Field as their home fields. Pressy's break came when the incumbent organist quit, citing a heavy schedule. McDonough liked what he heard and read via Pressy's cassette and resume, and hired him.

"I called him," said McDonough, now the Blackhawks' president and CEO. "We hit it off. He was sincere, reliable, creative and contemporary. He was somebody who wanted to make it a vocation. He did a great job."

Pressy's association with McDonough paid off six years later. After McDonough became the top Cubs marketing executive, he had an organist's job to fill after Bruce Miles – no relation to the longtime Daily Herald Cubs beat writer by the same name – departed not long before the 1987 season. Wrigley Field had employed baseball's first organist in Ray Nelson in 1941, but did not feature a regular until Jack Kearney began playing an earlier model Lowery in 1967.

Frank Pellico succeeded Kearney in 1970, gaining a distinction for the rapid fire, Latin-themed song when outfielder Jerry Morales collected a clutch hit. Pellico now pounds the keyboard for McDonough with the Hawks from an organ loft next to the United Center pressbox. Following Pellico at Wrigley Field in 1976 were Vance Fothergill, John Henzl and Ed Vodicka. Miles began in 1984.

"I called (Sting owner) Lee Stern and asked for permission to talk to Gary, and Lee was gracious," McDonough recalled of the aftermath of a Saturday staff meeting on in-game Wrigley Field entertainment just before the 1987 season.



Lifelong Boston Bruins fan Gary Pressy greets hockey legend Don Cherry (left) when he came to Wrigley Field to sing.

“The fact he is such a good person is big. There’s zero maintenance, he is sincere and wants to do a great job. It doesn’t surprise me at all that 2,500 games into it, he hasn’t missed a game.”

Pressy remembers getting the good news of his Cubs hiring “on April Fool’s Day 1987, six days before the home opener.” Oddly enough, his most important immediate task was delayed. Caray was sidelined the first part of the season recovering from a stroke. But once back on the job, Caray dramatically lifted Pressy’s profile for his seventh-inning singalongs.

“He was in his glory when Harry said, ‘Gary, let me hear you good and loud,’” McDonough said.

Special greeting for Caray

“I gave Harry a welcome-back card,” Pressy said of the broadcaster’s May 19, 1987 return. “He mentioned that on the air, that he got a nice card from the new organist. We did not talk about (beforehand) how he’d do (‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame.’). First time we did it, it was perfect. He was so nice to me. He would wave the mic and say, ‘OK, Gary...’”

Pressy arrived in time for Andre Dawson’s MVP season in ‘87. He’d play the theme from “Superman” for Hawk. “To this day, he loves it,” Pressy said. Incumbent Cubs superstar Ryne Sandberg netted “The Greatest American Hero” and the theme from “Batman.”

Bread and circuses, not world championships, entertained Wrigley Field ticket buyers in those days. Pressy was in his element for the first scheduled night game on Monday, 8-8-88. He played “Rhythm In the Night” and “You Light Up My Life.” Morganna the Kissing Bandit bouncily ambled out to buss Sandberg, so Pressy played Hall and Oates’ “Kiss on My List.” Once the torrential rains came, he emoted, “Rainy Days and Mondays Always Get Me Down.” He accompanied the slides of future Hall of Famer Greg Maddux, Jody Davis and Al Nipper on the wet tarp with “Splish, Splash, I Was Taking A Bath.”

Then, on Sept. 30, 1988, Reagan visited the ballpark that generated the grist for his Cubs broadcasts via Western Union ticker at WHO-Radio in Des Moines back in the mid-1930s. The tardy presidential arrival delayed the game, so Pressy played “If it takes forever, I will wait for you...” Reagan’s first-pitch toss was accompanied by “Hail to the Chief.” But Pressy stopped short of playing the “Notre Dame Fight Song” for the man who played George Gipp in “Knute Rockne, All-American” in 1940.

Pressy gets wistful when he talks about Caray’s final Cubs broadcast on Sept. 21, 1997 at Wrigley Field. Yep, Harry has been gone for nearly 20 years. “For the last time this season, Gary, let me hear you,” he repeated of Caray’s final seventh-inning cue. Pressy played Christmas songs that Sunday afternoon. “I remember how he said how ‘God willing,’ the Cubs would win someday.”

Another regular Wrigley visitor with whom Pressy developed a rapport over the decades was sometimes prickly umpire Bruce Froemming, the supposed villain of Milt

Pappas' aborted perfect game on Sept. 2, 1972. A Milwaukee resident, Froemming was serenaded with "On Wisconsin." Froemming was even more pleased when for his aunt and uncle's anniversary, the organ broke out with "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

Pressy had to smilingly endure some spectacular Cubs pratfalls that outdid 1973's. The '97 team began a franchise worst 0-14, after finishing 2-14 in 1996. In 1999, the Cubs went 10-40 in August and September. WGN-Radio had a periodic habit of playing "The Hallelujah Chorus" on the breaking of long losing streaks, such as the end of the 11-game skein that concluded the '73 downturn. But Pressy only picks his spots for "Hallelujah," such as the memorable walk-off win against the Cardinals amid a tightening pennant race on Sept. 9, 1989. He also invoked "Hallelujah" after Game 6 of the NLCS against the Dodgers last October.

Ditka the polka king

Over the years, Pressy has handled the post-Caray guest conductors with cool-cat grace. After racing up the ramp, out of breath after his own late arrival, Ditka sang the fastest rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" in 1998. "He broke into a polka tempo," Pressy said, recalling how he caught up with Da Coach halfway. Then, the crowd, almost feeling cheated, sang the song in its entirety again at regular cadence. Osbourne's seemingly besotted version with made-up or backward words in 2003 drew a stare that could kill from Kerry Wood in the dugout. But the proverbial band played on in the organ booth.

"I said to Gary the beauty of the seventh inning is the imperfection of the singer," said McDonough. "Harry's version was imperfect. With a lot of singers, there's a sense of panic, they've never sung in public before, singing in front of 40,000 and on WGN. Through all of it, Gary's been the thread of being flexible and understanding. He's egoless.

Pressy's best guest conductor was appropriately baseball's best-ever voice.

"Easy answer – Vin Scully," he said. "He sang once, to honor Harry. He was an Irish tenor."

Everyone passing through Wrigley Field meets Pressy. For the second time, he met Carlos Zambrano recently while the latter was doing a Spanish-language CSN Chicago game broadcast. Big Z proudly told Pressy of his own daughter's work as a pianist.

After his own long, strange journey, Pressy was rewarded by playing at the Grant Park bandshell for the Cubs championship rally in November.



Gary Pressy greets Carlos Zambrano (right) in his booth when Big Z did a Spanish-language Cubs broadcast on CSN Chicago.

“At the parade, Ben Zobrist and (singer wife) Julianna shook my hand,” he said. “Justin Grimm said hello. Chris Coghlan said his mother-in-law loved my music.

“I enjoy working for the Cubs. They treat me royally. Tom (Ricketts) came up to me and congratulated me, saying what an accomplishment (2,500 games).”

Most of all, Pressy appreciates the freedom to play his choices since Game No. 1.

“Music today is kind of tough to play,” he said. “But I still throw in Gaga or Katy Perry. I like Bruno Mars.

“When you walk into Wrigley, you want it to look like a cathedral – and sound like a cathedral.”

McDonough has long been vindicated on his 1987 hire. He can just sit back and listen to the good music.

“I’m really proud of the Cubs giving him recognition,” McDonough said. “Gary is an icon at Wrigley Field.”