

# From The Tonight Show band to Steely Dan, veteran sax player Pete Christlieb has had a varied career



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An interesting and varied career?



Yeah, you could say that. When it comes to his lengthy time spent in the music trenches, 70-year-old tenor sax player Pete Christlieb can lay claim to lending his talents to a remarkable array of projects and artists.



Known predominantly for his 20-year tenure in Doc Severinsen's The Tonight Show band, the West Coast native has also done everything from working on other TV projects such as Star Trek and The Family Guy to recording his own albums, session work for Steely Dan, Natalie Cole and Tom Waits, and touring with such luminaries as Della Reese, Woody Herman and Chet Baker.



"As a matter of fact, he still owes me \$400," says Christlieb, laughing when asked to explain what's behind that legendary fact about getting stiffed by the late Baker.

"Man, when you work for a junkie you better get your money in front because he's got another place in mind for your money."

He laughs again. "Or just say no."

Prior to his Saturday show performing with the Prime Time Big Band at the Ironwood, Christlieb spoke with the Herald.

Q: So what brings you up to Calgary?

A: Well, (Prime Time Big Band director) Dave (Jones) called me and he said, "You know, we have a band and we play every other week and we bring people in." And he named them, a whole bunch of people that I know ... that came up and played. And I said, "Whoa. Geez, what took them so long to ask me to play?" So I'm going to be there, play and have a good time.

Dave has an exceptional library of thousands of (songs) that he's collected, and if you're going to have a big band you might as well invest in music because it's the gasoline that keeps the car going ... It makes it possible for me to just show up and play ... because they're all tenor features that I've played on.

Q: Which speaks to your career. It's an incredible one, and an incredibly varied one. For a jazz musician it has to be great to keep things interesting.

A: It's the work I fell into ... I really wasn't interested in English literature or mathematics or any other required stuff you need to get any kind of potential in college. I just wanted to play. And so it wasn't a big deal for me to make up my mind that after the first semester of college when I got an offer to go on the road, I took it. ...

And if you were in the right place at the right and got the call to do The Tonight Show, you were one of 18 people that had a career that went for 20 years and you could put your kids through college and buy a house and make payments on anything, you know?

I was playing tenor and playing a lot of solos and people would say, "I used to hear you playing on the commercials." We did our best works behind the Alpo Dog Food commercials. I sold a lot of dog food.

Q: You also worked on Star Trek, does that make you a hero to nerds everywhere? Do you show up to conventions?

A: Oh, geez, no. I don't, I don't. It was one of those jobs that I had when I was doing The Tonight Show ... I think that's why people know me the best, and that's probably why I got all of these things, because people see you. It's great advertising, you know? If people don't see you and they don't hear you, then how can the hire you? That's what I tell these kids who are coming up ... you have to make yourself available to play in bands right out of high school and that's how people can hear you.

Q: How did your work with Steely Dan come about, recording the famous sax solo for the song Deacon Blues?

A: It was when I was doing The Tonight Show and they called me out of the blue and said, "Would you mind doing the solo on this tune?" And I didn't know what tune it was, I just went over to the studio after The Tonight Show ... and I met these two guys and they played this thing for me and said, "Could you do a solo for us?" And I said, "Sure." And it was over right away — I think I did one take. And they sold 40 million copies of this thing. So, you really know when you've done something big when you can hear your solo in every airport bathroom or elevator in the world.

Q: And you've kept going and kept working. What's been keeping you busy these days?

A: I played the Hollywood Bowl the other night for two nights with Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett ... And I bought a house in Washington (State) about three years ago because I've kind of run the gamut of things to do in California, in the music business and everything. I do most of my work going out of town and playing with bands like I'm doing this weekend.

Pete Christlieb performs Saturday at 2 p.m. at the Ironwood with the Prime Time Big Band. For tickets and reservations call 403-269-5581.



Jazz sax veteran Pete Christlieb has had a varied and storied career that includes playing with Chet Baker as well as being a member of Doc Severinsen's Tonight Show band.

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