



The
DEVIL
DRUMMER
of Strada Stretta

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Luckily, we have been able to combine the past and the present thanks to Joe Camilleri, who as a young boy was known as “The Devil Drummer of Strada Stretta”. Since Mr. Camilleri lived in the area when it was still thriving, he could share his treasured memories with us.

You might not know Mr. Camilleri by his real name but most certainly, if you have watched the Strada Stretta series on local television, his fictional name Victor might ring a bell. Yes, we met up with the man whose real-life story inspired the narrative of the charming young boy on the show who has stolen everyone’s heart.

What was mostly remarkable about our encounter with him, is that he made us realise that amidst all the drinking, quarrels, gambling and prostitution of Strada Stretta, there was another genuine side to it. “Strada Stretta wasn’t a place to go for all the wrong reasons as many believe it was,” Joe argued, “for some it was a way of making a living.” In fact, he remembers particular cases of people whom one would not expect to find working there as barmaids, including a widowed layperson, a 50-year-old woman as well as several under-aged girls. Considering Strada Stretta was jam-packed with shops and outlets, it presented itself as the only opportunity of employment for girls at that time, as other work, like factory work, was not yet available.

For Joe, Strada Stretta was also a blessing. It enabled his passion for music to flourish, a passion which he inherited from his father, Frank Camilleri (*il-Bibi*), whom Joe considers as the pioneer of live music in Malta. As taking music lessons was unheard of at that time in Malta, Joe owes it all to his father for teaching him the drums at the young age of seven. As a 13-year-old, in 1963, Joe

was already a star in Strada Stretta, playing in a band of three at a bar called The Lucky Wheel, rather than with his father’s band as was portrayed in the TV show. During this time, he was very much loved by the Americans who used to tip him very generously.

However, since the mid-1960s saw an end to the lively days of Strada Stretta, Joe explained how he was actually one of the last musicians to experience its glory. Yet this did not stop him from further advancing his career. After Strada Stretta, his musical journey continued in other bars across Valletta, Rabat, Paceville and once even on a luxurious cruise ship. Joe also spent 25 successful years as a part of Malta’s Philharmonic Orchestra. “I couldn’t imagine myself having another career other than that of a musician,” Joe reflected as he finished recalling his long-standing musical career.

As much as we enjoyed his vivid recollections of the past, we could not help but shift our conversation to the present. Apart from his role as a drummer, in the Strada Stretta show Victor is also significant for his witnessing of the serial killer. Even though Joe explained that he does not particularly recall a mysterious serial killer due to his young age, he did, however, remember a much-talked about case in which a Maltese prostitute was murdered by an Afro-American sailor.

Whilst appreciating the recent renovations in Strada Stretta, Joe lamented the fact that “it will never be the same again,” especially because American and British sailors, whose presence used to illuminate the street, no longer frequent the area. However, what he misses the most about those days is the importance that used to be granted to live music, which, in his opinion, is incomparable to any other form of entertainment.