

Legendary Cleveland Agora club owner Hank LoConti has died, leaves behind world-renowned legacy

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Henry "Hank" LoConti Sr., founder of the legendary Agora concert club and a driving force in rock 'n' roll's rise to greatness, died Tuesday. He was 85.

LoConti, who passed away in his home in Independence, battled lymphoma.

To the end, he retained the spirit and cheer that endeared him to thousands. Among those are dozens of names that reside in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, as well as the music libraries and memories of generations of Clevelanders.

Opened in 1966, the Agora was a jump-off point for countless careers. Yes, there is Bruce Springsteen, whose Agora shows are a thing of legend. But the club also played host to a wide array of acts on the rise, from KISS to Judas Priest to Metallica to U2, the Clash, Gang of Four, Southside Johnny and AC/DC.

The list is endless and varied. The Agora was never typecast - LoConti was too open-minded and imaginative for such a thing.

"Hank was a visionary and a futurist who could see the potential in things," said friend John Gorman, who promoted shows with LoConti while working at WMMS-FM/100.7. "The Agora was the first place for bands that would go on to become famous."

Gorman last saw LoConti a week ago, in his home.

"He was such a sharp guy, to the end," said Gorman. "He never changed as a person." LoConti took great pride in the Agora name and sought to protect its legacy, which is renowned around the world.

"The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame might be the first association people around the world have with Cleveland," says Bill Peters, owner of the Cleveland metal label Auburn Records and a DJ at WJCU-FM/88.7. "But the Cleveland Agora is right up there with music fans. I always have friends from Germany ask me about the legendary Agora and ask me to take them there when they come to visit. It's one of the most iconic names in music."

Countless recordings of concerts from the club enjoyed a new life in the Internet and YouTube era, turning new generations of music fans on to the Agora -- especially that glowing sign on the wall behind the stage that said: You are here, where rock 'n' roll history is being created.

Few clubs around the country recorded concerts in the 1970s, when the Agora helped shape the tastes and lifestyles of Clevelanders

with shows such as the WMMS Coffeebreak Concert Series.

As AC/DC sang, "It's a long way to the top if you wanna rock 'n' roll." Hank LoConti made the distance a lot easier and a good deal shorter. "Hank was always interested in doing new things," says Gorman, who met LoConti in 1973. "Few clubs were even open on Mondays, but Hank saw it as a great day to try something different - because no one else was doing it."

The Coffeebreak Concert took it one further, hosting concerts and broadcasting them to the entire area -- starting at 11 a.m. Wednesdays.

"Who else but Hank," said Gorman. "He was part of a well-oiled machine that made Cleveland ground zero for rock 'n' roll."

LoConti did something else that few clubs did: He took the brand on the road. In the 1970s, he opened 12 more Agora concert clubs around the country, from Tampa to Houston to Painesville to Youngstown.

The Cleveland location has long been the only Agora club still in operation. Plans are to keep it going, says Chris Zitterbart, who has operated the Cleveland Agora with LoConti since November.

"We set up a company together to operate the Agora when Peabody's closed and I moved in here," say Zitterbart, former owner of Peabody's Concert Club. "The Agora will keep on going." LoConti wouldn't want it any other way. Whenever I spoke with him about the Agora or its role in Cleveland, he displayed pride for its role in breaking music -- and never revealed even the slightest hint that he was tired of doing it.

"He was the same guy that I first knew in the late 1960s," said longtime concert promoter Jules Belkin. "He had a great love for the music business and for trying to make things happen in Cleveland."

"He was one of the great music icons in the business for 50 years," added Belkin. "There was this aura around Hank that will never be duplicated."

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LoConti is survived by 11 of his 12 children and his wife Bonita "Bonnie" LoConti.

Funeral arrangements are being handled by Vondrak Funeral Home, 6505 Brecksville Rd, Independence, 216-524-3900. Visiting hours are 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. Friday. Services will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Michael Roman Catholic Church, 6540 Brecksville Road, Independence. He will be interred in Maple Shade Cemetery, in Independence.

永遠銘記

緬懷 AGORA 劇院創始人 Henry LoConti 先生

不忘 Henry LoConti 先生生前對伊利華報作出的巨大支持,使得華報能在全美國著名的劇場之一舉辦一次特別熱烈隆重與眾不同的十周年報慶,在此謹代表華報全體同仁和各地讀者對先生的離世表示深切懷念和沉痛哀悼!



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