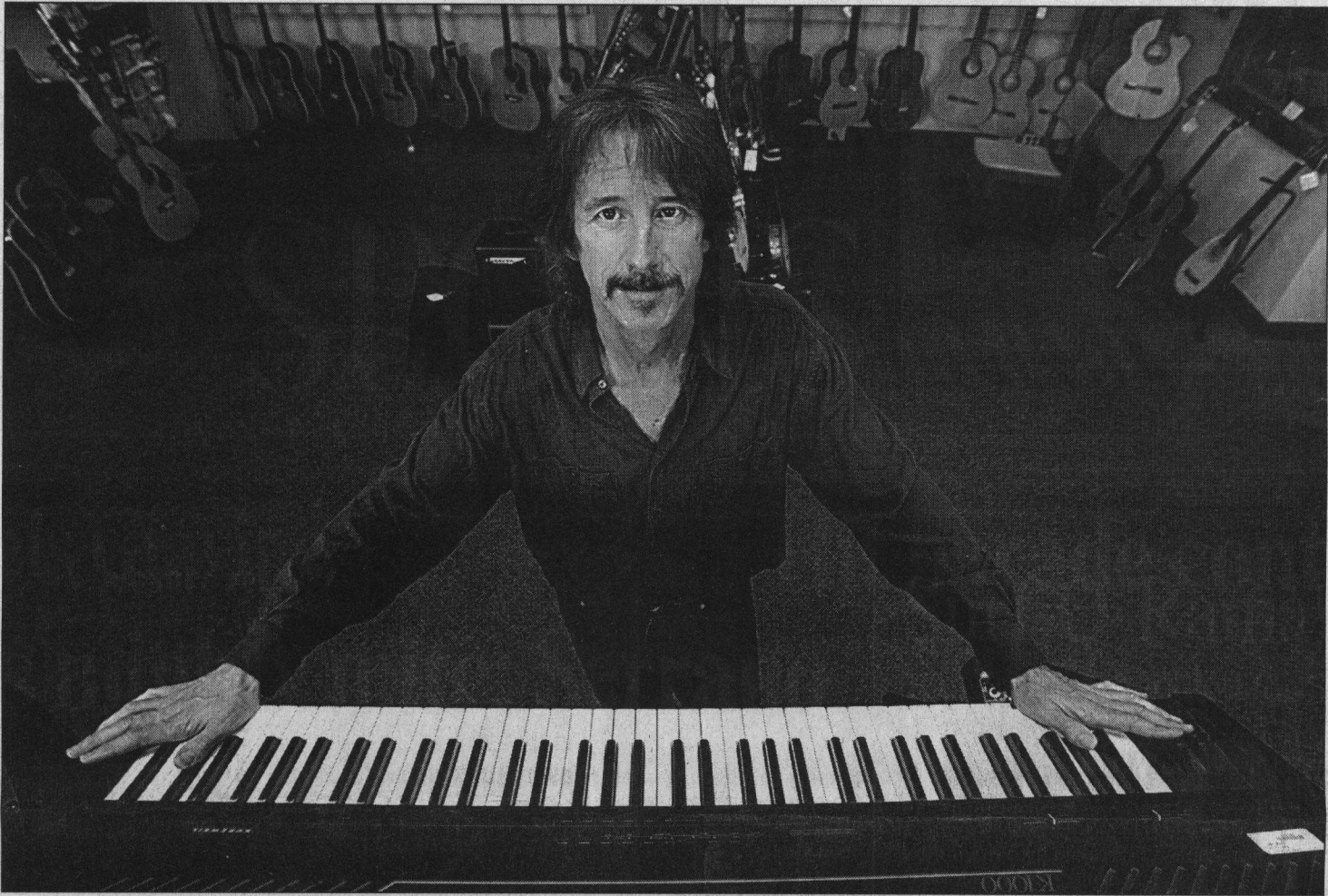




Santa Cruz rocker Dale Ockerman is hoping Santa Cruz is ready for its own school of rock ... and jazz and blues



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Dale Ockerman has opened a music school in the More Music building at 512 Front Street.

School of Ock

Bus 3

8-28-05

By WALLACE BAINE *Sentinel staff writer*

Dale Ockerman is a professional musician, not a businessman. But, as he launches an ambitious business venture, he can at least bank on the fact that, in both music and business, timing is everything.

With the public school system all but abandoning instruction in music, with not one but two movies released in the last two years — the Jack Black comedy “The School of Rock” and the documentary “Rock School” — about the art of teaching popular music, with a new business district heavy on music-related endeavors just beginning to blossom, and with dozens of accomplished musicians living locally looking for a sideline, the timing of Ockerman’s Santa Cruz New Music School is Miles Davis perfect.

Set for a Sept. 1 grand opening, the Music School will open in a small rabbit warren of rehearsal rooms behind the newly relocated

music store More Music on Front Street in downtown Santa Cruz. The idea is to bring in a stable of musician/teachers in rock, jazz, vocals, blues, country, metal and other idioms and offer a wide variety of one-on-one lessons to aspiring musicians of all ages and skill levels.

“Our philosophy is ‘who are the best players in town?’” said Ockerman, looking over his roster of teachers. “Here they are. And all these guys have taught before.”

Ockerman is a veteran keyboardist who’s played in a number of groups, most famously the Doobie Brothers. He’s also one of the eight men who make up the wildly popular

If You Go

WHAT: The Santa Cruz New Music School.

WHERE: 512 Front St., Santa Cruz.

COST: Rates are around \$30 for half-hour lessons, including a free introductory consultation.

DETAILS: 426-6060.

Beatles interpretation band the Santa Cruz White Album Ensemble.

Inspired by the Blue Bear school of music in San Francisco, which has been providing lessons and classes for would-be rockers since the heyday of Jefferson Airplane, Ockerman has been nursing the idea of starting a music school for a couple of years now.

“Well, ‘School of Rock’ was a real eye-opener, how fun it was. And classical music is great, but kids today just don’t sit around

See **Ockerman** on **PAGE B3**

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DALE OCKERMAN

Ockerman

Continued from Page B1

thinking about Rachmaninoff all the time. There's marching band too. But that's nobody's idea of a sexy lifestyle."

Among the players who've signed on to be teachers at the New Music School are Ockerman's White Album bandmates Jason Schimmel, Richard Bryant and Ken Kraft. Schimmel, a talented multi-instrumentalist, is also known for his work in the eclectic Santa Cruz jazz/rock band Estradasphere, which also contributes band members Tim Smolins and Kevin Kmeta to the roster. Bryant is a gifted singer and Kraft, a pillar of the Santa Cruz music community and founding member of the 1970s-era band Snail.

Also part of the effort is drummer Jimmy Norris (Snail, Lacy J. Dalton), blues guitarist Mike Schermer, country siren Ginny Mitchell, jazz bassist Dan Robbins and several more.

The idea is to start slowly by offering one-on-one lessons and build into more diverse offerings like master classes and performances. Ockerman hopes to attract both kids and adults in hours conducive to after-school and after-work schedules. Down the line, he's planning to incorporate the school as a nonprofit, and develop scholarship programs for low-income students.

"I'm really excited about what Dale's doing," said Steve Savage, the president of the San Francisco's Blue Bear school, which opened in 1971 and has since served more than 20,000 students. "He really has everything in place."

Blue Bear currently has an enrollment of about 600 and offers a variety of classes from theory to improvisation to technique. It offers a class on how to play the Beatles and another on how to play the Stones. It features classes called "How to Sing Like a Rock Star" and "Jamming 101."

Blue Bear struggled for its first four or five years before it was established enough to grow. But, said Savage, Ockerman and his New Music School might avoid some of the problems he faced.

"It was a huge cultural moment, of course, and there was a lot of energy in San Francisco at the time," he said. "But the idea of a rock'n' roll school was really at odds with the ethic of the time, which was, rock was not something that could be taught, that good rock musicians never read music, it only messed them up. That kind of prejudice was something we had to deal with."

That's not the case today. And the New Music School is opening in an environment potentially friendly to its mission. Front Street has, in recent months, become the new home of two music retailers, More Music which focuses on string instruments from mandolins to lap-steel guitars, and Thomas Instruments, which deals in brass and woodwinds. The long-established Union Grove Music is just a block away on Pacific Avenue.

What's more, near the corner of Front and Cathcart, jazz saxophonist Wes Anthony is opening a venue to be called the E3 Playhouse in which he will also offer music classes.

In true musician fashion, many of the principals involved are talking collaboration instead of competition.

"This whole area here is about to take off," said Ockerman. "As opposed to competition, I see us all in this overlapping, synergistic relationship."

"I'm a complementarian," said Anthony in front of E3, housed in the space that was once Cymbaline Records. Anthony sees E3 as a nightclub and lunch spot as well as a venue for music instruction. E3 stands for Education, Entertainment and Eatery.

Also in Ockerman's favor, he believes, is a family history in education.

"My mother was a kindergarten teacher. My father was a high school teacher. My grandfather was a principal. One hundred percent of my parents and siblings are teachers. And I was the black sheep that got thrown out of high school."

Ockerman's first musical instrument was the trumpet at which he excelled in school. Fans of the White Album Ensemble have seen him blowing the trumpet in the Ensemble's take on the Beatles' "Got to Get You Into My Life."

Eventually, he moved toward rock music and became a self-taught keyboardist, inspired by the rock acts of the time.

"My school was the Fillmore and the Avalon in San Francisco. I used to go to all those Bill Graham concerts to hear Sly Stone, Jeff Beck, Pentangle for something different, Jimi Hendrix, Electric Flag. I just listened to it all, dug it and tried to figure it out later when I got home."

Ockerman is still working regularly at his music; he's just released a new album and established a new Web site for his music. But the working life for a musician, he said, isn't what it once was, which has created a class of experienced musicians looking for teaching gigs.

"Live music gigging has dried up for a lot of people," he said. "It's really not a living anymore. At one point, it actually was. You could pay rent and keep everything running just playing live. Nowadays, that's pretty much impossible."

These days, many musicians give private lessons and classes, often at their homes. Other musicians have to travel to give lessons. One of the new school's instructors regularly travels to Morgan Hill, an onerous drive over the mountains.

As he works at administering the New School, pursuing a scholarship program, applying for nonprofit status and courting corporate sponsors, Ockerman sees the Santa Cruz New Music School as an answer to a riddle that's been bugging him for years and is largely responsible for the formation of the White Album Ensemble: How do you deal with public schools' move to cut back or eliminate music from the curriculum?

"If there were no more PE in the public schools, what would happen to the karate and the ballet schools? They would benefit, even though karate and ballet are not like doing push-ups and playing football. You'd still look for ways to get your kids to do something physical. Same thing goes for music."

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