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'Life takes us interesting places': Petaluma pianist's remarkable journey

Jimmy James Page, who once appeared on stage with Sarah Bareilles, enjoys balancing teaching with performing



Jimmy James Page teaches piano out of his Petaluma home and continues to play the classics at Feinstein's at the Nikko in San Francisco Thursday, June 25, 2026 in Petaluma. (John Burgess/The Press)

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PUBLISHED: June 30, 2026 at 9:11 AM PDT | UPDATED: June 30, 2026 at 3:38 PM PDT

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For Jimmy James Page — a Petaluma-based piano teacher and seasoned professional pianist — long-time relationships are the foundation of a remarkable life at the keys.



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Born in Newark, New Jersey, Page attended college at Rutgers University, where he got a BA in music before moving west only a few months after graduating. First landing in Santa Cruz, he eventually settled in San Francisco, then Berkeley, before meeting his wife and moving to Petaluma to start a family.

That was 30 years ago.

A self-identified singer-songwriter, Page predominantly works as a musician-for-hire and a teacher whose clients have ranged from four-years-old to well into their 80s. Some students have even grown up with him, their mentorships spanning over a decade. Many students' photos adorn the home he continues to instruct out of, offering both in-person and online classes.

"I fell into teaching partly because I was tired of driving to North Beach every Tuesday night for \$75 gigs," said Page, adding, "but I also really love my students. I think kids, especially teenagers — if they have the opportunity to have a focus on something like music or performing — really benefit from not being left to flounder on their own."

When you're teaching a person music, Page has learned, you really get to know them.

"Especially over a span of many years," he said, "and I think I'm a good teacher. I love to share what knowledge I have."

Though he's never released an album of his own material, Page has had songs included on compilations. His storied career includes twice winning "Song of the Year" from the West Coast Songwriters Association, playing piano as part of the lineup for bands like Lydia Pense and Cold Blood, and having once shared the stage with a young Sara Bareilles.

"It was many years ago, part of the Sunset Concert — where West Coast Songwriters honors their winners — and she was the Southern California winner and I was the Northern California winner," he recalled. "And she smoked me. She was just a little girl at the time, but she was unbelievable. My jaw dropped about 15 seconds after she started to play."

Page divides his time between teaching — both privately and at the Napa School of Music — and performing, most notably with the San Francisco-based Motown party band Top Shelf Classics, fronted by lead singer Olaf Pollard.

“I actually do very little playing in the Petaluma area,” Page explained, “because most of my music connections were made in the Bay Area. But I’ve known Olaf Pollard for over 30 years and he’s more or less how I got into the band.”

Founded by Johnny Trotman — whose widow LaDonna now manages — Top Shelf Classics performs a dynamic combination of classic soul, smooth jazz and R&B from the ’60s all the way up through the end of the ’90s. The ensemble plays regularly all over Northern California. They also have a once-a-month residency at Feinstein’s at the Nikko Hotel in San Francisco. In addition to Page and Pollard, the current line up includes singers Michael Clewis, Lorenzo Hawkins, Calvin Tillary and Dee Johnson, accompanied by Ricky Bailey, Greg Simmons and Neil Stallings.

“As the group is primarily focused on the vocalists, the musicians generally play supportive roles,” Page shared. “Occasionally — typically on a ballad — I am tasked to play a solo piano intro and I do enjoy those moments.”

Top Shelf has been around at least 20 years, he estimates.

“And I’ve been with them probably 15 of those, so it’s definitely a family, albeit a dysfunctional one,” said Page with a laugh. “Johnny and Olaf and I even played Europe together, way back in the day.”



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Page has also toured Japan as part of another act and even had a stint in the national tour of "American Jukebox."

"Many years ago, I received an urgent call from the show's production manager when it was in the middle of a run at Marine's Memorial in San Francisco," Page remembered. "Their keyboardist was late in her pregnancy and experiencing some issues, and they asked if I could make it to the theater and fill in that night? And oh, by the way, the band sets up onstage and is integrated into the performance!"

Since this was long before the internet and MP4s, Page had little more than a sound check in which to prepare, but he still did the show and ultimately finished the full run. He then joined the act in Atlanta and continued on to Texas after that.

"I even did a six-week stint at Ford's Theater in DC," he said. "As a history buff, that was a highlight."

Page's next appearance with Top Shelf Classics, at Feinstein's at the Nikko, is on Sunday, July 12. Interested students can also hire him through his website jimmyjamespage.com.

"I love to play Chopin and I love to play Stevie Wonder," Page said. "I'm kind of all over the map — Beethoven to Joni Mitchell — so if you're looking to send your kid to Julliard I might not be ideal. But if you're looking to improve your craft, I'm your guy — because I'm always looking to improve mine."

One day, he pointed out, he'd like to get back to songwriting.

"In some ways, I think I'm actually a stronger songwriter than piano player," he said, "but life takes us interesting places so ... someday!"

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