

First Night lures diverse, record crowd downtown

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SANTA CRUZ — First Night Santa Cruz drew a record crowd on New Year's Eve to welcome the last year of the century, organizers said.

First Night board member Marty Ackerman said inviting weather was partly responsible for the estimated turnout of 30,000.

Last year's crowd had been estimated at between 20,000 and 28,000.

Reflecting the "Year of the Ocean" theme, a sea of dancers, musicians and entertainers opened the festivities with a procession down Pacific Avenue.

They dressed in metallic marine colors and depicted sea horses, clams, fish, sea gods, and fantasy ocean creatures.

"The ocean theme showing was pretty enchanting," said Amy Fowler, a resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains, who attended with her family.

Ackerman said she saw a natural marriage between the themes.

"Because this is the Year of the Ocean and we're on the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, it was a great opportunity to tie the two together."

This year, coordinators surprised the downtown crowd with a colorful laser show at midnight at the Town Clock while Pelé Juju belted out Afro-Caribbean music.

The procession, also featuring belly dancers, cowboys, jugglers, and bagpipers, captivated thousands of children and adults alike both in music and in parade.

"I saw jellyfish, seaweed and dolphins," said an enthusiastic Maddie Tyler, 11, of Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz resident Rolfe Schreiner said he was impressed.

"It's amazing there is so much variety and so much energy in this parade," he said.

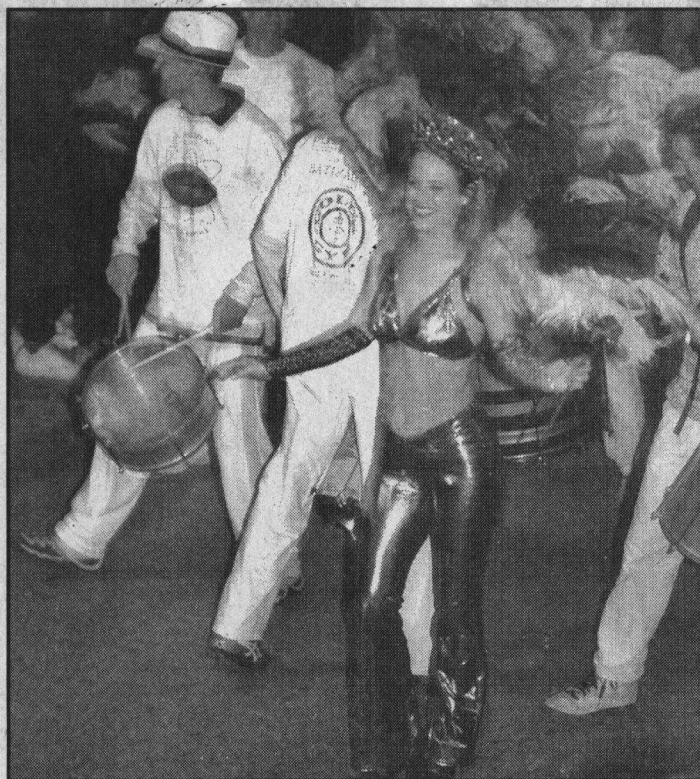
About 700 volunteers worked the event, which also included dozens of musical performances throughout the downtown, said Bruce Bratton, publicity director.

"It's gone a lot smoother than we expected," Bratton said. "Decisions are more centralized and there's a chain of command and there's more people here tonight than ever."

Those who paid to watch musicians perform on stage got treated to everything from salsa to reggae to opera.

About 1,000 artists, both musical and visual, entertained the crowds.

Proceeds go toward paying performers and event technicians.



A sea creature, top, makes her way to the head of Pacific Avenue as the grand procession for First Night Santa Cruz begins Thursday evening. At left, a samba dancer leads her group down Pacific Avenue during the parade. A record 30,000 people ushered in 1999 at the annual festivities.

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