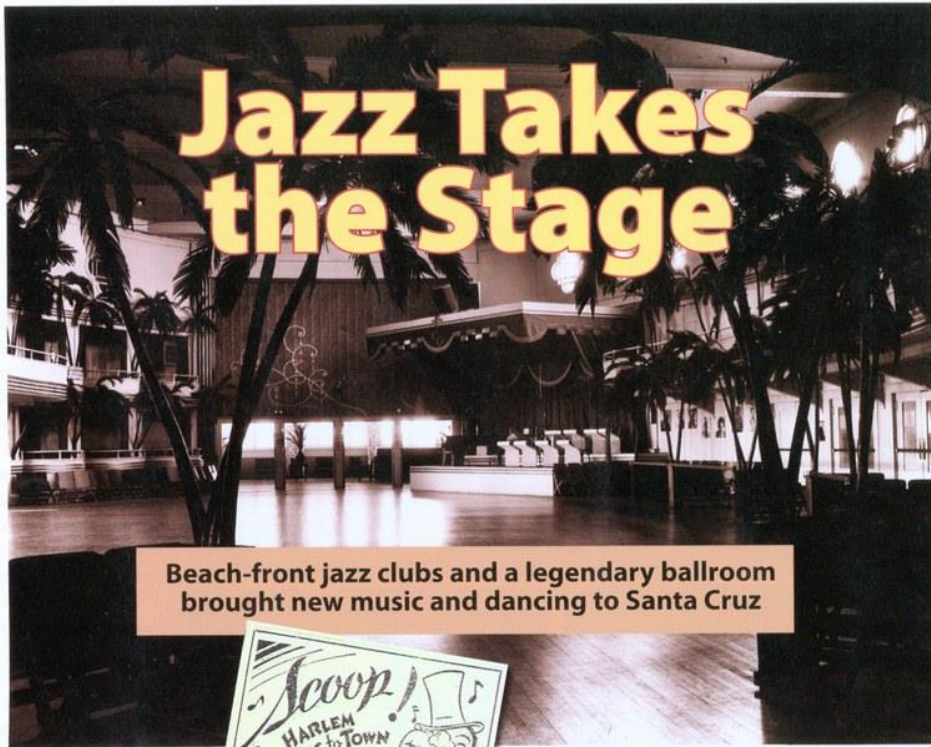


# Jazz Takes the Stage



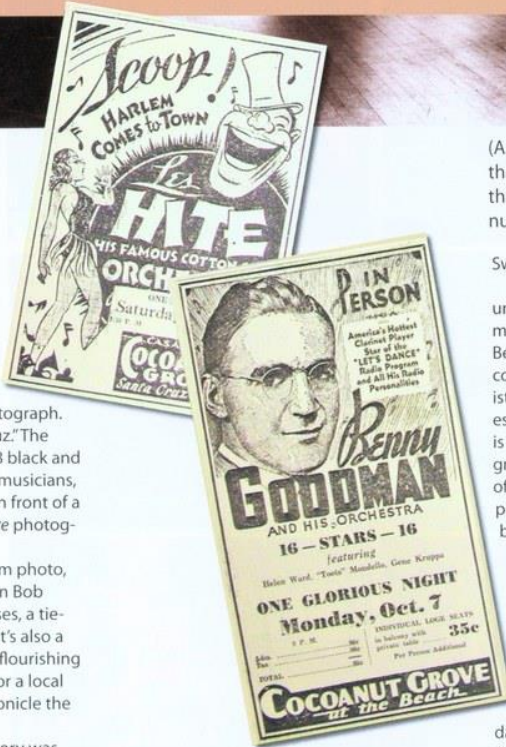
Beach-front jazz clubs and a legendary ballroom brought new music and dancing to Santa Cruz

By Jennifer Squires

On a summer day in 2006, photographer Bob Oberg gathered 57 local jazz musicians near the end of the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf for a photograph. Called "A Great Day in Santa Cruz." The image emulates the iconic 1958 black and white photo of 57 notable jazz musicians, "A Great Day in Harlem," taken in front of a New York brownstone by *Esquire* photographer Art Kane.

Less formal than the Harlem photo, the Santa Cruz snap by musician Bob Oberg features a lot of sunglasses, a tie-dye shirt, and Hawaiian prints. It's also a window into Santa Cruz's long-flourishing jazz tradition and the catalyst for a local documentary filmmaker to chronicle the area's jazz history.

"I never knew that the history was that rich and went that far back and it was so popular," said Ken Koenig, a jazz fan and filmmaker who produced 'Santa Cruz



(Above) 1930s Coconut Grove handbills for performances of two legendary-jazz orchestras, Les Hite and Benny Goodman.

(Above) When remodeled in 1934, more than 250 real palm trees were positioned throughout The Beach Boardwalk's Coconut Grove.

Swings' in 2008.

New York City always has been the undisputed jazz capital of the world but the music also has prospered on the West Coast. Beginning around the turn of the century, concert bands played at the beach for tourists during the summer. The Hastings Band, established by Professor George Hastings, is remembered as the first. The uniformed group—Koenig described them as "a bunch of guys with moustaches and funny hats"—played for Santa Cruz beach crowds on a daily basis from 1890-1907.

Dance concert bands gave way to jazz music with the advent of the saxophone. By the late 1920s, the Casino Ballroom at the Boardwalk was taken over by jazz band music. Big band sound came on the early 1930s and the ballroom was redone in 1934. The new "South Seas" theme included 250 palm trees encircling the dance floor, and the ballroom was renamed the Coconut Grove just as swing, a new, youthful sound for jazz, emerged.

"It was wonderful when the big bands

Photo/graphics: © Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Archives

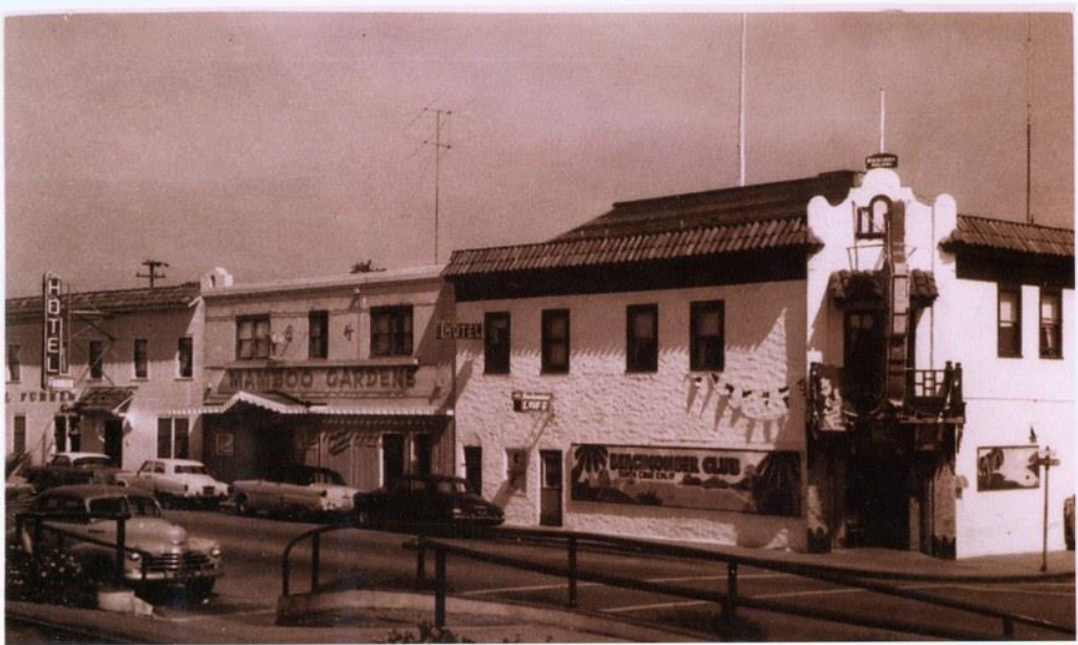


Photo: © Ken Koenig Collection

(Above) The Mamboo Gardens (L) and the Beachcomber Club were two of several jazz clubs located on Beach Street in Santa Cruz.

were in," Koenig said.

It was the beginning of a golden era for live music in Santa Cruz. All the big names in big-band jazz came to the Coconut Grove: Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw, Harry James, Les Brown, the Glenn Miller Band, and more.

But the jazz scene wasn't limited to the Boardwalk. Jazz clubs lined Beach Street in the '40s and '50s. Young jazz fans would come from the beach to dance during the day, then go home to get dressed up and return in the evening to dance more.

"It was very much like Broadway or New Orleans," Frank Leal, a local jazz saxophone legend who owned the 2525 Main Street Restaurant in Soquel, told reporter Sheila Solano in a 1988 interview. "Even on weeknights people would park their cars, then check out a place and go up and down the street, catching different types of music at each of the clubs."

The clubs came and went with the tourists, opening in the spring and closing after Labor Day weekend each year. There was Mamboo, the High Hat, the Surfrider, the Sunken Hole, and the Casbah, now a tamale restaurant. Leal operated the Beachcomber in what is now the corner of a parking lot, and booked artists like R&B legend Big Mama Thornton. The St. Francis became the Opus de Jazz and, finally, Monk's in the 1970s featured swing, R&B, and mainstream jazz. (Today the location is the Beach Street Cafe.)

"It was a very lively scene," legend-

Photo: © Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk

ary Santa Cruz jazz pianist and vibraphonist Don McCaslin recalled in an interview for the documentary. McCaslin said Opus de Jazz "was a great place to play."

Be-bop gained momentum in the early 1940s, buoyed by jazzmasters Charlie Parker on

sax and Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet. During World War II and the Korean War, musician servicemen stationed at Fort Ord traveled to Santa Cruz on leave to play music and enjoy the diverse sounds.

The spirited jazz scene extended down



(Above) The Buddy King Orchestra performs for a crowded dance floor at the Beach Boardwalk's Coconut Grove Ballroom in 1947.

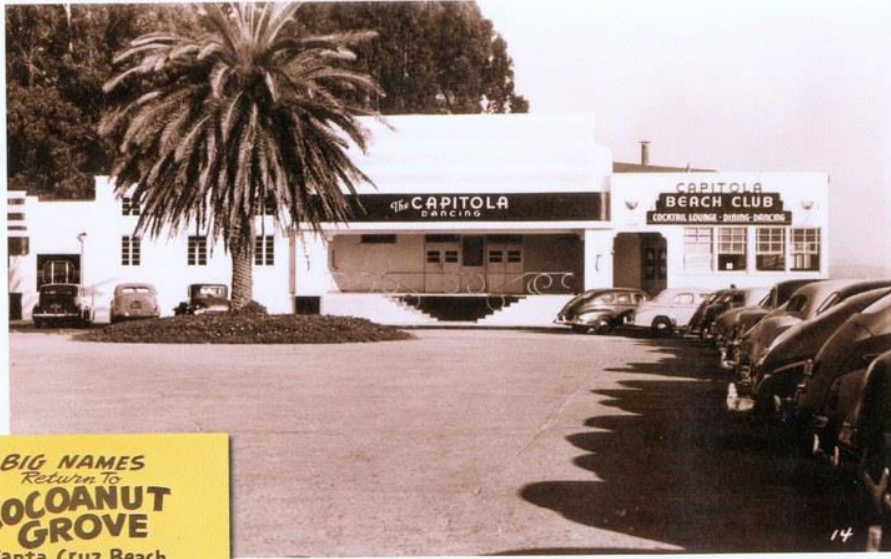


Photo: ©Capitola Historical Museum

(Above) Built in the 1930s just south of Santa Cruz, The Capitola Ballroom and Beach Club remained a Bay Area hot spot until its renovation in 1954.



Graphic: © Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Archives

(Above) A show card for jazz vocalists "The Four Freshman," accompanied by the Boardwalk's band, Karl Bruhn.



Photo: © Bob Oberg

(Above) Photographer Bob Oberg gathered 57 local jazz musicians near the end of the Santa Cruz Wharf to emulate Art Kane's famous Harlem photograph.

the coast to Capitola, known as "the oldest resort on the Pacific Coast." The Capitola Ballroom, built at the site of the old Grand Capitola hotel, rivaled the Coconut Grove in the 1930s. One summer pianist Gil Evans brought his band from to the ballroom to perform for the season. (He later moved to New York and teamed up with iconic trumpeter Miles Davis to make recordings in the '50s and '60s.) The ballroom began side-by-side jazz

venues: the Caribbean Club and the Saba Club. The Caribbean featured big bands for dancing, while the Saba was the spot for small jazz combos and jam sessions until it burned down in 1957.

But the lively jazz club scene began to fold in the late '50s and early '60s. The Coffee Cabaret in Capitola was one of the last clubs to make a go of it. It opened in 1958 in the current site of Margaritaville, and was the only



Photo: © Courtesy Art Kane Archive

(Above) It was a Great Day in Harlem when *Esquire Magazine* photographer Art Kane gathered 57 eminent jazz musicians on the steps of a Harlem brownstone. Included in the group were Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Gene Krupa, and Thelonious Monk.



Photo: ©Capitola Historical Museum  
Graphic: © Frank Hill



(Above) Tiki Mania made its way to Capitola in 1954 when Brad McDonald renovated the Capitola Ballroom to create the Saba nightclub and Caribbean Ballroom. Performers include jazz greats like Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, and Ella Fitzgerald.

jazz coffeehouse with live entertainment between San Francisco and Los Angeles. House bands played from 8 p.m. to midnight, with jam sessions extending well into the morning.

Big band sound gave way to more experimental jazz music in the '60s and '70s, as Cabrillo College's famed jazz education program, led by Lile Cruse and trumpet virtuoso Ray Brown, gained prestige and young musicians flocked to the beach to study and test the waters as professional musicians.

"This was a happening jazz community and, of course, a beautiful spot to be," said Paul Nagel, a jazz pianist who studied at Cabrillo College and went on to found the Hy-Tones with drummer Jimmy Baum, bassist Stan Poplin, and saxophonist Paul Contos.

The Crow's Nest, at the Santa Cruz Harbor offered live jazz on the weekends in the 1970s and the Bayview Hotel in Aptos hosted jam sessions during the week. In 1972, McCaslin began his epic fabled gig playing vibes daily at the Cooper House sidewalk cafe with his band Warmth and a revolving cast of musicians. Warmth played there daily until 1989, when damage sustained in the Loma Prieta Earthquake led to the Cooper House to be demolished.

"That was, of course, the most fun I've ever had in my life, getting to do that," McCaslin said in Koenig's documentary. ♣



Painting: © Mary Hopf

(Above) The jazz band Warmth, (L-R) Brad Hecht, Jim Baum, and Don McCaslin at the Cooper House in Santa Cruz.