

PAIN *and* PLAY

THESE ARTISTS, AND THEIR MUSES, ARE NOT YOUR AVERAGE ART GROUP

This wasn't a typical gig for Jerry Portnoy.

The blues great, an East Dennis resident who's played harmonica for Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton and Cyndi Lauper, appreciated the intimacy of the venue: the studio of noted Eastham painter Paul Schulenburg. ("This is just like playing for a bunch of friends in your living room," he said.) On a refreshingly mild night this past April, Portnoy didn't just perform for Schulenburg and a crowd of 20 or so other local artists... He was also their model for the evening—their muse.

With their easels in position and canvases primed, the artists—all painters, except sculptor Hiram Ball—had an ease about them as they diligently captured the scene that was unfolding: Portnoy, accompanied by guitarist and singer "Brother Phil," delivering a selection of lively, bluesy tunes, which garnered toe-tapping, applause and

BY HALEY GOTE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY TEAGAN ANNE



cheers from the artists. At the start of what was to be a three-hour session, Portnoy told the group, "This is all very loose—just like your brushstrokes should be."

Through his weekly figure painting sessions, like the one with Portnoy, Schulenburg has created a unique society of sorts for artists from across the Cape, a place where they can both practice their craft and mingle with their peers. Typically held on Wednesday nights throughout most the year in Schulenburg's Eastham studio, the figure painting sessions consist of a group of about 20 established and emerging artists—all personally selected by Schulenburg—and feature a guest model. Local musicians like Kami Lyle, Sarah Swain and Tianna Esperanza, a belly dancer, a female fisherman from Chatham, and a woman who dons early 1900s garb have been among the models.

"Sometimes people get together for figure painting just for anatomy and the practice of painting the body, but it's fun to have these personalities," says Schulenburg, who started the figure painting group 12 years ago when he moved to Eastham. He says he intended on using his studio, a converted three-car garage, for such a gathering, after having attended other figure painting sessions around the Cape. "I'd think, why aren't they playing music? Maybe there's no talking," so he says he decided to host his own session. "I wanted to make it more of a fun time—have a party," he explains. The group started as just a few artists, hiring a model and painting together, and eventually it

turned into 7, then 8, then 10, then 15, to now 20 artists. "I didn't know it was going to turn into this much of a thing."

With food, wine, chitchat and music often playing, these sessions are a true social gathering. "And there's no instruction here—just paint what you want and have fun," Schulenburg says. "You never know what might happen." Like the impromptu dance Rosalie Nadeau and Hiram Ball shared as Jerry Portnoy played. And when Portnoy shared the amusing story of how he met Bob Dylan through Muddy Waters, and Waters thought his name was "John Dylan."

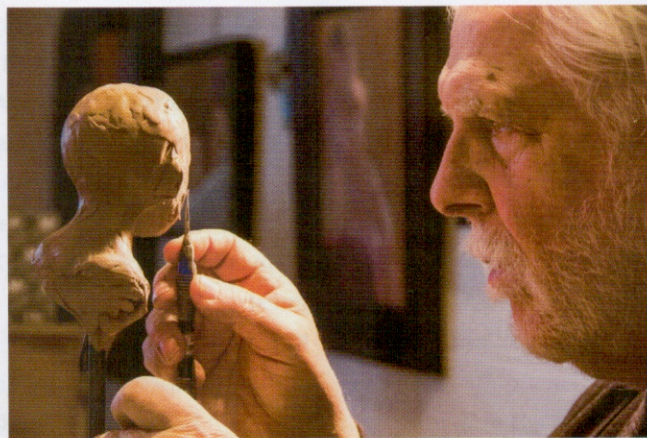
Artist Andrea Petitto, who is represented by Addison Art Gallery, has been part of the figure painting group now for seven years, and she says she enjoys how dynamic Schulenburg's sessions are. "It's almost like trying to keep up with life," she says, using that night's models as an example. "In the beginning, I tried to capture the guitar player, but he was moving all the time. It's kind of a challenge, but I enjoy doing it, so I just kind of went at it."

"This is the most fun way to paint," she adds. "And we all hate Paul, he's so annoying," she says sarcastically. "He's wonderful." As she says this, someone brings out a cake, and everyone starts singing "Happy Birthday" to Paul. "It's frequently somebody's birthday. We have way too much cake around here," Petitto says, laughing. And just like that, the lively chatter throughout the room turns to a hush—their break time



Andrea Petitto (above), Ron Lindholm (below), and Taylor Fox (opposite) meticulously craft their portraits of harmonica great Jerry Portnoy at Schulenburg Studio.





is over. Brother Phil begins to strum his guitar, and the artists resume their work.

Jerome Greene, represented by Provincetown's Arthur Egeli Gallery, has been painting with Schulenburg for the last two decades, so he's been part of Schulenburg's group since the beginning. "I helped him put the windows in the studio," Greene says. For Greene, aside from the art they get to make, his favorite aspect of the sessions is the sense of camaraderie among all of the artists. "I've been painting for 30 years, and I know this is the best that it gets," he says. "It's because of Joan Lockhart, it's because of Rosalie Nadeau, it's because of Maryalice Eizenberg—it's because of everybody here. We have music, we have jokes, we have a real lively atmosphere."

"Compadres!" Nadeau chimes in. "Yeah, it's a very, very compatible group," Greene says. "They're the best," Joan Lockhart says of Greene and Nadeau. "No," Jerome says bashfully, "We have to include Joan in that, because not only is Joan a fabulous artist, she is funny, and a real compadre—even though she bought her way in through our stomachs," he says, as he and Lockhart both laugh.

Lockhart, an Eastham artist, is the one who provides all of the food for each session—from cakes and salads to, on this night, balsamic-glazed salmon. "It satisfies my need to cook," she says with a laugh. When Lockhart moved to the Cape three years ago after retiring from the high-tech industry in the Boston area, she attended a show at the Cape Cod Museum of Art and saw Schulenburg's work. "I was fascinated by all these paintings of the same model done by different artists," she recalls. "I didn't know who Paul Schulenburg was at the time, and I started asking around and I found out that he lived in Eastham, about three blocks from where I live. So I contacted him—I sent him a blind email—and said, 'I saw your show. I love your work. How do I get into your group?'"

She explains that there is a long waiting list to get into the group, and in addition to the 20 regulars, Schulenburg keeps a list of 40 alternates. After reaching out to Schulenburg, Lockhart says she planned to keep her Wednesday nights free in the hope she'd get the call to join a session. "About two weeks later," she says, "I got my first call," and she's been a fixture with the group ever since.

Lockhart says some of her favorite sessions have been when they've spent the day painting on the beach in Provincetown, which Schulenburg arranges once or twice a year through the Beachcombers Club, a 100-year-old, all-male artists society. The Schulenburg group gets to use the club's facility on Commercial Street and paint on the beach behind their facility, a former rigging loft. "There's a history in Provincetown of painting figures on the beach," Lockhart says. "Those sessions are really special because you're part of that whole Cape Cod art school tradition."

As the group continues on, Lockhart, who coordinated the "Artists and Muses" show at Barnstable Town Hall this past April, hopes to find more opportunities for the group to exhibit their figure work together. "We all have stacks of these portraits and figure paintings," she says of the work they create during sessions, noting that it's usually not their priority to sell this figure work, "so the chance to exhibit them and share them with people is an opportunity I think we'd like to pursue more of."

In speaking with artists Terry and Ron Lindholm, Shawn Dahlstrom and Dale Michaels Wade, they all agree the group environment is incredibly welcoming. "I think the pressure is off of everyone to perform," says Wade. "Nobody's instructing or critiquing. Everybody does what they want," says Ron Lindholm. And while making art is typically solitary, they all see the value in working together. "There's an energy that goes along with painting with a group of people—it helps to spur you on and keep you going," Ron adds.

Jerome Greene just might sum up the experience best: "It's like a Gertrude Stein novel, but funnier and better," he says with a smile. "To have this many like-minded people gather, c'mon, it's just really cool."



Paul Schulenburg (*above*) and Joan Lockhart (*middle*) depict their own unique interpretations of Portnoy. *Bottom*: Portnoy strikes a pose for the artists.



Haley Cote is the assistant editor for Cape Cod Life Publications.

Paul Schulenburg's work can be seen at Addison Art Gallery in Orleans.