

June 2013 Chronicle article by Mark Nelson

Bach Dynamite Society: Peninsula's Hidden Pearl Where the Beat Goes On

Playing saxophone alongside Bruce Springsteen at the 2009 Super Bowl, Jerry Vivino felt the turbo-charged adoration of 66,000 screaming fans and millions of television viewers around the world. Many rank it as one of the top five halftime performances of all time.

He savored the jolt of excitement all right. Who wouldn't? However, Vivino prefers jamming the lights out at the Peninsula's own Bach Dynamite Society, a quirky but slightly upscale venue that's off the beaten path across from the Pacific Ocean at little-known Miramar Beach.

"I love this place," Vivino said after he and his LA/NY Jazz Trio wowed about 150 appreciative fans from all walks of life on a recent Sunday evening. "Here, you can interact and communicate more with the audience, like having a conversation in your living room." Vivino drove up from Burbank during a break from his regular gig in the house band for the TBS late night show, Conan.

On the eve of its 50th year in business, the beat – and the melody - still go on at The Bach Dynamite Society, what many still consider to be "the best hidden secret" on the Peninsula. With its low-key, word-of-mouth promotion, it's a wonder that its jazz roots have survived and at times even thrived while riding out the waves of rock, disco, grunge, hip hop, rap or whatever.

The place has featured nearly all the well-known jazz greats past and present – from Stan Getz, Wayne Shorter and Dizzy Gillespie to Pete Escovedo, Brad Mehldau and Michael Brecker, as well as lesser-known emerging talent throughout the decades. For the second year in a row, *Downbeat* magazine recently named the Bach Dynamite Society, which is a non-profit organization, one of the "150 Great Jazz Venues" in the United States. Yoshi's in Oakland and San Francisco as well as Kuumbwa in Santa Cruz also made the list.

Talk to anyone familiar with the Bach Dynamite Society, and they will tell you there is only one reason why the place and its unique vibe have endured so long. That reason is Pete Douglas, the 84-year-old, ruggedly handsome, beatnik businessman who opened up his house and living room to jazz musicians and their fans in 1964.

Linda Goetz, Douglas's assistant and business manager, said, "Pete is the Bach Dynamite Society and the Bach Dynamite Society is Pete." Peggy Atkinson, a volunteer checking people into the concert, agreed, "Pete is this place."

Pete is a charismatic but funky presence as he sits comfortably behind a well-worn wooden desk he calls his office, holding a tobacco pipe, wearing dark CHP-like glasses and adjusting his grey "Balkan beanie," which is tilted rakishly to the side of his head. An old album with

fading black and white photos of past performers and a recent newspaper article on the “digitalization” of music and journalism ironically face him on the desktop.

Unperturbed, he chooses to talk about dancing, and in mid-sentence playfully jumps up to demonstrate the different steps in waltz, funk and what he calls, “the senior shuffle,” in which he shuffles along slowly and then quickly raises his hands and kicks up his right foot at an awkward angle, flashing a mischievous smile.

Once seated again, the words come steadily and with conviction. It’s soon clear that he has an endless reservoir of stories and opinions, and he hangs onto an irrepressible passion for authentic music in small venues, whether it’s jazz, classical or chamber, all of which are played here on different occasions.

“Real music isn’t meant to be played in a football stadium,” Douglas harrumphed, peering straight into the eyes of his listener. He smirks at the thought of the Rolling Stones playing before one million people once on a beach in Brazil, and remembers the time someone gave him a ticket to one of today’s best-known jazz artists at a large venue in San Francisco. “It just didn’t work, man. He couldn’t get intimate with 2,500 people. He wouldn’t take chances. It didn’t happen. As Harold Maybern said when he played here, ‘If you’re afraid to make a mistake, go sit down.’” He laughs raspily at the thought after saying it.

He laments the closing of so many “mom and pop” businesses like his, such as coffee shops, grocery stores and music venues because of larger, commercial enterprises. It’s hard enough for a musician these days to make a living as it is, said Douglas, so the good ones will only play in large auditoriums, especially in the major cities. “The booking agents in New York or Los Angeles won’t even call me anymore because I don’t have enough seats to make it worth their time.” The venue seats up to 200.

Nonetheless, Douglas has stuck to his principles of keeping it small, intimate and authentic and the purists like Vivino keep coming back. Vivino, who has also played with Wynton Marsalis, James Taylor, James Brown and many other celebrities, said, “I’m not making a lot of money here, but it sure is the right place to make music. You can connect with each person in the audience.”

“At a venue like mine,” Douglas explains, “the musicians can play to be free. Music is beyond love. It is freedom. You go, wow, how do these guys do that,” enthused Douglas, who doesn’t play an instrument but is described by others as having an uncanny ability to spot talent and deeply appreciate it. Here, he features all types of jazz – straight, mainstream, free, fusion, whatever.

It all started in 1957 when Douglas bought a rundown “beer joint” to live in with his then-wife and young daughter. Because of its perch overlooking the ocean, and Pete’s hospitality, musicians began jamming there, sometimes until the sun came up.

In 1965, he built a 3-bedroom/2-bath house abutting the beer joint, and the year afterward opened the Bach Dynamite Society, so named after one memorable evening in which he

was playing Bach on the record player and party-goers were dancing and setting off dynamite at the beach below.

Back then, Sunday concerts were literally in his second-floor living room, where cedar-planked walls are still adorned with offbeat art, metal sculptures, stained glass, and a movie poster prominently showing, "Rebel Without a Cause," starring James Dean and Natalie Wood. "And they came from good families," Douglas raspily laughs at the movie's promotional line.

The Bach Dynamite Society became increasingly popular, and in 1971 Douglas added a more formal studio with a balcony, good acoustics, a bar seating area and, of course, that signature view of the Pacific. Several years ago, he added the Ebb Tide Beach Club cafe that's open on weekends, and has somehow fused it all together with stairs and hallways – a kind of smaller, beatnik, beach version of the Winchester Mystery House.

Somehow, it all works, like the crazy musical fusion of jazz itself.

"This place is fabulous," said Doris Williams, a well-known Celtic singer in the Bay Area who was dancing barefoot outside in her burnt-orange gypsy dress during the concert. "I came on a lark with a friend, had a fun day at the beach and really enjoy the intimate atmosphere. It's like having a party at someone's house with friends and family."

Misha Cohen, who drove down from San Francisco, said, "A lot of the people who come here are like from the Bohemian burbs." Her friend, Carla Wilson, also from San Francisco, added, "It doesn't get better than this. Pete is a guy who just wants to capture the essence of music. It's a hidden pearl."

Nonetheless, Douglas recognizes that the Bach's "halcyon days of the 80s" are long past, and that he doesn't have a clear "succession plan" for the mixed-use (commercial/residential) assemblage that also includes a non-profit organization. He's had many creative offers on how to sustain the place, and yet Douglas worries about his legacy and commitment to authentic music in a small venue. Nothing has interested him yet.

"I've been coming here since the 1980s," said Marti Africa, a retired academic who lives in Alameda, "and the audiences have become as old as me. I pray that it remains, gets new generations of followers and people will get together as a community to keep it going. The musicians love paying here."

Vivino, who returns June 30th with a quartet, added, "Pete is an ageless wonder. God bless him. He is the reason this place has had so much longevity, and his presence will always be felt here no matter what happens next."