



'IT'S A TRIP, AND
THAT'S WHY IT'S
LASTED SO LONG.'

— PETE DOUGLAS, BACH DANCING AND DYNAMITE SOCIETY OWNER

Bach

TO THE FUTURE

COASTSIDE VENUE BLENDS FUNKY
AND FAMOUS IN A STORIED PAST

✦ By Stacy Trevenon

Pete Douglas sits back at his desk, where he's usually found when not introducing top talent in the intimate concert room that is steps away.

He looks out over a slate-gray ocean and a smile softens his craggy features as he recalls a day, 40 years ago, when friends came down to party. "Suddenly," he said, "we couldn't hear the ocean."

Running out to investigate, they found the surf had receded hundreds of feet. Unconcerned, they returned to the party. But then, hearing a gurgling sound, they rushed back out to see what was happening.

"The tide had risen to the level of

the street like a bathtub had been filled up," Douglas said. "I go, 'Oh, Jesus.'"

That mix of music, people, a party and the spontaneous is a bedrock of the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society all these years later. It is also a guiding force for Douglas, a wry beatnik visionary, who thought music first, business second and fame last when he grew a ramshackle seaside cottage into a world-class jazz jewel.

Gruffly unapologetic, he is a curmudgeon to some. But his vast knowledge and love of jazz wins ready praise from the music-savvy. He is an unwilling icon who introduces top jazz names in jeans and his ubiquitous jaunty cap, a tireless champion of the alchemy between listeners and

musicians, and a gravel-voiced, irreverent maverick who laughs often.

Long before Douglas stumbled onto the quaint Miramar Beach cottage 50 years ago (the actual anniversary was in November), his life was defined by a college professor who invoked Henry James when he told students that a good reason for college was to recognize a good man when they saw one.

"That's my role," Douglas said with relish. "I don't develop the talent. My role is to recognize a good man when I meet one in my chosen field.

"And in my case, that's music. I recognize them and am in a position to have them come here and play. I don't do it for reward or money. I book a person based on what I like."



His venue is a funky musical haven: a cozy, wood-paneled concert room with a balcony for more seating, paired with his house which he opens for refreshments and a second-story ocean view. Douglas cites the “feng shui” of a place where you get top-flight jazz, classical and contemporary music close enough to see every flick of a player’s fingers or flash in a singer’s eyes.

He quotes Gary Giddins from his book “Visions of Jazz”: “Classical jazz was a vital, transfiguring, seductive, galling art, often improvised, that spoke to people’s lives and kept them on their toes ... Then the institutions (aka festivals) took over and re-tailored it into a malleable craft and fixed repertory.”

Then he fixes his visitor with a stare in which wisdom and indignation parry. “I totally agree,” he growls. With a flash of his Bohemian roots,

A door in the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society has a music note cut out of it and filled with blue stained glass, that lights the dark hallway with an eerie blue light.

he adds, “Nothing good happens in in-sti-tu-tions. I hate festivals — they essentially remove people further and further away from the music. Jazz is about artists’ ability to communicate their musical language, and you can’t do that in a ballpark.”

The phone rings. Someone wants to reserve tickets. “The ambience couldn’t be better,” Douglas says. “You’re no more than 30 feet away from the musicians at the farthest.”



THE DOWNBEAT:
Douglas’ formative years

Prentice “Pete” Douglas was born

Feb. 9, 1929, in Waukegan, Ill. — “Jack Benny’s birthplace” — into an upper-middle-class family. His father was CEO of Chicago’s largest meat-packing company.

In 1936, a pneumonia epidemic took his father and both grandfathers within 90 days. His mother, though devastated, soon remarried. Her new husband took her, Pete and his brother Jack (now a retired librarian with San Jose State University) west to Inglewood.

There, the young Douglas hung out in the Los Angeles jazz club scene. By that time, traditional Dixieland had evolved into swing, which became America’s dance music from the 1930s to 1950s. He also had a yen for J.S. Bach and the way the great composer would weave melody lines into chords.

But trouble was brewing. Douglas’ mother and stepfather split and she returned to Illinois. Douglas stayed on

the West Coast, renting a room after graduating Inglewood High School in 1947.

"I could decorate it the way I wanted to," he shrugged. "I felt I was in control of my life. Finally. I had to escape when I could."

Those first years were carefree. Douglas hung out with peers, never getting into trouble but living fully and laying a foundation for his future. He fixed up his own 1932 Ford, a jaunty little car without fenders but boasting a Model A engine. "Wherever the action is, I'd be there," he said. "Somehow or other, we'd find a party. It was the car culture."

That screeched to a halt when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Douglas had been taking a few classes at the local junior college, but now he joined the National Guard to beat the draft.

When his division of the Guard was activated, he found himself in the Army anyway. He spent eight months training in Japan and was sent into combat in Korea as a driver for officers. He was never injured — neither was he inspired.

"I was the kinda guy who didn't make a fuss, just hung back and did as little as possible," he said. "There was nothing about the Army I was going to get along with."

Once discharged, he found himself at loose ends. So he returned to college, graduating from El Camino College and transferring to the University of California, Santa Barbara, to study sociology.

In a harbinger of things to come, he roomed with buddies on Miramar Beach in Santa Barbara. "We were all idealists," he said. "We thought business majors were the biggest squares in the world."

That was only the first step north. "I saw what was happening in Los Angeles, how L.A. was an assault on one's identity," said the former small-town kid.

Soon, his own identity included marriage. "I impregnated a sorority girl," he said, and married his first wife, Pat (now a Coastsider resident) in 1958.

PETE'S PICKS FOR JAZZ

"These people are not just great players, they are innovators," said Pete Douglas of the names he chooses from a long list of jazz musicians who have performed at the Bach Society.

His picks for the best in the field of instrumentalists and vocalists who have built the Bach's reputation as a top-flight jazz venue:

Among pianists: Jaki Byard, Frank Collette, Tommy Flanagan, Hampton Hawes, Harold Mabern, Horace Silver, McCoy Tyner, Mary Lou Williams and Teddy Wilson;

Among bassists: Ray Brown, Red Callender, Ron Carter, Eddie Gomez, Milt Hinton, George Mraz, Rufus Reid, Leroy Vinnegar;

Among drummers: Louie Bellson, Art Blakey, Frankie Capp, Jack DeJohnette, Billy Hart, Pat Motian, Ben Riley, Max Roach;

Among guitarists: Laurindo Almeida, Kenny Burrell, Bucky Pizzarelli, John Scofield;

Among saxophone players: Benny Carter, George Coleman, Frank Foster, Kenny Garrett, Dexter Gordon, Steve Lacy, Dave Liebman, James Moody, Art Pepper, Flip Phillips, Pharoah Sanders, Wayne Shorter, Zoot Sims, Phil Woods;

Among trumpeters: Terrence Blanchard, Lester Bowie, Pete Condoli, Don Ellis, Art Farmer, Dizzy Gillespie, Blue Mitchell, Shorty Rogers;

Among trombonists: Carl Fontana, Curtis Fuller, Delfayo Marsalis, Frank Rosolino, Bill Watrous;

Among clarinetists: Vince Catolica, Kenny Davern, Allan Vache;

Among flutists: Buddy Collette, Herbie Mann, Lew Tabackin;

Among vibrophonists: Gary Burton, Terry Gibbs, Bobby Hutcherson, Milt Jackson, Red Norvo, Cal Tjader;

Among violinists: Billy Bang, Michal Urbaniak;

Among vocalists: Ernestine Anderson, Charles Brown, Betty Carter, Nnenna Freelon, Etta Jones, Irene Kral, Bobby McFerrin, Carmen McRae, Anita O'Day;

Among percussionists: Big Black, Zakir Hussain, Mongo Santa Maria, Tito Puente.



PETE'S PICKS FOR CLASSICAL

Among string quartets: Prazak, from Europe, that Douglas calls "outstanding." Endlian, from England, "because of their style."

And the Chicago Pro Musica: Douglas tells the story of when the director of the Chicago Philharmonic contacted him with interest in playing at the Bach. The ensemble "showed up," he says, a scant few minutes before curtain time. When he invited them to see the venue they casually strolled up to the room and looked around it. Generally not one to be flustered by casual behavior, Douglas was nonetheless "in a panic" — until the three string players and the clarinetist sat down to play Mozart. "Needless to say, it was breathtaking," he said. "We had the principal cellist, the principal violinist, unfortunately we only had the second principal (second) violinist, and the clarinet was so pure, so clear, it blended with the strings in a way that you could hardly tell the difference."

Among flamenco guitarists: Juan Serrano and Mariano Cordoba;

Among classical guitarists: the "outrageous" Pepe Romero, Manuel Barrueco and Eliot Fiske.

Among recitalists: cellist Joel Krosnick with a pianist, at whose concert the number of tables forced Krosnick to sit so close to the audience that the only thing separating him from them was the music stand. "It was interesting," Douglas said the cellist remarked. "There are few concerts in which I can see every reaction in (viewers') eyes to the music."

Among pianists: Mack McCray, who has performed at the Bach's annual classical piano festival for 26 years — "and still wants to do it," Douglas said.

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THE BASS LINE: Finding the beach house

Jobs for sociology undergrads were hard to come by so he took work with the Red Cross at Travis Air Force Base. But the pull north was strong, and he eyed Sausalito and a job with the Marin County probation department. It fell through, but a San Mateo County department sought to hire him.

He wasn't enthused, thinking that San Mateo "was beginning to look a lot like L.A. — but better because it had water on either side." He took the job and settled with Pat and their baby daughter, Linda, in Menlo Park. Six months later, with his marriage rocky, and unhappy with suburban life, a light went on.

"I had to get back to the beach," he said.

He took little Linda one day to see the Coastsides. "For some reason," he turned north at Half Moon Bay, found a little road to Miramar and stumbled on a "little stucco cottage sitting in a pile of weeds, with a 'For Sale' sign."

It looked like somewhere he could "live like a refugee from the hipster scene of the 1950s," so he bought it. Soon it became a hangout for musi-



cians, writers, gays, artists and San Francisco show people.

In 1958, the first jam session took place there, and in the early 1960s, a second beach party event hailed the future. Everyone was dancing to some jazz and pop until Douglas, bored, put on Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. The guests zeroed in on the regular 4/4 rhythmic pulse and started dancing to that. One guest had brought along some dynamite, which he set off on the beach, causing then-Half Moon Bay High School teacher Bob Swift to

The old beer bar with owner Pete Douglas. It is now rented out as a private residence and Douglas has built the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society and the Ebb Tide Cafe up around it over the half-century since he's owned the building.

observe that "obviously, this is the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society."

It wasn't taken seriously. "It was a put-on, as we thought of ourselves as somewhat Bohemian," Douglas said. "Hardly a society."

But he still hung out a sign — and the name stuck.

A moment at the Bach

In 50 years, the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society has, besides some of the world's finest jazz, classical and contemporary performers, seen a stream of offbeat personalities and memorable moments — with music as the common thread.

Owner Pete Douglas says he has learned "how important a venue is for live music or any show. Live music will die if people don't present it right, so that it's not based on celebrity but based on musical qualities.

"It's not just its size," he insists. "If you don't pay attention, you're creating a dull, fearful, emotionally sterile place that audiences come in and say, 'If this is what jazz is, I don't want any more.'"

"The venue is almost as important as who's playing in it," he continued. "You have to care about the music, care about the people making it, their quality, their musicianship, their musical language."

The Bach "prepares people for a musical event," Douglas said, and "Musicians sense that, by the way — whoa, do they sense that, and play accordingly.

"They know whether a venue cares, so that (they say) 'I feel good because this venue is hip to what we're trying to do.'"

He tells of one concert when he "felt a vibe in the room." Looking around, he saw listeners craning forward in their seats "with incredible emotional involvement, leaning forward — for good reason. The joy of seeing them into the music brought tears to my eyes."

The musician featured that day, Ernie Watts, addressed Douglas as he left the building. "He said, 'Ya know, Pete, when I come to your place, I give a musical program. When I go to a festival, I give a show.'"



THE RHYTHM SECTION: The Bach takes shape

Douglas put sociology to work as a probation officer in San Mateo from 1957 until 1961, when he was asked to leave for chewing gum in court. The dismissal, he said airily, “was a technicality because politically, I wasn’t getting along there.”

From 1963 to 1965, he worked for the San Francisco welfare department, a Palo Alto mortgage broker, sold real estate and inspected properties — and registered the Bach as a nonprofit, bringing jazz and classical musical acts to the public.

His take on jazz — which he calls the only true American art form (with musical theater) because it distilled from several cultures — had matured by then. “What started as a party house and playing music evolved into a serious music room,” he said. “(Jazz) wasn’t just party music ... I realized I was listening to the new popular music.”

In 1965, “the fun began.”

He added two more lots and put up a building behind the cottage. In 1968, he became self-employed. “I figured out the demand for offsite facilities for parties and weddings and things.”

He and Pat had two more daughters, Barbara and Virginia, but split in 1967. In the early 1970s, he added a professional music concert room, and held a debut formal music program in 1971 with a local, professional jazz group.

He added weddings, parties, anniversary celebrations, even college festivities to chip down debts from the building. “By 1975, I was in the wedding business” with maybe 40 a year, he said. “Without weddings, there would be no music.”

For weddings, Douglas dips into his collection of 80 or so flags from different countries. He flies three per wedding, representing the couple’s heritage.

He says he’s been accused of pro-

Communist leanings when the flags were red. Once, when questioned by an irate passerby for flying the flag of Germany, he explained that that day’s concert featured a German composer.

“A lot of people don’t catch on,” he said.



THE DISSONANCE: The human element

Though he snorts that “American audiences are so visual — they don’t know how to listen,” Douglas says he’s interested in the “sociology of audiences.” And Bach is a sociologist’s dream.

Coastsiders helped build it, including Russell Bissonnette, commander of the American Legion Post 474 in Princeton, who from the early 1970s pitched in as a doorman, janitor, manager and publicist. He became close to Douglas’ family, once even taking youngest daughter Virginia, nicknamed “Sweet Pea,” to the prom when her date stood her up.

“I love the guy — he’s like a father to me,” Bissonnette said of Douglas. “He was difficult in a way to work for, but it was rewarding. My deal was publicity, his was music. I learned an incredible amount about music and the way people are.”

Through the 1970s, Douglas says he didn’t encourage the drug culture at the Bach, but some people still came to shows stoned.

One of them was a wild-eyed ex-Marine who sauntered in holding a harpoon while some 150 guests were taking their seats. Bissonnette, acting

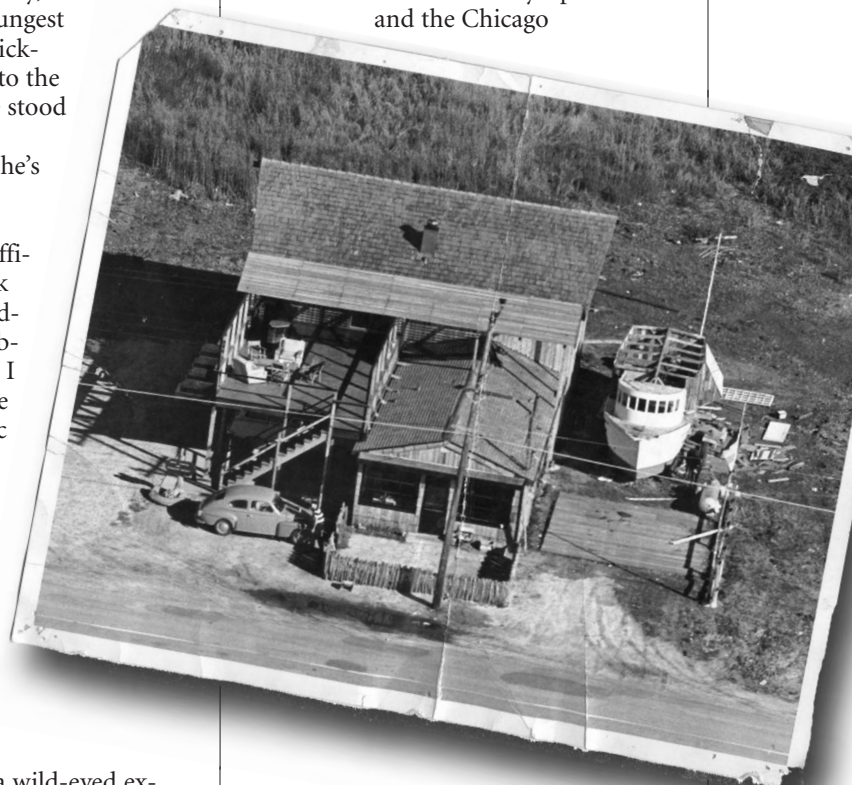
as bouncer, defused the situation. The harpoon now hangs on the wall at the Bach.

In 1978, Coastside classical guitarist Richard Patterson discovered the Bach. “Pete took me under his wing,” Patterson said, and gave him work in which he learned to run a performing arts series.

In 1980, Patterson introduced the Friday night candlelight dinner series of chamber concerts and recitals. In 10 years, this series — with dinners catered by a local business, the Dynamite Mousse — staged hundreds of quality concerts. “Richard really brought in top names in classical guitar,” said Douglas.

Artists also included the Kronos String Quartet — who didn’t interest Douglas until he learned they played contemporary music as well as classics. “That piqued my interest,” he said. Modern music, including rock, has since taken its place at the Bach.

Interest also came from the San Francisco and New York symphonies and the Chicago



An aerial shot of the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society prior to the building of the concert room in the early 1970s which now stands where the boat is. The little house in front is the original cottage that Pete Douglas bought with the larger house that was built up around it in 1965.

Philharmonic. “We kept getting lucky,” Douglas said. “Here’s this funky little place and we’re getting incredible players.”

He got incredible memories, too. He tells of the mid-80s candlelight concert when the picturesque fireplace backed up, and smoke began to drift down over the audience “like a blanket.”

“I’m panicking,” Douglas said. “I had to use a bucket of sand, crash through tables to throw the sand.” As he did, one listener calmly remarked, “This is like watching chamber music on the Hollywood freeway.”

Chamber music isn’t immune to Bach-ishness. Douglas recalls a classical brass player who started playing sitting upright but wound up sprawled back with feet tapping wildly — not missing a beat.

“This room brings out things because it’s informal, things (performers) don’t do in other places,” he said. “Here, they feel free enough to act out. He was letting it all hang out.”



THE CODA: The future

While Douglas books the music, for the past 20-plus years his friend, Linda Goetz, has helped with the clerical side — on Douglas’ terms.

“The way to help Pete most is to assist him in doing what he’s doing,” she said. “The house is his life. He doesn’t compromise. Integrity is what Pete tries to accomplish.”

After all, she continued, “He may be known as a curmudgeon but he has a big heart. But he doesn’t relate well to the social chitchat scene.”

She is planning tributes for the 50th anniversary and Douglas’ 80th birthday. But she admits to sadness as the venue struggles to break even.

“It’s heartbreaking,” she said. “Coastsiders don’t understand what they have here.”

They still have Douglas who, now the grandfather of six and great-



Pete Douglas on stage under the red skylight, near stained glass artwork.

grandfather of five, has no plans to step off the Bach’s bandstand.

The venue brought in more modern-day Bohemianism: Three years ago, the Ebb Tide Cafe welcomed visitors for coffee and snacks. Now, operating on a club basis, it invites members to bring friends for weekend picnics. The goal is interactive events like movies, live music, dialogue and speakers, in a casual open-house ambience.

The cafe is an extension of Pete’s Park, which began when Douglas set up a speaker to broadcast music from the downstairs deck. “He wants the old hipster feeling. A hangout,” said Goetz. “More discussion than isolation.”

Douglas, too, wishes the Bach was a household name. “I do miss critical attention I’m not getting from the radio, media, except on rare occasions,” he said. “I can understand why a lot of people don’t come if they feel it’s too personal. I’m not great at

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schmoozing locals.”

He wants people to see the Bach for what it is.

“It looks like an ego thing, ‘Pete’s place,’ the home for jazz by some eccentric nut who does music in his house,” he fumed. “It’s never appreciated as a venue that has lasted 40 years in the same space.”

“It’s a pleasure giving (musicians) a place to be the best they can be, if you care about what real musicianship and talent are,” he said. “A majority of people sense this place feels good, and the musicians sense it and open up and everyone experiences enhancement. But it’s subtle — there’s no way to measure it.” ✎