

MOE'S ALLEY
{enjoy}

Energetic club scene

Moe's Alley

keeps spoiling music fans

By Graham Haworth

After putting on 297 shows during a banner year at Moe's Alley in 2008, owner Bill Welch often puts in 80-hour work weeks with the sole intent of bringing some of the most positive musical experiences to Santa Cruz audiences in 2009.

Welch opened Moe's Alley in 1992. Back then, it was primarily a blues club.

Acts like Coco Montoya and Tommy Castro routinely graced the stage, along with some of the biggest names in the blues world. Fast-forward to 2009, and Montoya and Castro are now among the biggest blues acts. And Welch has diversified his musical lineup to include Americana, reggae, funk, Brazilian, Afro-funk, Latin and much more.

"The word I've heard used to describe Moe's Alley lately is 'energy,'" said Welch. "We have a lot of different styles of bands play the club now, but it's all uptempo, fun music. The common thread is great music in a small club."

The intimate confines of Moe's Alley provide a unique chance for audiences to check out their favorite bands, up close and personal. Couple that with a superb sound system and a large stage, and you've got a winning recipe for a killer club that, despite being somewhat out of the way, provides one of the most satisfying club-going experiences in Northern California.

"The setting at Moe's Alley is the best way to experience live music around here, if you ask me," said Welch. "There are so many options for people to spend their money on in Santa Cruz, and not as much money to spend these days. Our whole goal is to give people that positive musical experience."

Award-winning Santa Cruz-based band SambaDa is a fixture at the

club, usually booking a Saturday and a Sunday gig to satisfy their rabid fan base's passion for what the band calls "California Samba." San Diego's B-Side Players also book back-to-back shows when they swing through to spread their Latin-reggae-funk vibe.

"SambaDa and the B-Side Players epitomize the vibe we're going for," said Welch. "Their message is about caring about the world, caring about what you do with your life and having fun while doing it. They say 'be proud of your heritage.' We've always done that with the blues; now we're doing it with so much more."

Welch is assisted in his booking duties by Moshe Vilozny, and Lisa Norelli, a longtime part of the Moe's Alley family, has taken over as general manager. The trio's goal is to provide not only a perfect

environment for Santa Cruz's notoriously artistic audiences, but to give the performers a stress-free and friendly place where the only thing they have to worry about is doing what they do best – play music.

"Being in the club is one of the biggest joys of my life," said Welch. "I really enjoy being around the musicians, talking to the audience and using the feedback everyone gives us to build the club into something everyone enjoys. We're always open to new ideas and new music."

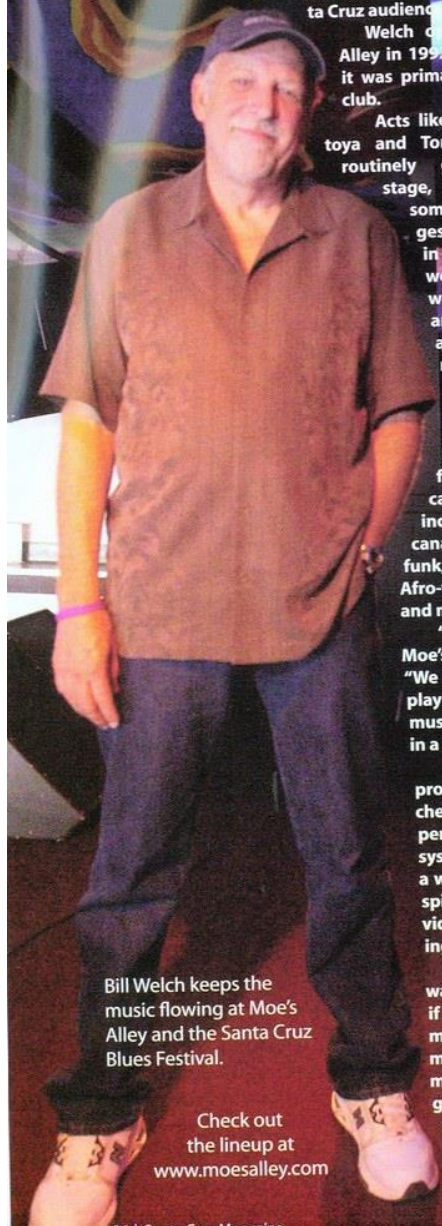
Welch even opens up his stage to local bands who have the chops to entertain and a thirst for the thrill of playing in front of an attentive and dancing audience. There are a lot of clubs in Santa Cruz, but with so many national touring acts coming through the area, good local bands often have to go elsewhere to book gigs. Welch wants to promote what he calls "a burgeoning local music scene."

"I try to make it all based on the music," said Welch. "If they're local, and they have something to say, and it's done well, I'm all ears."

Welch pointed to the club's New Year's Eve show with locals Sourgrass as an example of what local bands can accomplish at Moe's Alley. He said



Blues virtuoso Coco Montoya is a regular at Moe's Alley.



Bill Welch keeps the music flowing at Moe's Alley and the Santa Cruz Blues Festival.

Check out the lineup at www.moesalley.com

PHOTOGRAPHS BILL LOVEJOY

Santa Cruz has always had a lot of local bars, but recently he's seen a rise in how many being formed, and how good they are.

For Welch, the success of Moe's Alley comes down to one thing: the fantastic audiences in Santa Cruz County. It's something every club owner says about the community here. They love their music, their theater, their painting, their arts in general.

"That's pretty unusual in this day and age, for an entire community to be this focused on the arts," said Welch. "The way I see it, we've got them here, so it's my job to keep them spoiled." ■

Taste of the blues

Bill Welch not only owns and operates one of the best clubs in Santa Cruz in Moe's Alley, he's also the man behind the annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival. Held every Memorial Day weekend at Aptos Village Park, the Blues Festival has grown over the past 17 years from a small, grass-roots blues concert into one of the most prestigious and talked-about blues festivals in the world.

The two-day festival has attracted greats like B.B. King, Bonnie Raitt and Al Greene; as well as up-and-comers like Jackie Greene, Los Lonely Boys and J.J. Grey.

"We spend all year organizing the festival; it's all about seeing the music in the best possible way," says Welch. "We've taken advantage of what Aptos Village Park has to offer. It's so beautiful there with all the oaks and pines surrounding the performance area and the ocean providing crisp, clean air."

While the festival is primarily focused on the blues, Welch also strives to include artists that are based in American roots music. That's natural, he says, because roots music is derived partially from the blues to begin with.

Welch and his crew of planners make attending the Blues Festival a headache-free pleasure. While there is no parking at Aptos Village Park, Welch sets up temporary parking lots down the road at Cabrillo College, with free and frequent shuttle rides back and forth to the venue.

The festival is also family-friendly. Concert-goers arrive with blankets and small beach chairs, set up shop in their favorite spot, and soak up the sun while enjoying the best of what blues and Americana have to offer. The food vendors offer everything from the regular hamburger and hot dog fare to more healthy and organic options from Santa Cruz businesses.

"There are a lot of people that can't come out to the clubs for late night shows because they have families, but they make sure they come to the Blues Festival," said Welch. "It also marks the beginning of summertime in Santa Cruz. It's become something of a ritual for a lot of people in that respect."

do list...

{enjoy}

- ☐ walk to the beach
- ☐ catch a wave
- ☐ hike in the redwoods
- ☐ sample local wines
- ☒ enjoy being **HOME**

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