

VELZOE BROWN: 1910-2011

Beloved SC jazz pianist dies at 101

Bio-B

By WALLACE BAINE

wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Velzoe Brown, the 101-year-old jazz pianist beloved by generations of Santa Cruz County musicians, died Wednesday at her home in Santa Cruz.

She performed with her band the Upbeats

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until last year, and lived independently in her own home until October, when a series of seizures put her in the hospital.

“Velzoe was a living history book,” said “adopted nephew” Bill King, 75, who has known Brown since he was 10 years old. “She

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Santa Cruz jazz pianist Velzoe Brown entertains Sunshine Villa residents in 2007. She died Wednesday.

SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE



VELZOE

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had seen a lot and she was always interested in passing along everything to anyone she was around.”

King said that a public celebration of her life and music will take place some time in mid- to late May in Santa Cruz.

Brown was born in Nebraska in 1910, and toured the country at 16 as a trombone player in an all-female jazz group called the Pollyanna Syncopators in the 1920s. Throughout the '30s, '40s and '50s, she continued to play with a number of touring jazz bands.

She moved to Santa Cruz 50 years ago, and in March 2010, to celebrate her 100th birthday, hundreds of friends and supporters filed into the Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz to salute her longevity and her love of music. Velzoe Brown & the Upbeats played regular gigs in county elder care homes for many years.

Longtime friend and musician Steve Palazzo remembered seeing Brown at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop where she taught jazz to young musicians. She already was past 90 at the time.

AT A GLANCE

VELZOE BROWN

BORN: March 1, 1910, Nebraska

DIED: May 4, 2011, Santa Cruz

HOME: Santa Cruz

OCCUPATION: Jazz musician and teacher

COMMUNITY

INVOLVEMENT: Toured with her jazz group Velzoe Brown & the Upbeats in elder care homes throughout Santa Cruz County

SERVICES: A public celebration of her life is in the planning stages.

“Her energy was amazing,” said Palazzo. “She was always the last one to go to bed. I’d check out at 1 a.m. and there was Velzoe still going.”

Brown’s Santa Cruz home was a magnet for local musicians who would visit with her and discuss not only music, but a wide variety of subjects from art to religion to current events.

“She represented so much to a lot of people,” said Palazzo. “She was everyone’s grandma — or great-grandma. But she never just talked about herself. She wanted to know about you.”