

Jazz drummer indicted

Charlie Rice accused of fueling personal car with government gas in Camden

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CHARLIE RICE says he has always been a stand-up guy — even while sitting at the drums alongside jazz icons John Coltrane and Chet Baker.

That's why Rice, 88, is angry that he recently was indicted — along with 11 other New Jersey government employees and another person — on charges that he allegedly stole government gas to fuel personal vehicles.

"This is all a bunch of crap, really," he said yesterday at his attorney's office. "I've never had problems with anybody. I just do my job."

Rice — described by www.jazz.com as a "mainstay of the Philadelphia jazz scene" — is accused of fueling his personal car six times over three months in 2007 at Camden's municipal fueling stations, where he worked as a gas attendant until he was suspended. He faces two charges of official misconduct, which could mean up to five years in jail, though the sentence would likely be lower if he is convicted.

Rice, a handyman/aide for the Camden school board for the last two decades, says the school district denied his request for a work vehicle to travel back and forth to the fueling stations.

"They told me to use my own car," he said, throwing up his hands.

Rice says he put about 20 gallons of gasoline into his car during the period in question, to cover his commute. And because neither of the city stations has a shelter, Rice said he had to sit in his car between filling tanks to keep cool or to warm up.

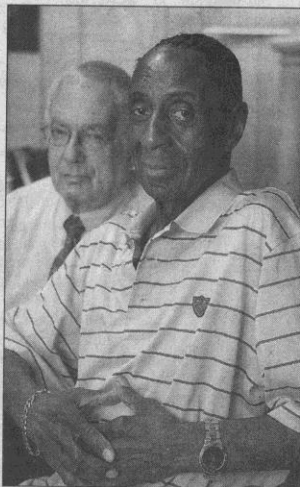
Camden School District spokesman Bart Leff said Rice has been "suspended without pay, pending further action." Leff declined

to discuss details of the case.

He played with the greats

A West Philly native who moved to Camden in the '60s, Rice played and recorded with some of the biggest names in jazz, including Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Jordan, J.J. Johnson and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. He was a regular at the Apollo Theater and Charlie Parker's Birdland in New York City.

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JESSICA GRIFFIN / Daily News

Jazz drummer Charlie Rice was indicted on charges that he allegedly stole gas from city pumps in Camden.



Charlie Rice (center) plays with the Oscar Pettiford Sextet on a USO tour in Korea during the Korean War.

(Philadelphia Daily News –
cont. on next page below)

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He toured Europe with Baker, and was part of a USO tour with Oscar Pettiford during the Korean War.

"It was cold like something else," Rice said of Korea. "We'd be playing for five minutes, and the guys' lips would freeze to the mouthpieces."

Tap dancing was Rice's first passion, but when that craze fizzled out he bought a set of Ludwig drums from a pawnshop at 6th and South streets — and fell in love.

Jazz clubs were scattered all over the Philly region in the '40s and '50s, Rice said, and he played just about every one, including the Downbeat Club in Philadelphia and the Dreamland Cafe, in Lawnside, N.J. He first played with Coltrane in Philadelphia when the saxophone virtuoso was just a teen.

Local gigs were always Rice's favorite because he could spend time with his wife, Lucy, to whom he was married for 62 years "without one fight."

He had four children with his late wife, and now has a number of granddaughters who won't let their spry grandfather go on dates.

But on Sunday nights, he still checks out the "young cats" at Ortlieb's Jazz Haus in Northern Liberties. His playing days, for the most part, are over.

"I get real tired carrying those heavy drums around," he said with a scratchy chuckle.

'A well-respected elder'

But Rice isn't tired of working. When he learned of his indictment June 11, he contacted the Jazz Bridge Project, a Glenside-based nonprofit group dedicated to assisting jazz musicians during crises.

"We were all shocked," said Wendy Simon Sinkler, the organization's president and co-founder. "He is a well-respected elder in the jazz community."

Last year, the organization honored Rice at a standing-room-only event in Collingswood. A sharply dressed Rice wowed the crowd with his skills that night, Simon Sinkler said.

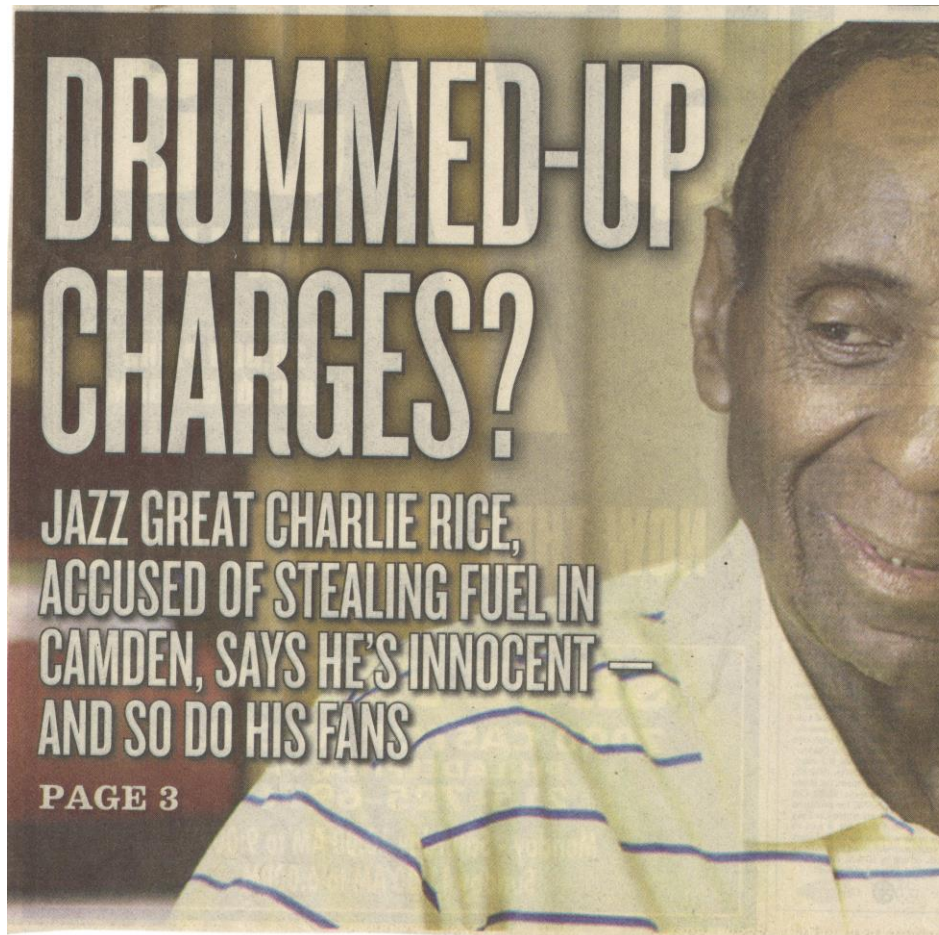
The Jazz Bridge Project has started a "Help Charlie Rice" fundraiser on its Web site, and has hired Haddon Township lawyer Mike Pinsky to defend Rice.

Pinsky, who calls the charges against Rice "mind-blowing," says he's more than ready to go to trial. He intends to get Rice his job back — with back pay.

"They can't fire him until he's convicted," Pinsky said. "I believe he's going to be totally vindicated."

Rice wants the job, his pension and his good name back. Retirement is not an option. "What am I gonna do — sit home?" he asked.

Pinsky said Rice's pre-arraignment conference is scheduled for later this month. ★



DRUMMED-UP CHARGES?

JAZZ GREAT CHARLIE RICE,
ACCUSED OF STEALING FUEL IN
CAMDEN, SAYS HE'S INNOCENT
AND SO DO HIS FANS

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