

Jazz scene nurtures talent that is changing face of music

By Graham Haworth
Photos by Philip Wartena

Santa Cruz County has always been known for importing some of the best live music in the nation, often attracting more than 40 touring acts in a week to the myriad clubs here. But now, Santa Cruz is gaining a name for exporting its finest musicians to New York City, where numerous jazz musicians who previously called Surf City home are now making big waves in the Big Apple.

So that begs the question, what makes Santa Cruz such a ripe place for young musicians to learn their craft to such a high degree? Is it the liberal arts-oriented atmosphere? Perhaps the ocean breeze and the coast redwoods inspire some sort of intense musical creativity? In truth, the answer is much simpler than that. It's the numerous educational organizations and the teachers who inspire their young students.

"I'll never stop reminding myself how glad I am to have grown up in Santa Cruz," said Remy Le Boeuf, who with his twin brother Pascal has quickly risen to the top of the fertile NYC jazz scene. "The Kuumbwa Jazz Center is a

huge reason for why Santa Cruz is putting out all these young jazz musicians. And Cabrillo College's music program — Ray Brown in particular — has always played a huge role in shaping the interests and passions of young musicians in Santa Cruz."

The Le Boeuf brothers are among a new crop of young jazz musicians taking the artform to new and fresh places. Their use of odd time signatures — as well as obvious non-jazz influences like alternative rock, electronica and hip-hop — is helping expose jazz to a newer generation. Jazz has always been about change and evolution, and in that regard, the Le Boeuf brothers are becoming leaders in the changing of the jazz guard. And Remy gives full credit where it's due — to the teachers who inspired him and his brother to follow a musical path.

"[Ray Brown has] taught some of the most successful jazz musicians in the world such as Donny McCaslin and Jeff Ballard, both of whom hail from Santa Cruz," said Le Boeuf.

"Pascal and I both have our quirky past of getting into jazz by playing for tips at the Cabrillo farmers market," reminisces Le Boeuf. "Gene Lewis was the first person to introduce us to jazz, and he taught us a small repertoire of tunes that we would play at the market. We'd always play next to Oyster Bill's stand, and he'd give us free oysters when we took breaks."

The 20-year-old Le Boeuf brothers visit the Kuumbwa Jazz Center Aug. 21 with their quintet, returning to another place renowned throughout the jazz world as one of the most pure jazz clubs on the planet.

The Kuumbwa Jazz Center opened its doors on May 27, 1977, the brainchild of Rich Wills, Sheba Burney and Tim Jackson. What began on a shoestring budget has since grown by leaps and bounds. One of the most interesting aspects of the club is that it's always been a nonprofit organization, which was a radical idea back in the 1970s, and remains somewhat radical today.

Through grants from organizations like the James Irvine Foundation and the Packard Foundation, Kuumbwa comes up with money to attract top-flight jazz musicians to the intimate 200-seat jazz club. Aside from putting on stellar live concerts in a close-knit atmosphere, Kuumbwa also dives headfirst into music education.

"Over the years, I've seen almost four generations of young musicians who have come out of not only our programs, but out of Cabrillo College and UC Santa Cruz as well," said Tim Jackson, executive/artistic director at Kuumbwa Jazz

Photo by Dan Coyro



Remy and Pascal Le Boeuf export the sound they learned in Santa Cruz to the world.

Center. "Santa Cruz has always been fertile ground for musicians, and that's one of the reasons we started the organization in the first place. I think it's safe to say we've nurtured the early generations of Santa Cruz jazz musicians."

One of the most satisfying aspects of the Kuumbwa Jazz Center is its sense of history and family-like atmosphere. Indeed, many of the same folks who attended that first show in the spring of 1977 are still very much involved with

Monday is the main night for big headliners at the Kuumbwa.

Photo by Philip Wartena





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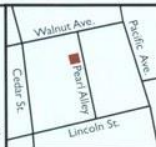
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the club. Now, they bring their kids along to watch, and in many cases, their kids are now playing on the same stage their parents did.

One such example is the Dobson family. Smith and Gail Dobson — both fine musicians in their own right — were two of those people at the first show, and over the years graced the stage countless times. Smith died tragically in a 2001 car accident, but his musical and personal legacy lives on through his daughter Sasha and son Smith V, both of whom are charting their own musical careers — Sasha in New York City and Smith in San Francisco.

“Smith was a spiritual mentor over the years,” said Jackson, who is also general manager of the Monterey Jazz Festival. “He was a real classy guy and a wonderful musician. He was a mentor in a way as to how we wanted this organization to conduct itself.”

The theme of being a good person, along with being a good musician, comes up over and over again when talking with Jackson. He said it’s a natural outgrowth of being a successful jazz musician.

“I’ve noticed over the years that all the great musicians have a certain style and grace,” said Jackson. “Playing jazz is like being on a sports team in a way. You’re working for the good of the group and each instrument has its role to fill. The special musicians are the ones who’ve figured out a way to communicate with not only their music, but their actions off the stage.”

When looking at the future of not only the Kuumbwa, but jazz as a whole, Jackson believes the very nature of jazz will carry it through any kind of economic downturn or social upheaval.

“Jazz has always been music of the moment,” he said. “It’s emotional, and it’s best experienced in a live setting. It’s a direct connection with another person, and that seems to be harder to come by in this world.

There’s an old-school aspect to the quality of music in a live setting.

That’s a strength that we have and will continue to promote.” ☺