

Academy buddies reunited by rock radio
[Metro Edition]
Seminole's PAST article written by Jim Robinson
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Grad recalls tie to band's keyboardist

Last Sunday's column about rock 'n' roll keyboard player Billy Powell and his early music training while attending a military academy in Sanford jogged the memories of several callers and writers. The most interesting comments came from another Sanford Naval Academy alum who went on to a career in radio and the music industry.

Chalender "Chail" Martina, whose grandfather owned Celery City Printing, was born at Sanford Naval Air Station in 1950, when it had the only hospital in town. He graduated from the academy in 1968, and went on to get his bachelor's degree from the University of Central Florida, then called Florida Technological University.

He writes that, by 1972, he was a radio personality on 107.7 FM (WORJ), which in 1969 introduced Central Florida to album-oriented rock.

"This is where I first realized this was the same Billy Powell who was an underclassmate at SNA," wrote Martina, who now lives near Fort Worth, Texas, and read the column at orlandosentinel.com.

The former Mayfair resort on Lake Monroe, which is now international headquarters for New Tribes Mission, was the Sanford Naval Academy for boys ages 14 to 17 beginning in 1963.

Powell was the son of a Navy aviator who died of cancer in Italy in 1960. After his family returned to the United States, Powell's mother enrolled him in the Sanford academy. He took piano lessons in Sanford before finishing high school in Jacksonville.

Lynyrd Skynyrd founder Ronnie Van Zant heard Powell, then a roadie, playing a piano and decided to add the keyboard player to the band's lineup.

The group had just released its sixth album when, on Oct. 20, 1977, a plane carrying band members crashed near McComb, Miss., killing Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and his sister, singer Cassie Gaines.

"We, WORJ, did the world premiere of the *Streets of Fire* album, the flame covered one and the last to feature Ronnie," Martina wrote. "I was the MC for an autograph party WORJ was asked by the band to host at the then 'new' Altamonte Mall. Also, I cut the MCA radio spots for the album and was on the air when the plane went down, breaking the news to our audience that night, just a few days following our get-together.

"It was at this autograph party that Billy and I reconnected. I left WORJ in 1978, joining Capital Records in Miami, then EMI as a regional promotion manager. The last time I saw Billy was in Nashville, when the re-formed band made their first appearance. I had an artist

named Gregg Kiln at that time whose band quit on him just hours before he was to go on stage at the same concert. Billy and the band were gracious enough to come to his rescue and back him up. Later that same day, I got a call from the label with the instructions to tell Gregg he had been dropped from the roster. Tough duty. Billy has always been a terrific fellow.

“Last month, as you may remember, we had a school reunion. It was a great time. My class of 1968 hadn’t seen each other since graduation 33 years ago. Of the 32 class members, we had 10 show up. Not bad. Total attendance was 199. I was hoping *Sentinel* would have covered the event. Next time.”