

Music - go-round

Diverse shows for savvy audiences at **DON QUIXOTE'S** travel the world

By Graham Haworth

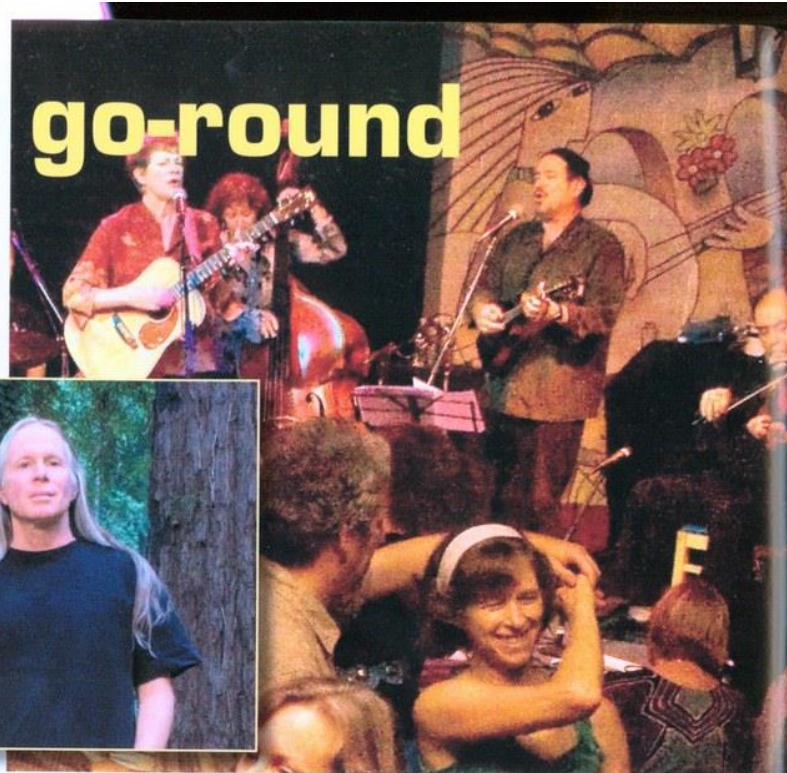
It's tough to decide just what makes Don Quixote's Music Hall such a great place to see live music. On one hand, all you have to do is look at the venue's calendar, and you'll find at least five bands a week playing everything from Celtic to bluegrass to African to reggae to Latin and beyond. On the other hand, one has to simply step into the main hall to recognize that the room reverberates with decades of musical entertainment.

"There aren't a lot of rooms that are built intentionally to present music," says Tom Miller, who books shows at Don Quixote's in Felton and has been a concert programmer in Santa Cruz County since 1979. "Back in 1953, when this place was known as the Swiss Chalet, the owners decided to add a room specifically to present jazz and big band music. It was built from the ground up to host music performances. It has beautiful dimensions. The big arches were brought over from Italy. They hold up a combed redwood ceiling. The original oak hardwood dance floor is still in place. The whole room is like an old wood guitar; it's got a real warm sound."

But without performers and an audience, the old wood room would sit silently. That's what drives Miller to bring in bands from throughout the world. Miller is a busy man in that regard. He strives to present the best musicians to audiences who make the 10-minute drive into the mountains from Santa Cruz. His philosophy is simple: turn people on to music they may not have heard before, and bring back the old favorites that audiences clamor for.

"The idea of change is what we strive for every day, and it's what we'll continue to do," says Miller. Slight and animated, with long hair beginning to gray, Miller is a man whose excitement and enthusiasm for music is evident. "Everyday I wake up, it's about change, and I feel like a little kid going to school. If there's anything steady about my job, it's the looking forward to something new and exciting and fresh."

In some ways, the experience of going to



a concert at Don Quixote's is old-fashioned. It's not just a concert venue, but also a restaurant. Owner Sue Ko and her restaurant staff offer delicious Mexican and Southwestern cuisine, while Miller takes care of the entertainment. It's dinner and a show, all in one convenient place.

Miller's affinity for presenting diverse music goes back decades. He tells of shows he put on in the 1980s where the Marlboro Man is standing in the audience next to the hippies who are standing next to the punk rockers. And all of them having a damn good time.

"That's a condensation of what I've always tried to do with music, and that's to bring in as much music from as many places from as many genres," Miller says.

In any place other than Santa Cruz County, that wildly diverse aspect might confuse audiences. Not so here, insists Miller. In fact, Miller thinks it's the audiences in particular that lend Don Quixote's shows their unique, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants atmosphere. Concert-goers from the Santa Cruz area are musically intelligent because they have the resources at their disposal to go out and appreciate different styles of music.

"There's a consciousness here that embraces the whole world of music," Miller says. "A big factor in that are the radio stations. It begs the question, 'which came first? The audience, the radio stations or the concerts?' The truth is, they all emerged together."

Miller cites the influence of iconoclastic radio station KPIG, along with a wealth of public

and college radio stations that includes KUSP, KZSC and KKUP. Throw into that musical gumbo the free-wheeling students at UC Santa Cruz who choose to stay on and live in the area, and you've got a perfect recipe for an environment that musicians just can't get enough of.

And Don Quixote's is glad to host those acts.

"What the artists say about Santa Cruz is they just love the audiences and the joyousness and intelligence they bring to the table," Miller says. "Here, audiences hang on every note, and when the song is over, they show their love. Standing ovations happen sometimes in the middle of a song. A song no one requests in other places—you know, a B-side from 20 years ago—a music lover in Santa Cruz will pick that out. It's got to make an artist feel great. All of this exists because the audience opens their hearts and minds to the music, the culture and the stories the performers have to tell."

Those who work with Miller agree. Toby Gray, the bass player for It's a Beautiful Day and the Road Hogs, is also the soundman for Don Quixote's. "I think Tom is one of the most audience-conscious people I know of. He really walks that fine line to taking care of artists and making sure audiences have a good experience. He keeps a close-knit, family atmosphere for people who work here, too."

Miller himself is as much a part of the Don Quixote's audience as anyone else. Despite working in his office all day, he says he often finds himself at the venue when he thought

he might just sit at home and read a book. He can't stay away from a good show, and at Don Quixote's, good shows are likely to happen five nights a week.

Visit Don Quixote's Web site and peruse the concert calendar at www.donquixotesmusic.info. And don't forget to arrive at the venue early to enjoy dinner and drinks beforehand. ♣



BEST PLACE FOR MUSIC, EVER

There are no statistics per capita for the number of live concerts in a city, but if there were, Santa Cruz would surely sit at the top of the list. A look at the calendar of just three additional clubs in the city — **The Catalyst**, **Kuumbwa Jazz Center** and **Moe's Alley** — reveals well over 60 shows in one month alone. And that doesn't include other venues such as the Rio Theatre, the 418 Project, or UC Santa Cruz. Not bad for a town of 56,000.

There are several things that factor into Santa Cruz's wealth of live music entertainment. Number one, according to the artists themselves, is the audience. Bands love to play here because the audience is continually thirsty for music. Perhaps it's the personality of Santa Cruz, but audiences here are as open-minded as they come.

But you've also got to give enormous credit to the club owners and promoters. Bill Welch at Moe's Alley strives to bring in world class blues acts, along with reggae and world music bands and jam bands. Kuumbwa Jazz Center is one of the finest jazz clubs on the planet, attracting top jazz artists, both classic and emerging.

And what town is complete without a rock club? The Catalyst, in the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, has been bringing in the biggest names in rock for the better part of three decades. Neil Young used to do secret shows there. Pearl Jam has used the venue for epic warm-up gigs before they head out on arena tours. Nirvana, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, No Doubt and Alanis Morissette all graced the Catalyst stage before they became household names.

If you find yourself with nothing to do at night, you can find world class music on pretty much every night of the week. And you don't have to travel to San Francisco to see it. It's right