

Velzoe Brown is shown in her 90s in a photo taken at her Santa Cruz home. Friends and musicians will gather Sunday to remember the beloved late jazz pianist.

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MUSIC

Bio-B

Songs for Velzoe

Jazz icon gets a fond farewell from friends, admirers

6 11 11

By WALLACE BAINE

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If you had never met her, or seen her perform live, you might think that, given all the stories about her, Velzoe Brown was a figure out of Santa Cruz folklore — that someone who lived to be 101, and lived every one of those years as a free, energetic, independent-minded, intellectually curious, musically voracious dynamo, and who collected meaningful friendships like the rest of us collect

spare change, couldn't possibly be real.

However, in this community, if you never met Velzoe Brown, you're also probably in the minority.

The beloved jazz pianist, whose life span reached to the days of Mark Twain, died May 4, a little more than a year after the Santa Cruz music community celebrated her 100th birthday at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center. On Sunday, also at

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the Kuumbwa, many of those same friends and admirers will gather again to share stories and reflect on Velzoe's long life in a party to feature live music in her honor.

Even after turning 100, she was regularly performing with her band the Upbeats. She was still living independently in her cozy home, which is a stone's throw from Highway 1 but feels like it's in the middle of a storybook forest. She was still hosting friends and neighbors, talking about music, history, spirituality and art.

"She was a fascinating person," said friend Steve Newman of the Jazz Society of Santa Cruz. "You'd visit her house, and it was surrounded by a lot of gardens and trees that she worked hard to maintain. And inside, there were paintings on the wall, all by her. Inside there were always books. She collected a lot of memorabilia and histories. She wrote histories of families."

And she played music. For decades, Velzoe hosted musicians who would bring along an instrument or two to play in her parlor while she accompanied them on the piano. Newman first met her more than 20 years ago, by which she was already in her late 70s. "Her main love were the old jazz tunes, but she also liked classical and we'd play together in her front room, her on piano and sometimes the flute."

Bill Charleston first met Brown in the 1990s at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, a summer program in Washington state where Velzoe served as a kind of historian and inspiration for the younger musicians. Charleston had so much enjoyed performing with her, he would visit Santa Cruz many times over the years to play with her.

"You couldn't help but have real philosophical conversations with her," he said. "She would talk about her life and want to know about your life. She was the kind of person you could be a bit vulnerable with."

Velzoe Brown was born in Nebraska, near the Missouri River, when William Howard Taft was in the White House. In the 1920s, at the tender of 16, she joined an all-girl traveling jazz band called the Pollyanna Syncopators who traveled by car to cities all over the Midwest.

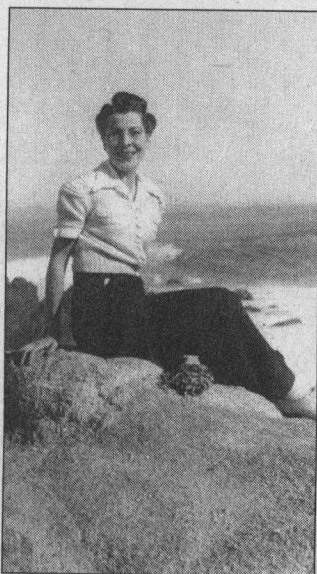
In later years, she would talk glowingly of her parents, both musicians, who were enlightened enough to allow her to do what was in those days a scandalous thing.

That was only the beginning of a long life dedicated to playing music. Velzoe, who nev-



Velzoe Brown, far left, with Peggy Russell & the Hollywood Hi-Lites, circa 1930.

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Velzoe Brown in Carmel in 1940.

er married or had children, moved to Santa Cruz in the early 1960s, and it was there that her social circles kept expanding until her death.

One of those friends was Muriel Anderson, widely considered one of the finest finger-picking-style guitarists in the country. Anderson composed and recorded a song dedicated to her friend titled "Velzoe's Garden."

IF YOU GO

VELZOE BROWN MEMORIAL GATHERING

WHEN: Sunday, 2 p.m.
WHERE: Kuumbwa Jazz Center, 320-2 Cedar St., Santa Cruz
TICKETS: Free
DETAILS: www.kuumbwajazz.org

"She was a great inspiration to me," said Anderson, who will fly to Santa Cruz from Nashville to perform at Sunday's event. "She was a great light in my life, spiritually as well. I would call her up on the road and we'd end up talking about life, boys, everything."

On Brown's 100th birthday, Anderson brought her a guitar made the year she was born. "If anyone referred to her as 'retired,'" said Anderson, "she got really mad. 'I'm not retired,' she'd say. 'I'm still working.'"

Santa Cruz harpist Shelley Phillips also befriended Velzoe, despite the half-century difference in their ages. "It was great because she developed this huge interest in Indian culture, and started doing ananda yoga, and being a vegetarian."

Phillips once invited Brown

to her house to watch the old movie "Some Like It Hot" with some other female friends. "She had never seen that movie, and she laughed and laughed. She was as youthful as anyone there that night. We were just a bunch of crazy girls laughing at this movie."

Velzoe was often a woman of contradictions. She was a traditionalist and proud American who was politically conservative, but she

also cultivated a fascination with other cultures and other spiritual traditions. She never had children of her own, but became a primary caregiver for many others.

"I asked her once," said Bill Charleston. "'Velzoe, what it is about your attitude?' And she said, 'Well, I don't sweat the small stuff, and I'm ageless.'"

Tracy Spring also met Brown at the Puget Sound summer program, and ended up taping eight to nine hours of interviews with her. "She was just amazing," said Spring. "We'd do these jams into the night, and she would regularly play us youngsters under the table. She'd still be playing until 1 or 2 in the morning."

Spring is hosting her own

Velzoe Brown memorial party this weekend in her hometown of Bellingham, Wash. "I was also amazed at how her friendships really cut across the decades. She was a real master at that."

Her friend, guitarist Steve Palazzo, remembers an incident at the Puget Sound program that he said best describes Velzoe's impish spirit.

"There was a question from one man asking, 'Velzoe, how did it come to be that you never got married?' There was a brief uncomfortable hush from all of us at the apparent inappropriateness of the question. She paused, shook her head and chuckled, 'I don't know. I guess that I'm just one of the lucky ones.'"

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