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**LAS VEGAS SUN**

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OFF THE STRIP:

# Big band, big dreams

## Classical musician, professor taps roots in founding Nevada Pops, benefit concert



Tiffany Brown

Dick McGee, College of Southern Nevada's Fine Arts Department chairman and Las Vegas Philharmonic associate conductor, said of his motivation for launching the nonprofit Nevada Pops, "It's been on my mind for years. One of the last things my mother said to me nine years ago, right before she passed away, was, 'Don't let the band go. That's the best thing you do.' "

By [Kristen Peterson](#)

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Dick McGee composes music, drives a Porsche and plays the trombone.

He's a "Star Trek" fan, chairman of the College of Southern Nevada's fine arts department and associate conductor of the Las Vegas Philharmonic.

But that's McGee as we know him today — a talented, likable guy who has good taste in cars, diverse interests and a great head of hair. He's also married to an oboist, Joan.

What you might not know is that McGee has a showroom past. We're talking late-night gigs on the Strip playing for Steve and Eydie, Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick, and performing in — and conducting — the “Folies Bergere” band at the Tropicana.

He even played a solo behind Dean Martin in “Pennies From Heaven.”

McGee attributes his success to his Vegas big band days — more specifically, a 40-piece concert band he formed in 1987 as a way to give musicians a chance to flourish outside their regimented “house band” gigs at the casinos.

This month he'll return to those concert band days with “A Night With the Pops,” a performance that will officially launch his new organization, Nevada Pops.

He knows it's not the best time to start a nonprofit group in the arts and it looks as if he's going head to head with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, which is about to kick off its first-ever pops season.

But McGee has had Nevada Pops in the works for a long time and wasn't about to let a little recession stop him. He's keeping ticket prices low — \$15 for adults — even though that puts pressure on the group to raise money.

“It's been on my mind for years,” McGee says. “One of the last things my mother said to me nine years ago, right before she passed away, was, ‘Don't let the band go. That's the best thing you do.’ ”

Besides, he says, “these are all friends of mine and every time we get together we have so much fun, and I'm thinking, ‘Why don't we do this more often?’ It's time to get it really rolling again.”

Getting it “rolling again” means kicking out a special arrangement of “Oh, When the Saints,” Broadway show tunes, a sampling of movie music, Aaron Copeland's “Fanfare for the Common Man” and the world's favorite circus march, “Thunder and Blazes.”

The concert includes the Desert Chorale and the Walt Boenig Big Band, which will play works from the swing era. Also on the program is McGee's “Las Vegas Rhapsody,” composed during the Las Vegas Centennial for the Las Vegas Philharmonic.

Nevada Pops is basically reviving the Nevada Symphony Wind Ensemble, the concert band he formed in 1987.

“We played serious concert band literature — Holst, Copland, Bernstein. Some of those guys were serious musicians,” McGee says. “They went to the Eastman School of Music, but were playing for jugglers every night.”

When McGee came to town from Denver, where he taught high school, Las Vegas was one of three cities — along with New York and Los Angeles — where musicians could still make a steady income. McGee filled in for a band at the old MGM Grand, backing Martin, Doc Severinsen, Crystal Gayle and other headliners, before landing the permanent gig at the Tropicana's “Folies Bergere.”

But that was the beginning of the end. In 1989 hotels began replacing live bands with taped music. The musicians union went on a nine-month strike, sold its hall to cover the cost and still lost out to recorded music.

Musicians from big band orchestras went into real estate, insurance, teaching or skilled labor. Some waited for the climate to change, the phone to ring, anything that alluded to the old days. Others left for Branson, Mo.

Those who stayed in Vegas, including McGee (who landed a teaching job at the community college) picked up occasional showroom gigs with Bacharach, Natalie Cole, Tony Bennett, Johnny Mathis.

Nevada Pops will be flavored with old-timers such as Fred Hallard, who knows how it's done. Hallard, who plays saxophone, flute and clarinet, came to town in 1965 with Harry James. He toured the world with Les Brown doing Bob Hope specials. Last weekend, he was backing Steve Lawrence at the Orleans.

"I'm still humming those songs," Hallard says. "That's the way it used to be. Ella Fitzgerald, Sinatra, they'd come to town and stay a month. In those days, you'd go into a lounge and see Harry James or Buddy Rich big bands. As a musician, the first time I heard Woody Herman's band, it lit a fire in me that never went out."

The hope is that it will do the same for Las Vegas audiences. Nevada Pops has partnered with the Clark County School District to collect donated instruments for aspiring musicians. Anyone who donates an instrument that night gets a free ticket to the show.

For the rest of the audience, McGee says, he's staying true to the original "pops" concept.

" 'Pops,' the word, came from reducing costs. There would be no rehearsal so they would play familiar works. It came from popular prices, not popular music."

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