

I CAN STILL HEAR IT

The Blackhawk — where the gods of modern jazz held forth

By JOHN BURKS

The year I moved to Northern California, 1959, I came across an article in Time magazine, "Success In A Sewer," depicting a "scabrous" jazz dive in San Francisco — The Blackhawk — that "slumps" at the corner of Turk and Hyde, the Tenderloin. This was the height of Timestyle, wherein reporting intermingled with extreme point-of-view, abetted by snooty, archaic wordings.

"Its dim doorway belches noise and stale cigaret smoke. Against one wall lies a long, dank bar minus bar stools; a bandstand, just big enough for an underfed quintet, is crammed on the other side; stained, plastic-topped tables and rachtic chairs crowd the floor."

Belches? Dank? Rachtic? Wow! This, I told myself, I gotta see. And did, discovering that Time had been sparing in its disgust. The place was at its worst during Sunday afternoon jam sessions when thin rays of sunshine pierced the club's rotting curtains, revealing tattered, blotchy carpets, battered tables, cracked mirrors, naked lightbulbs. The eminent jazz writer Doug Ramsey aptly recalls "the dust and dimness of that temple of gloom."

First band I saw there was vibist Cal Tjader's. His was also the last performance I saw there. Tjader was now in his pace-setting Afro-Cuban mode, featuring Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo, et al, a unit that all but defined what would come to be known as salsa. Wailing Latin percussion undergirding driving jazz solos. I believe Vince Guaraldi, a friend of Tjader's since they matriculated at S.F. State, was his pianist at the time. They were really churning that night. Exhilarating.

Tjader had played The Blackhawk for years, at first fronting a straight-ahead vibes-piano-bass-drums combo, no congas, no timbales. Same instrumentation as the Modern Jazz Quartet but less delicate, harder swinging. Purists will argue that Cal was no match for MJQ vibist Milt Jackson, and they'd be correct, but Cal and his guys really did groove. (If interested, you can hear it for yourself on Tjader's live 1957 "Jazz at The Blackhawk" album.)

THEY KNEW SQUAT

Back to that Time "Sewer" headline. The Blackhawk's owners, Guido Caccienti and Johnny and Helen Noga, had more or less stumbled into operating the club, and jazz was not part of their equation. They got lucky when Dave Brubeck, who was having trouble getting gigs, made himself The Blackhawk's virtual artist-in-residence, somehow attracting scores of devotees via his harmonic and rhythmic unorthodoxy and pronounced lack of social skills. Even luckier when Fantasy Records began recording Brubeck "live at The Blackhawk" — the first of innumerable live recordings there, including Tjader and the initial Gerry Mulligan Quartet album, featuring Chet Baker on trumpet.

Great musicians were attracted to The Blackhawk because of Caccienti and the Nogas — and NOT because the owners were caring, nurturing patrons of the art form. Quite the reverse. They'd taken over the club because they wanted to make money selling booze, and sought to hire musicians who appealed to drinkers. They knew squat about music per se. They never told musicians what to play, how to play it — nothin' — so long as the cash reg-

ister was singing. Players felt free to cut loose, take chances, go nuts. Which was exactly what fans flocked to hear. The bottom line was solid, and that was all that concerned ownership. Musicians running wild? Tackiness? Filth? Guido Caccienti: "I've worked and slaved to keep this place a sewer."

In such an atmosphere they'd sign Miles Davis for a couple of weeks and not give a shit when he abandoned The Blackhawk to jam at the Jazz Workshop or the Say When. He'd miss several nights in a row. No matter: The Blackhawk crowd dug Miles' sidemen, cheered them on in Miles' absence. The joint was packed, the booze was flowing and so were the greenbacks; no problem.

THE FANTASY CONNECTION

The proximity of Fantasy Records, originally operating from an alley off Market Street, was salutary. Fantasy was founded in 1949, the year The Blackhawk opened, when the brothers Max and Sol Weiss bought out a failing jazz label and renamed it. Fantasy began schlepping recording equipment over to the club to record Brubeck, Mulligan, Tjader. The surprising success of these recordings — dubbed West Coast Jazz — led to Blackhawk bookings beyond anything its owners had dreamed. Everybody wanted to play the club, and the best of them did. In the interest of growing its ever-expanding catalog, Fantasy purchased a minority interest in The Blackhawk and kept the tape-decks running.

San Francisco had always been something of a jazz mecca, starting with extended visits by Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory and many other foundational jazz artists at the dawn of the 20th century. By the late '30s, the city was at the forefront of traditional jazz "revival" as played by a generation of mostly white acolytes. Lu Watters, Bob Scobey, Marty Marsala and Turk Murphy were among the top "revivalists." Kid Ory and Earl "Fatha" Hines, veterans of Louis Armstrong's band, settled here. The traddlers opened clubs like The Hangover, The Tin Angel, Earthquake McGoon's. Soon enough Fantasy began recording and profiting from them, too.

The trad movement was alive and well through most of The Blackhawk's tenure, and sometimes the trad-bop twain was met. I'm remembering Vince Cattolica in particular, a blind clarinetist who could and did play with just everybody, delivering solos reaching all the way back to Johnny Dodds, referencing Benny Goodman, tossing in Diz and Bird licks with aplomb, sparks flying. A true original. Why Cattolica never achieved national renown remains a mystery.

A GOLDEN AGE

The '50s and '60s were San Francisco's golden age for jazz lovers. There were jazz clubs, or anyway bars where jazz was played, in every neighborhood. If you could keep a decent beat and make listeners feel good there was work, even for me. I still recall the evening when I had to make up my mind whether I wanted to go hear Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dexter Gordon or Ray Charles, all playing different clubs. Hint: Paul Gonsalves broke the tie. (Later that night, Gonsalves would show up with his tenor sax at the after-hours Jimbo's Bop City along with half his Ellington bandmates, most of the Basie brass section, and Carmen McRae.)

The Blackhawk had its rivals. If

COLTRANE'S 45-MINUTE MUSIC LESSON

It hit me that Sunday



HUGO VAN GELDEREN, ANEFO

John Coltrane, 1963

Management's disinclination to rein in, or in any way control, Blackhawk performers led to some spectacular improvs. Players felt free to try anything, and often did. One memorable instance was tenor saxist John Coltrane's astonishing 45-minute blues solo on a hot summer Sunday.

Trane was a member of Miles Davis' all-star sextet, along with the vaunted alto saxist Cannonball Adderley. That afternoon Miles called a medium blues (maybe "So What," I'm not sure) and by the time it ended an hour and a half had elapsed. There was not one single dull moment.

Everybody soloed: bass, drums, piano, Miles' trumpet coy and sly for at least 10 minutes, Cannonball supple, elegant, waiting for at least 20, and then came Trane. He opened honking and signifying like an r&b player, then, gradually, chorus upon chorus, he turned up the heat and added layers of complexity. His sound: biting, enormous, thrilling. It took control of your gut.

By the half-hour mark he'd gotten into full "sheets of sound" mode. Meaning what, you may wonder — sheets of sound? Coltrane had perfected an improv technique akin to Jackson Pollock's painting. Pollock threw layers of paint on layers of paint, creating a swirling pointillistic effect; so much was happening on his canvas it all but defied interpretation.

Trane achieved a parallel effect by playing so many notes at once, cascades crowding and bumping into one another in pointillistic fashion, that it implored you to make sense of it. Not easy. Trane's playing was so intense, so explosive — so much happening all at the same time — that it seemed impossible to fully process it.

Until that Sunday afternoon, when it hit me: The man was playing three interlocking solos simultaneously. It was akin to New Orleans-style jazz whereby three horns improvise collectively in ad hoc counterpoint. Except Trane was taking the role of all three horns.

The more I listened the more sense it made. Afterward, Trane retired to a table in full sweat, smiling beatifically. I went over to congratulate him, and asked him whether I'd heard what I thought I'd heard — three-part contrapuntal blues played on a single horn. His horn.

His eyebrows shot up, he gave me a quick hug and said, "You heard that!" Nothing more needed be said, except thank you John Coltrane.

— John Burks

we're writing a history of San Francisco jazz, the Jazz Workshop deserves a chapter of its own, and the definitive book would find room for The Matador, Both/And, Basin Street West, Fack's, The Jazz Cellar, Off Broadway, Keystone Corner, the Say When, even Enrico's. Inarguable, however, is The Blackhawk's status as the premier venue for jazz in San Francisco.

The only other popular music paladium paralleling its accomplishments: Bill Graham's Fillmore Auditorium, plus tributaries Winterland and the Carousel. As to which made the greater contribution to the sonic arts — Blackhawk or the Fillmore — it gets real fuzzy.

THE MAYOR AND THE CROONER

That what came out of the jazz club was art did not matter to Mayor George Christopher. In 1961, he became aware that The Blackhawk allowed people too young to drink to attend its festivities. The kiddies were ensconced in a special section, behind chicken-wire fencing so nobody could slip them hooch. Peculiar perhaps, but it provided young folk the opportunity to connect with America's native art form up close and personal, without obstruction. Except of course for that chicken wire.

Mayor Christopher, apparently, had read that Time article, and was shocked, shocked, that innocent S.F.

children were being encouraged to devour lowlife "noise" (and inhale stale cigaret smoke) in a goddamn sewer. An outright affront to Republican civility. So the mayor manufactured a crisis — and a howler of double entendre. "One of these days," he intoned, "a young girl is going to get raped in the parking lot outside the club, and who is going to get blamed for that act? — the mayor of San Francisco!"

Whoa. Can't have that. Cops shut down the youth section within the week. Within a couple of years, The Blackhawk itself went dark, though not necessarily because of the mayor's wrath, nor waning attendance. Insiders say it was because Hawk co-founder Helen Noga had latched on to a money-maker guaranteed to outpace anything a 200-capacity jazz club could ever provide, monetarily anyway.

His name was Johnny Mathis, best known, pre-Noga, as an S.F. State high jumper with Olympic aspirations. One Sunday afternoon, the 19-year-old Mathis had dropped by The Blackhawk to croon some tunes. Enthralled by his

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The Blackhawk, in all its guttery glory at the gritty corner of Turk and Hyde, is sure to occupy a prominent place in the Tenderloin Museum.



COMPOSITE BY LISE STAMPELLI, BASED ON A 1961 PHOTO BY LEIGH WIENER