

1995 Cotati Jazz Festival

For the fifteenth year, the little town of Cotati north of San Francisco showed everyone how to put on a Jazz festival with style and heart. The festival organizers eschew expensive big-name performers and instead book high-quality musicians from the Bay Area, putting one group in each of five or six restaurants and bars around town on each of the two days of the festival. For the price of a badge, you can come and go as you like, wandering around town and dropping in to hear whomever you want with no one hustling you to buy drinks. Since the music is inside, it doesn't have to be pushed through amplifiers that distort it out of all recognition. The only problem is finding time to sample all the musical wealth available.

This year there were three variations from the usual all-Jazz format: the Limonim Klezmer Band, a new age trio called Tokenki, and the world music group Ancient Future. We were particularly taken with Ancient Future, which imaginatively combined musics from all over, like gamelan and rock, for example. This is experimental music in the best sense, something from which more straight-ahead musicians can draw to revitalize and enhance their own work. Limonim and Ancient Future played in the old Cotati Cabaret, which has been consecrated as the Ner Shalom Synagogue.

Latin Jazz was represented at the Inn of the Beginning on Saturday by the One World Latin Band and on Sunday by Bobbe Norris (*JN* February 1994) with the Larry Dunlap Quintet. One World had a kind of Latin fusion flavor, while Bobbe and Larry—well, how do you say “straight ahead” in Spanish?

Over at the Redwood Café, Donald “Duck” Bailey’s Other Side quintet neatly evaded all the labels. Duck (*JN* May 1994) normally plays drums, but in this group his ax is the harmonica. Duck generally likes to play out there harmonically, while saxophonist Susie Laraine prefers to play along with the chord changes, and the contrast is refreshing. Singer Nozipo scatted in a small, almost babylike voice and sang a beautiful ballad, “Sunday, Monday,” we’d never heard before.

At the Cotati Yacht Club, vocalist David Watson led a really fine, high-energy quintet with drummer Bob Braye, who is on the road to recovery from a bout with Guillain-Barré syndrome. Bob says his high-hat foot only works when the music’s playing. Let me tell you, that foot was putting out the pulse on Saturday. On Sunday, Denise Perrier packed the Yacht Club; in fact we only “got as far as the door” due to the crowd.

At the Tradewinds bar on Sunday, Ed Kelly led his regular Tuesday night group from Pier 23 Café in San Francisco. Tenor saxophonist Robert Stewart, who sat on a stool for most of his sets, drew a lot of applause for growling, squealing, and repeating the same note (using alternate fingerings) for two choruses, but for serious saxophone chops we preferred Mel Martin (*JN* August 1993) down the street at the Redwood Café. Martin had played in festival organizer Mel Graves’s group on Saturday, where he had navigated some tricky, somewhat far-out charts. He seemed much more comfortable with his beloved bebop on Sunday.

As for Benny Barth (*JN* July 1994), who once more held down the drum chair at Café Louise (formerly Bud’s Ice Cream Shop), many festival regulars figure it just wouldn’t seem like Cotati without him.

It’s too bad Cotati comes but once a year.

by Robert Tate



KCSM’s Jazz on the Hill Festival

After four years, the KCSM Jazz on the Hill Festival has settled into a comfortable groove. There were no big names from distant places this year, but a mixed bag of Jazz and near Jazz in an outdoor ambience made for a pleasant weekend on the grass if not for great musical memories. The sound system comprised two batteries of speakers, one on either side of the stage. Those seated in front got blasted while those farther away had trouble hearing. More speakers scattered throughout the audience area would have solved the problem.

The other annoyance was that the KCSM disc jockeys felt they had to talk every moment when music was not being played on stage. In past years, I recall, the sound technicians would simply switch to the radio station when there was a lull in the live music, but this year we had to try and ignore scenes like Mal Sharpe and Alisa Clancy chattering about how silly it was that they had to chatter like this until the music came on.

The music: Monarch Records saxophonist Alex Murzyn played a tough ice-breaker set. Fred Berry’s Jazz 91 All-Star Big Band contained some of the Bay Area’s finest musicians. For most of the gig the drummer was Dave Rokeach, but Louie Bellson played for about three numbers and traded fours with Rokeach in one of the high points of the first afternoon. Trombonist Wayne Wallace’s Rhythm and Rhyme played Latin and world beat music. We had seen Wayne the previous week with Mel Martin’s Bebop and Beyond, but he seemed more comfortable here in his own group. Dick Conte served up straight-ahead Jazz with a lot of scale runs, fast fingering, and overblowing from saxophonist Steve Heckman.

Dick stayed on to comp behind Al “Jazzbeaux” Collins’s “rejuvenated”-for-the-nineties readings of his classic fairy tales, “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Goldilocks.” Following his reading, Jazzbeaux was presented

with the first annual KCSM Jazz Legend award and a trophy created by Vern Allié. Ray Obiedo, Harvey Mandel, and Wild Mango closed out the first day. We missed these, although we had heard Wild Mango in Monterey a year earlier and thought they were sensational.

Several high school bands played during the second day of the

festival. Although many tend to dismiss these as not worthy of notice in our big-name-dominated culture, they are in fact where the music is at in the real world.

Mark Little’s trio expanded to five with a saxophonist and a vocalist who sounded like the reincarnation of Mr. B(illy Eckstine). Shanna Carlson sang and accompanied herself on piano. The big outdoor speakers were wrong, but Shanna still broke my heart with a delicate bass-vocal duet on “Just Friends.” Chet Smith, who was listed as an orchestral synthesizer wizard, lived up to his billing with a version of “Take the A Train” that began with a long impressionistic evocation of New York. Pete Escovedo and the Tommy Castro Band closed the show.

by Robert Tate

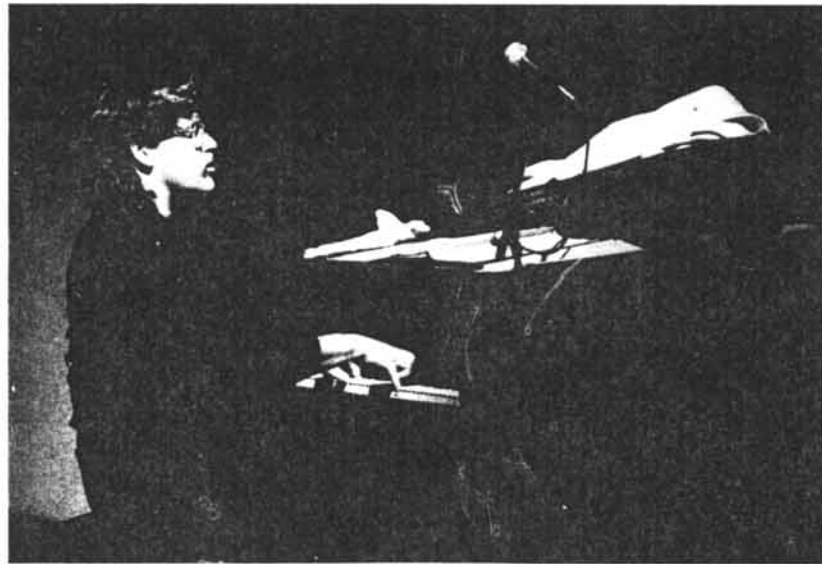


Photo by James Radka

Mark Little