



Art and Artsy

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15 YEARS WITH A BEAT

By Rick Hildreth

When the musicians take the stage at Duck Island in San Lorenzo Park on September 2, they'll be celebrating more than another birthday for Kuumbwa Jazz Center; they'll be marking the milestone 15th anniversary for the non-profit music group.

Tim Jackson, Kuumbwa's executive director today, was one of the founding members of what has become Santa Cruz's leading jazz institution. He said Rich Wills was the man with the original idea for a non-profit jazz institute back in 1975. Linking up with Sheba Burney and Jackson (through the then-funky KUSP-FM non-profit radio station), they went to work raising money and sponsoring concerts, leading to the development of the Kuumbwa Jazz Center in 1977. They took over part of an old Parisian bakery, setting up shop where the ovens were, and the center remains there to this day, behind the Bagelry on Cedar Street in Santa Cruz.

"In the jazz business, 15 years is not a long time," said Jackson. "But it is a major track record."

Jackson credits musician James Coleman with coining the unusual name, which means "the act of creation" in Swahili. He admits now that the name "Kuumbwa" has been as much a liability as an asset. "It's hard to pronounce, and it might scare some people off," he said. But its unusual quality sets the organization aside from other, more traditionally-named organizations.

Kuumbwa has hosted a wide range of jazz artists over the years, from Bob Dorough to Paul Contos. Its stage has also seen a variety of other types of performance on nights when it is rented out to other organizations. Kuumbwa's unusual structure and ambience has been a major attraction for top artists.

The non-smoking environment in Kuumbwa is another appealing factor for jazz artists. And since Kuumbwa is a non-profit institute as well as a jazz center, there isn't the strong emphasis on drink sales that there is at for-profit night clubs, assuring the artist and attentive audience.

"We can't take all the credit for a nice facility," Jackson said. "The audience is a big part of it. An artist comes here and sees an audience that's ready to listen, with a quality organization and quality equipment, and they want to come back here. They tell their friends, who make this a stop on their tour."

Kuumbwa schedules its major jazz concerts on Monday nights, which allows top

artists who are on their way between weekend gigs in Bay Area and Los Angeles to drop in for a comfortable night at a nice club. There's a continuing series of "jazz jams" on Tuesdays, and Friday night shows featuring Monterey Bay area artists.

As Kuumbwa has aged, it's become a fixture of the Santa Cruz nightlife. While this has its advantages (such as a regular audience), there are drawbacks as well. The biggest of these is trying to remind people that Kuumbwa is a non-profit, not just another club.

To that end, Kuumbwa two years ago became a co-sponsor of Carnaval!, a Brazilian celebration held in April, along with Tandy Beal and Company.

"We realized we needed to beef up our image in the community," said Jackson. "The public perception is that the Cabrillo Music Festival and Shakespeare Santa Cruz are non-profit, but jazz is perceived as a commercial music. It's been a struggle on our part to align ourselves with the non-profits."

As Jackson, the only surviving member of the original band that created Kuumbwa, looks to the future, he sees a long tenure with the non-profit organization. A jazz musician himself, he knows how tough it can be to find work in the jazz world. And now that he has a mortgage, he's happy to have a steady job with a track record.

Celebrations for Kuumbwa's 15th Birthday include:

Birthday Party, **September 2** at San Lorenzo Park, with Eastbound, the Ann Whittington Group and Pacific Rhyth'm. Free.

Anniversary Concert, **September 10**, with a reunion of the musicians who played at Kuumbwa on its opening weekend: The Hy-Tones (Paul Contos, Stan Poplin, Paul Nagel and Jim Baum), plus the Smith Dobson Trio. \$9.75, half-price for members.

Benefit auction, **Sept. 16** at Paul Masson Concert Area, with music by Nancy Wilson and Ramsey Lewis. Tickets are limited to the first 300 takers at \$40.

"Tradin' Fours," a series of lectures: **October 5:** Nat Hentoff, jazz journalist. **October 12:** Al Young, poet, essayist and novelist.

October 19: Films and commentary by Mark Cantor, featuring film of Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderly, John Coltrane and more.

October 26: Jazz critic Dan Morgenstern remembers Duke Ellington. ■