

A drumbeat of support greets a veteran jazzman in legal trouble

Charlie Rice has never been in trouble before. He's lived a long time — he's 88 — and spent most of his life traveling the country and the world as a jazz musician. So saying he's never been in trouble before is really saying something.



BOB BRAUN

"Never gambled, never smoked, never drank, never did drugs, not even reefer," says Rice, a great-grandfather of six who was married to the same woman, Lucy, 62 years until she died four years ago.

But Charlie Rice is in trouble now

He began his entertainment career in the 1930s as half a tap-dancing duo, Struts and Struggles (he was Struts), and then turned to drums after he saw a set at a pawn shop at Sixth and South in Philadelphia in 1941.

The drummer did gigs with Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. Entertained in Korea with a USO jazz band during the war. Played the Apollo with Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis and Louis Jordan. Toured Europe and cut albums with Chet Baker.

And, according to a state indictment, he stole gas from the Camden school board.

Less than \$200 worth, but because he was charged under the official misconduct statute, that's enough to have him fired from his public job as a maintenance man,



Rice playing drums in the 1940s.

lose his pension and, maybe, face jail just as he approaches his 90th birthday.

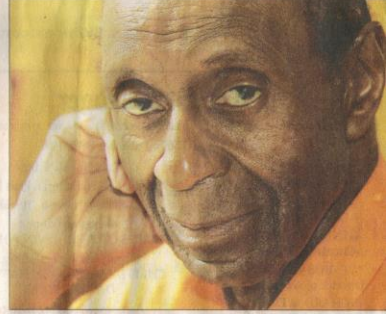
"Once the evidence comes out, it will show Charlie was given permission to use the gas," says Michael Pinsky of Westmont, Rice's lawyer. Pinsky's involvement is a mea-

sure of Rice's standing in the jazz world. He is the longtime attorney for, among others, Joseph Ligambi, considered by the Philadelphia police and the New Jersey attorney general to be head of the Philadelphia crime family once run by Angelo Bruno and Nicodemo "Little Nicky" Scarfo.

The veteran criminal defense attorney doesn't usually bother with third-degree crimes charged against superannuated public employees like Rice.

"It's a shame they're coming down on this old guy," says Pinsky.

Pinsky was persuaded to get involved by a Philadelphia group called the Jazz Bride, begun by jazz singers Suzanne Cloud and Wendy Simon. They raise money to help out jazz artists who, like Rice, [See **BRAUN**, Page 18]



JENNIFER HULSHIZER FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Charlie Rice, who has been pumping gas for the Camden school board for 26 years, is accused of official misconduct.

(cont. below)



JENNIFER HULSHIZER/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Charlie Rice with his lawyer, Michael Pinsky, and Wendy Simon of the Jazz Bridge, a group in Philadelphia that supports jazz musicians in need.

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face "crises."

"We discovered that many of the old jazz greats were in trouble," says Simon. "They needed help, usually with medical bills."

This will be the Jazz Bridge's biggest challenge, because Pinsky doesn't come cheap, and the lawyer says he has to go to trial on this one. No plea deals because, if Rice pleads, the pension and the medical insurance are gone.

Those benefits are why Rice gave up his lifelong devotion to jazz performance and took a job with the Camden school board 26 years ago. He became a pump jockey, filling up school district vehicles from the board's pumps.

Three years ago, the school board's pumps were contaminated with groundwater, so the district began using pumps belonging to the city in an open maintenance yard across town. Rice used the pumps but, Pinsky says, because there was no shelter, he sat in his own car, running the heater in winter and the air conditioner in summer.

"He was told he could top off his tank when he used his car like that," says Pinsky.

Rice, who lives with his daughter in Camden, was indicted last month along with 11 other public



Charlie Rice with Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis in the early 1970s.

employees, mostly state officials. Five city workers in Newark — including a sanitation worker charged with stealing nearly \$45,000 in gas — were indicted earlier this year.

Announcing the indictments, Attorney General Anne Milgram said some public employees "literally took a free ride." Pinsky says Camden owes Rice money.

"We're not only going to win this case, we're going to insist that Charlie gets reinstated with back pay," says Pinsky. His client was suspended without pay from his \$33,000-a-year job after the indictment. Spokesmen for the Attorney General's Office and the Camden

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school board would not comment.

Simon, once a singer for the jazz group 52nd Street, says Jazz Bridge is reaching out for help to as many performers and fans as possible.

"Everybody likes Charlie Rice," she says. "He needs help now."

Bob Braun's columns appear Monday and Thursday. He may be reached at (973) 392-4281 or rbraun@starledger.com. The Jazz Bridge's website is www.jazzbridge.org.