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## News & Feature Articles

### Pete Douglas: 45 Years of Jazz & Dynamite

by Alexa Weber Morales



Pete Douglas at the Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society in Half Moon Bay

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In 2007, I had the fortune of playing the **Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society** at the Douglas Beach House in Half Moon Bay, south of San Francisco on mostly misty Highway One. I had previously worked the venue singing in a short-lived 19-piece Latin jazz orchestra. This time, I brought a full band: **Wayne Wallace** on trombone, **Murray Low** on piano, **Jeff Chambers** on bass, **Charles Ferguson** on drums, **Edgardo Cambón** on percussion and **Zareen** on background vocals. We sold the place out. I've yet to repeat the gig, however — even though I give owner and booker **Pete Douglas** an annual phone call or two.

If you've never been to the Douglas Beach House, it's an experience. Done in distinctly 1970s-era diagonal wood paneling, the 200-seat room has gorgeous ocean views. The naturally lit performance space is on the second floor. On the first, there's a cozy living space/green room with a piano and food and drink for the band. Depending on which band it is, it's a nice spot to watch sports on TV, play poker, practice, read, or indulge in more nefarious pastimes before the show. Douglas' assistant, **Linda Goetz**, lives in the tidy apartment, but kindly vacates for the Sunday afternoon concerts.

Identically framed promo shots, many signed, line the wood-paneled walls. For a jazz musician, the process of discovery as you look at the hundreds of greats who have played there over the years is glorious.

*[Editor's Note: To get a glimpse inside the Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society, check out our photo collection from Brian McMillen in our new [Jazz Photography Showcase](#).]*

I drove down early to the gig, and was able to walk on the beach for an hour before the show in unusually balmy weather. During the show, Douglas sat up front off to one side, running the sound and occasionally making comments in his signature pirate voice — which can be disconcerting for the uninitiated.

Though my show was a success even by his exacting standards, I distinctly recall him yelling out in the second set, "Come on, let the guys stretch out some!" My songs are tightly arranged, for the most part, due to a past aversion to endless solos, so on some tunes if you blink you may miss that 16-bar improv. Or that must've been Douglas's take.

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Inside the Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society digs in Half Moon Bay

I called Douglas again a few weeks ago, and found him in an extremely loquacious mood. Though he turned me down right away for another gig in 2009, we continued talking. I began taking notes, and about halfway through I asked him if he minded if I turned this into an interview.

"Hell no, I'm not afraid to have an opinion," he said. "In three weeks I'll be 80 years old!"

**Q: What's your booking philosophy?**

A: I book for myself, because I'm on a musical adventure. If I have a hunch I follow it.

Let's take music that I'm not that familiar with. I hired this Turkish Arabic group that put me right through the ceiling. They even brought a *kudum* player. The *doumbek*, it builds and it drives... Oh my God did he cook. All I could think was, I was listening to a jazz program.

That's why **Scott Henderson** on electric guitar and **Scott Kensey** on keyboards was an experience for me in this room. It wasn't a crowd jumping up and down half-stoned, it was artistry. That kind of music, you've got to move physically to it. If they want to stand momentarily you've got to let 'em. It wasn't just a power trip to get off, it was about what was going on inside the music. It was an education. I've had electric guitars before but nothing like this. Holy Christ, it was something.

Each time I have had a revelation of hearing every form of classical music, trad jazz, swing, bop.

**Q: And Latin jazz...**

A: Latin jazz has been played since the swing era. **Dizzy Gillespie** really brought the Latin rhythms into the bop scene. American music is really incredible! It's the fusion of all these styles.

I'm on a musical adventure of what happened not just in the past but what is happening now. I'm not some good old boy who only listens to swing. **Art Blakey** taught me how to be a hard bop listener.

**Q: Does your audience expect certain things?**

A: A good audience has the freedom to let all that music in without having to be working at it. A good presenter should be the intermediate between the audience and the musicians — wanting to be pleased, but at the same time being knowledgeable and prepared. As a presenter, you care about the environment they're going to play in. All of these factors I'm ultimately very sensitive about. They come into this room, let's get it right. This has been my joy and my role as a presenter.

I'm going on my 45th year at the same location. New generations coming up — under 40 — don't really understand what this venue is. More specialized shows like yours actually made me more money than some of these groups that I hire. But money isn't the issue, it's the music. Nobody's ever sat through what I've sat through over the years.

**Q: So what's special about the venue?**

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A: This room pulls people together — musicians and audience — like no place I've ever been. I go to Yoshi's and am totally disappointed. I went up to see **Ledisi**. The way they mix the band is so loud. She's screaming over it.

**Q: What about sound engineering at BDDS?**

A: I've had to learn the hard way about getting it mixed right. Often I couldn't afford to have pros mixing here. But I have ears for jazz so if I put on swing then I know what swing should sound like. You don't have the bass player drowning out everything else. Yet you can have a really hard bass player with an edgy bop group. I work hard in making sure that the sound mix is good.

Many times I didn't do as well as I might have. I learned the hard way through the years. I work the sound board much of the time after the soundcheck. I mix it according to my ears, not by dials and lights and all that shit on the soundboard.

**Q: Do you have a bias for East Coast artists?**

A: Yes, and I'll tell you why. Los Angeles is the home of pop culture. It's produced for movies and CDs and worldwide consumption. New York is more the performing arts capital. Most of the agencies are there. You've got the Berklee School of Music in Boston. In New York, more people go to music with a more critical ear, and there are more indoor activities than in California.

There's a little old lady in New York who plays violin, **Mrs. Bloom**. She went over and saw a barge in Brooklyn. She got an idea: Wouldn't it be nice to build a little shack on the barge and we'd have classical chamber music? It's called barge music. It doesn't hold over 50 people. She's in New York City with so many musicians there — she has the cream of the crop. She's doing what I've been trying to do all these years. She's so well located — not in Half Moon Bay like I am.

It's a story in itself how this venue grew up in Half Moon Bay. No one in the media has ever come down to me and said, "Pete, you've presented **Earle 'Fatha' Hines** and **Teddy Wilson** and **McCoy Tyner**... How come you've lasted this long?"

**Q: How did you come to Half Moon Bay, of all places?**

A: I'm an L.A. beach boy, and I took a job up here as a probation officer. I was unhappy with my life and my marriage. To make a long story short, I said, "I've got to get back to the beach." I drove out to Half Moon Bay and saw this shack. I bought it in 1958 for \$8,500. It started out as nothing but a jam session.

By 1965 some of the guys said, "We'll build you a home right in back of the beach house." We then were incorporated as a nonprofit. We had **Cal Tjader**, **Vince Guaraldi**, **John Handy**, all those people performing here. By the time I turned 40 years old, I said, "OK, are we going to get serious about music here?" So we built a concert room, where you have been. I built that in 1971.

I'm known in New York as the artichoke circuit. I have to rely on them getting out here for some other concert. I'm an en-route gig.



Pete Douglas

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**Q: What changes have you seen in music over the decades?**

A: Forty years ago there wasn't as much product out there. People used to go out more to live music. Recently I was looking at all the theater listings in the San Francisco Chronicle. Live music is less exciting to people. There's not enough buzz around it. There isn't a new thing to bring people in. And there is so much advertising with so many people demanding our attention.

Thirty or 40 years ago there were local reviewers in SF who drove out and reviewed the venues. They weren't afraid to go in and say, "The sound sucks." We had more people paying attention to music in general.

**Q: Do you have advice for those of us slogging through performance careers?**

A: It's not necessary to keep coming up with what's trendy, it's necessary to hone your art. The word gets out slowly. But there was a community around jazz before. Back in the 60s and 70s, I could send out a music program, about 1,500 programs, and the word of mouth was great. There were columnists in the city [San Francisco] who would review someone before the weekend. Now you don't have those kinds of advantages.

**Q: Do you prefer instrumentalists?**

A: Look at all the vocalists I've presented: **Claudia Acuña, Mose Allison, Karrin Allison, Ernestine Anderson, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Betty Carter, Faye Carol, Dena DeRose, Lorraine Feather, Nnenna Freelon, Jon Hendricks, Etta James, Etta Jones, Irene Krall, Armen McRae, Anita O'Day...**

**Q: When was Anita O'Day? I saw her singing live in SF when she was quite old.**

A: She was in her 60s.

**Q: How do you choose singers for your venue?**

A: Right now, do you know how many CDs I have sitting in front of me from singers? I have 30 CDs from singers. I [recently] booked [Canadian singer/pianist] **Carol Welsman**. She's good, but no better than 100 others. But she's got **Peggy Lee** down solid.

Peggy Lee is the only pop singer I like. She was the hippest pop singer around in her day. She brought the cool into singing, not belt 'em out. [Half singing] "I know a little bit about a lot of things but I don't know enough about you" and real dark things, [half singing] "Is this all there is?" She was the thinking person's singer. Carol Welsman is going to do an all-Peggy Lee program on the 15th of March.

**Q: Great, I'll let people know about it! Is there anything else people should know about you?**

A: There's lots on the [Bach Dancing & Dynamite website](#). Have you read my "Ruminations of a Music Presenter?"

**Q: No, but I will! Thank you for talking with me, Pete!**



**Alexa Weber Morales** is a multilingual singer-songwriter who has sublimated her wanderlust into a dynamic music career. Since 2004, she's made six studio recordings and two solo CDs. This article was originally published on her blog, [ThinkSong](#).

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