

Hidden Gems: Half Moon Bay's Legendary Jazz Spot That Started in a Living Room

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The Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society in Half Moon Bay grew out of the impromptu jazz concerts Pete Douglas would throw in his living room. **(Ryan Levi/KQED)**

The [Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society](#) in Half Moon Bay is not your average jazz club, and it's not just because of the quirky name (more on that later).

Let's start with the setting. As I settle into my seat in the cozy, wood-paneled room for a Sunday afternoon concert, I can see the sunset streaming through the stained-glass window. I can hear the ocean just outside the door.

"To watch the sunset and be listening to jazz here, I can't imagine any place on the planet that's quite like where we are right now," said Kevin Daniels, who first came to the Bach — as it's affectionately called — in the 1970s.

By that point, the Bach had already been around for nearly a decade, but its story starts in 1957, when a beatnik beach rat named Pete Douglas moved to Half Moon Bay from Los Angeles with his wife, Patricia.



Pete Douglas, circa 1959, in his cottage. He and his wife bought an old beer and hamburger joint in Half Moon Bay when they moved from Los Angeles in 1957. *(Courtesy Barbara Riching)*

Douglas initially worked as a probation officer for San Mateo County, but that didn't last long.

"I think he took the county car and drove it off the road or something, and that was the end of that," said Barbara Riching, Douglas' daughter. But before he got fired, he was assigned to work with Pat Britt, who had stolen a bologna sandwich.

Britt was also in a band, and Douglas asked him if they would come play at the beer and hamburger joint he had bought in Half Moon Bay, the Ebb Tide Cafe, where Douglas also lived with his family.

"He started having just little jams right in there," Riching said, *there* being effectively his family's living room.



One of the first jam sessions inside Douglas' cottage in Half Moon Bay in the late 1950s, featuring Pat Britt and his band. *(Courtesy Barbara Riching)*

'This Must Be the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society'

In 1964, Douglas was hanging out with some friends in the Ebb Tibe and dancing to some Bach, when one of his friends went down to the beach below and started setting off dynamite. As the dynamite blew, Douglas and his friends kept dancing to Bach, prompting one friend to say, "This must be the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society."

"Sure enough, one of my dad's attorney friends who was there said, 'Yeah, let's incorporate this thing,'" Riching said. "And so that's how the nonprofit actually got incorporated in 1964."



The first 'Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society' sign in front of the cottage in Half Moon Bay with Douglas' daughters Linda (R) and Virginia (L). *(Courtesy of Barbara Riching)*

With an official name and organization in tow, Douglas set about to expand the operation. He built a two-story house onto the beer joint and moved the concerts — for which he now charged a small entrance fee — into his new living room.

"He would set up a temporary stage, and then we would swing the couch around right up to the stage," Riching remembers. "So the people that first got here were the luckiest because they could just sit right on the couch and hear the music."

In 1972, Douglas added a separate performance space next door with room for about 200 seats and a small stage. According to Britt, this is when Douglas started booking some of the biggest names in jazz to play his small seaside venue.

Jazz legends, including Bobby Hutcherson, Carmen McRae and Stan Getz, have all played the Bach. Pianist Bill Evans recorded a live album there in 1973.

“I almost cried. Bill Evans was playing there. Bill Evans was my hero,” Britt said. “I just couldn’t believe it. Bill Evans was playing at Pete Douglas’ place.”



Photos of jazz greats, including Carmen McRae, Bill Evans and Eddie Jackson, line the wood-paneled walls of the present-day Bach concert room. *(Ryan Levi/KQED)*

The Bach Today

In 2014, the Bach closed temporarily after [Douglas died](#), but it reopened soon after, under the management of Riching, Douglas' daughter.

"It's my father's legacy," she said. "I feel like I have to somehow make it happen."

The Bach has a small but passionate group of members who help sustain the venue and regularly attend concerts, and it seems like everyone I talk to has a personal story about Douglas.



Pete Douglas running the sound system just off of stage right in the performance room at the Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society. Douglas died in 2014. *(Courtesy of Barbara Riching)*

"Pete would sit over there controlling the sound board," said Rob Malenka, who first came to the Bach in the late 1970s when he moved to the Bay Area. "And he would have two pipes, and I'll just let the audience imagine what substances were in the two pipes. I'll give you a hint — one was tobacco."



Barbara Riching sits next to a photo of her father, Pete Douglas, in what was his customary spot at his Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society. *(Ryan Levi/KQED)*

Malenka and his wife, Julia Kauer, like to take advantage of another one of the Bach's perks — visitors can bring their own food and alcohol. They also appreciate the camaraderie they say exists among the patrons.

Sitting out on the venue's outdoor deck overlooking Pillar Point before the concert, Kauer said people they didn't know offered them their seats and then chatted with them for 20 minutes.

Riching said that social component was always important to her dad.

"What was important to him was creating a really unique atmosphere where people could come together and socialize and experience the music and talk," she said.



Paula West performs at the Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society in Half Moon Bay on April 22, 2018.

(Ryan Levi/KQED)