

# All That Jazz

## Commitment to music, fans elevates S.C. venue to world-class stature



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Local bluesman Mike Schermer gets the Kuumbwa crowd going as he fronts for Maria Muldaur Friday night.

By **CHARLES LEVIN**  
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Branford Marsalis couldn't play a wrong note if he tried — not at Kuumbwa Jazz Center.

On a blustery October night in 1999, the tenor saxophonist was consumed with creative fury. He rolicked his way through songs that traversed swing, funk and reggae. He dived into merciless free improvisa-

tions that seemed to abandon all musical principles.

The standing-room-only crowd didn't just abide Marsalis' detours into the unknown. They listened with reverence, heads nodding in time. They didn't just applaud. They exploded with roars of approval.

Unlike in conventional jazz clubs, however, waiters didn't patrol aisles to fill two-drink minimums. Cash registers didn't ring. Cigarette smoke

didn't pollute the air.

This is not extraordinary. It's been the norm since a ragtag group of volunteers founded the not-for-profit Kuumbwa Jazz Society 30 years ago and opened the downtown Center Street venue two years later.

Kuumbwa will celebrate its 30th anniversary next Sunday with a free concert at San Lorenzo Park. The

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### KUUMBWA JAZZ CENTER TIMELINE

30 years ago, Rich Wills placed an ad in the newspaper asking for people to brainstorm ideas for creating a non-profit jazz club. No one thought then that the Kuumbwa Jazz Center would be entering its fourth decade.

**March 7, 1975:** Led by KUSP-FM DJ Rich Wills, a group of eager volunteers — hippies, surfers, musicians — meet at Santa Cruz Veterans Hall to brainstorm forming a nonprofit jazz club.

**Weekend of May 27, 1977:** After roughly 30 concerts in two years, Kuumbwa Jazz Center opens at an old bakery on Center Street. Martha Young headlines, a last-minute substitute for pianist Hampton Hawes who died a few days earlier. The Hy-Tones open the show. Smith and Gail Dobson perform Saturday night.

**1979:** Center launches Kuumbwa Jazz Institute, the first of its educational programs.

**January 1992:** Tim Jackson named new general manager of the Monterey Jazz Festival.

**March 27, 2000:** Kuumbwa produces pianist-singer Diana Krall at the Santa Cruz Civic. Other shows to follow including this year's production of Pat Metheny Ensemble and Directions In Music (with pianist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Michael Brecker and trumpeter Roy Hargrove).

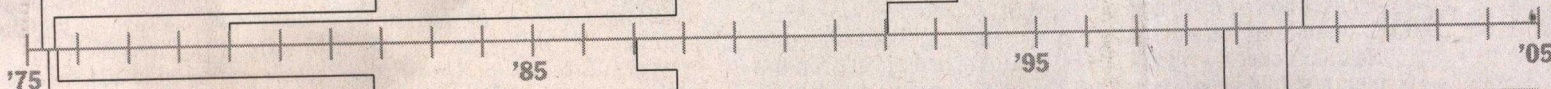
**April 6, 1975:** Kuumbwa Jazz Society sponsors a free concert in San Lorenzo Park, featuring the late tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson and local favorites, the Hy-Tones, who also back up Henderson.

**June 10, 1975:** Rich Wills files paperwork with California Secretary of State for nonprofit status as the Kuumbwa Jazz Society.

**January 1987:** Center reopens after major renovation that adds 900 square feet, a full cafe with kitchen facilities, and larger beer and wine bar. Stage relocated to left-hand wall, offering better sightlines. New state of the art sound. Pianist Cedar Walton headlines.

**October 1998:** Jazz Center moves offices to space above The Poet and The Patriot.

**2000:** Over the course of several months, former Kuumbwa board director Bob Bickal donates \$100,000 to the center, largest single contribution in its history. Half is invested to create an endowment.





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show marks an anomaly in the jazz world — a club that elevated a marginalized art form by treating artists with respect, educating the public and converting more than a few souls to America's classical music.

It doesn't take a master's in business administration to know that running a jazz club won't put operators in the Fortune 500. Jazz accounts for about 3 percent of CD sales, according to the Record Industry Association of America.

More so than other entertainment venues, jazz clubs walk the fine line between art and commerce to stay open.

"Kuumbwa has done that beautifully," said John Gilbreath, 56, executive director of Earshot Jazz, a Seattle-based nonprofit presenter that has borrowed ideas from the Santa Cruz club.

"They're not just pandering to drawing audiences. They're committed to putting art on the stage, and they do so while keeping their business house in order."

Kuumbwa has produced about 3,600 shows over 28 years at its downtown venue and, since 2000, at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

Over the years, the club has showcased now-departed bebop icons such as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, vibraphonist Milt Jackson and drummer Art Blakey.

But nothing is off limits for Tim Jackson, the center's artistic director.

One week, it's a modern-day giant like saxophonist Wayne Shorter. The next week, it's kinetic fusion from the Yellowjackets. Piquant Latin-jazz from pianist Eddie Palmieri, cool Brazilian samba from Ivan Lins, soaring vocals from Dianne Reeves, throw-down blues from Robben Ford, the fringe of avant-garde pianist Cecil

Taylor.

"We really feel an obligation to cover all the artistic bases," said Jackson, 51, of Santa Cruz, who also holds the title of executive director.

That also extends to educating the public, even if it means losing some cash once in a while on a rare and unknown act.

"As a nonprofit that people put their trust and faith in, we have an obligation to introduce artists to Santa Cruz that folks wouldn't normally hear," Jackson said.

## Locals get a shot

For years on Friday nights and more recently on Thursdays, Kuumbwa has also given equal footing to local and regional musicians. A sampling includes singer Ann Whittington, former Bay Area guitarist Charlie Hunter (now an established artist in New York City) and the late pianist Smith Dobson.

Kuumbwa now ranks among Santa Cruz's most successful cultural institutions alongside the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, Tandy Beal & Company, KUSP-FM, Santa Cruz County Symphony and Shakespeare Santa Cruz.

"I think Kuumbwa is truly a jewel in the country, not just locally," said Lance Linares, 53, of Santa Cruz, executive director of the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County. "It's so unique. If you're into jazz, where else are you going to hear it? You have to go over the hill or up to the city and sit in a dive."

In three decades, Kuumbwa has gone from an all-volunteer organization to one with a \$1.03 million budget and three full-time and four part-time staff members. They run the club from a tiny office atop The Poet and Patriot bar, its walls adorned with fliers autographed by guest artists.

About 50 volunteers take tickets, usher patrons to seats, cook meals, maintain computers and clean the

facility.

Managing Director Bobbi Todaro oversees the center's educational programs: a high school honor jazz band, master-class series and two-week summer jazz camp. Alumni of Kuumbwa's early educational efforts include tenor saxophonist Donny McCaslin and drummers Jeff Ballard and Kenny Wollesen. All have returned with nationally known acts.

Todaro also handles fundraising and works with up to 50 sponsors who subsidize concerts. Many are local businesses that glean free — advertising on the center's monthly fliers and Web site. On concert night, they're rewarded with plum seats, verbal plugs from the stage and complimentary wine.

Some would call this synergy with local merchants and other businesses. Longtime sponsor Erik Johnson, president and CEO of Erik's Deli Cafe, signed on for more altruistic reasons.

"This is something that's important to the community," said Johnson, 60, a jazz neophyte until he started checking out shows with his brother-in-law shortly after the club opened.

"When you come out of there and see this quality entertainment that blows you away, you almost don't want to tell anybody," Johnson said, adding that he sometimes worries "it'll become too crowded, too San Jose-ish."

To stay competitive in a town teeming with music, Kuumbwa also rents out its facility. Promoters rave about the 3,000-square-foot, 200-seat theater, gourmet cafe, and wine and beer bar. The sound system is state-of-the-art. Every seat in the house offers a perfect view. Photos or paintings of jazz musicians adorn the center's white walls.

For many clubs, live music is

an afterthought, something to perk up the bottom line. That often translates to tiny stages, bad sound and pillars that block views.

"Here, you have Kuumbwa built specifically for music," said Tom Miller, 52, who programs shows for Don Quixote's International Music Hall in Felton. "It's a simple and thoughtful room."

Artists heap praise on the club because music comes first and jazz-conversant fans listen with rapt attention.

That may seem obvious, but it's not the norm, said Russell Ferrante, 53, co-founder and keyboardist with the Yellowjackets. In most clubs, the almighty

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JOHN SCOFIELD, GUITARIST

dollar still trumps all concerns. Audiences stare down musicians with a show-me-what-you've-got glare.

"You never feel that way (at Kuumbwa)," said Ferrante, of Los Angeles. "You really feel like you're a special act to them."

Such opinions are not isolated. "To a man, I've never heard a bad thing about Kuumbwa," guitarist John Scofield, 53, said recently from his home Westchester, N.Y. "How could they. It's about the music and the musicians."

## Formula for success

The club's success has hinged on two elements.

One was the foresight to book major-name acts on Monday nights. Although Kuumbwa pays less than market rate, artists flock to Santa Cruz to fill a night off between longer engagements on a circuit that includes Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The other reason for the club's success is Jackson, an accomplished flutist and bandleader (a resume credit that explains why musicians get treated like digni-

taries).

A transplanted surfer from San Jose, Jackson emerged by default as director in Kuumbwa's formative years with his plain-spoken, even-handed approach.

The jazz world is notorious for flaky, arrogant people. Jackson stands out for his ethical, can-do personality, said Anna Sala, 40, who owns AMS Artists of Teaneck, N.J., and manages pianist Benny Green and other noteworthy jazz artists.

"Part of what we do is business, and part of what we do is art," Sala said. "And he's able to marry the two things."

In 1992, Jackson was tapped to run the Monterey Jazz Festival, succeeding founder Jimmy Lyons. Jackson has since balanced both jobs. And Kuumbwa has reaped the benefits of that relationship.

Luminaries like guitarist Pat Metheny, pianist Herbie Hancock and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, whose fees would put them beyond Kuumbwa's reach, scale back their prices to play Santa Cruz.

Jackson acknowledged that his broad musical acumen has fueled the club's success. But he also credits Kuumbwa's popularity with visiting musicians to the little details: good hotels and food, a tuned piano, excellent sound.

"I don't think they remember how much they get paid," Jackson said. "They remember the tangible things."

## No money borrowed

Under Jackson's direction, the club has never borrowed money. Kuumbwa pays cash, writes grants or seeks donations for its needs.

"We've maintained a conservative fiscal outlook," Jackson said in a 1999 interview. "We've never dug ourselves a hole, period."

That fiscal mantra hasn't changed, Jackson said recently. But the entertainment world has. Concert and club profits are

down. People have more choices than ever for entertainment dollars. The Internet beckons.

For the first time in its 30-year history, the center has run \$10,000 to \$20,000 budget deficits for three consecutive years, according to Jackson.

"We're not immune to the larger trends in the music business," Jackson said. "It's something we have to take a look at. Historically (borrowing is) not something we've done, and I don't think our board of directors wants us to start."

The future, however, holds many possibilities. Former board member Bob Bickal donated \$100,000 to the club in 2000. Half has been invested for an endowment.

In the past, Kuumbwa commissioned three artists to compose music who premiered their works at the club. Jackson hopes to revive the practice if the club can secure more grant money.

And the club is cautiously considering a permanent home (Kuumbwa rents the Center Street venue). Jackson and his board of directors have expressed interest in the city's plan to convert the old Salz Tannery to a live-work center and performing arts venue.

For now, Jackson basks in the pride of Kuumbwa's longevity.

"We've never become Lincoln Center overnight," he said, referring to the powerhouse New York City-based nonprofit organization led by Wynton Marsalis. "But we've been able to build a viable organization for 30 years. Kuumbwa just keeps moving along like the story of the tortoise and the hare. Kuumbwa is the tortoise."

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