

Something to howl about: the Redwood City Blues Jam

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The first time harmonica player Mark Hummel heard about the blues jam at the Little Fox Theater in Redwood City from one of his students, he admits he was skeptical.

"He said, 'Man, it would be great for you to come down and check it out.' I said, 'Fat chance,' " Hummel recalled.

Why?

"Most blues jams pretty much suck," said the 51-year-old, who lives in Castro Valley. "It's usually a bunch of guys who just want to show off their stuff and never play professionally. The difference with this one is they do get a higher caliber of player in general. And it's run very well."

Every Wednesday night, guitarists, fiddlers, harpists and singers come together at the Little Fox for the best blues jam you've never heard of. It's flying low under the public radar, but top-flight Bay Area musicians - from Hummel to Louisiana blues guitarist Kenny Neal to Chicago blues-style guitarist Steve Freund - are flocking to the intimate club - capacity 240 - to share the stage with local unknowns, for the fun of it.

It's turning out to be fun for the audience, too. Their numbers have grown to an average of 200 a week since the jam started a year ago. And best of all, it's free.

Like a delicate high school science experiment, no one knows quite what to expect in the blues lab at the Little Fox. No national headlining musicians have made it to the Little Fox - yet. Last week, Freund, 55, of Vallejo, played and brought keyboardist friend Wendy DeWitt, who used to tour with him. Seated in the audience, just off the dance floor, was Francis Clay, one of blues' more influential drummers, now retired. He played with Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and James Cotton. Clay said he was impressed by the quality of the sound, the cleanliness of the club and the musicians.

Lesser-knowns such as fiddler Carole Mayedo, 60, of Redwood City, who played on Neil Young's "American Stars 'N Bars" album (and is a classical violinist) come to play.

So have complete unknowns, such as singer Rachel Walker, 43, a fresh-faced but homeless mother of three from Mendocino who wants to start a career in the blues, and guitarist Matthieu Vial-Collet, 23, a mechanical engineer from the Swiss border region of France, who is creating a bit of a sensation with his pure tone and touch of jazz in his style, musicians say.

Bass player Craig Robinson, 49, of San Jose, who tours with John Lee Hooker Jr., also was there, playing and singing in a few sets on a recent night. His half sister, Cynthia Handy, 48, of Palo Alto, daughter of jazz saxophonist John Handy of Oakland, is a musician broker who puts bands together (for artists such as Neal and Hooker Jr.), comes to scout - and dance up a storm. "I come to find the best musicians who are not working right now," she said. "I find the level of talent mixed. It's not a pro jam."

But that's exactly what jam master Vince Caminiti is after. Caminiti, 57, of Pacifica, a human resources specialist by day and guitarist in a blues band by night, began playing guitar in high school and moved to the West Coast as an adult. Jam sessions were his only venue for playing out, because he wasn't a professional. He learned a lot from that experience - including what he'd do if he were ever in charge: rotate the bands like clockwork, to give everyone a chance.

(Other Bay Area blues jams include Old Princeton Landing on the San Mateo County coast, JJ's in Santa Clara and the Mojo Lounge in Fremont.)

Caminiti has house rules regarding the stage lineup. A professional guest band hosts the first hour, from 7 to 8 p.m. From 8 to 9:30 or so, musicians on the signup sheet get to perform. Caminiti decides whether they've got enough talent to get up there and who will play together, and each combo gets three songs. After that, time's up - it's on to the next group. After three "jam bands" perform, the host band returns to play a set, usually with guests they've invited to join them. After that, there's one more set of jammers. The night ends at 11.

"I mix the weaker musicians with stronger musicians to have something palatable to the audience," Caminiti said. "This was not going to be a jam session for the benefit of musicians, but for the benefit of the audience, because I want to build a base of more blues fans in the Bay Area."

The jam is an offshoot of an earlier jam started by Redwood City businessman George Schoenstein at the Broadway Lounge, a bail bonds bar near the county jail. There was a falling out, and the jam needed a new home. When commercial real estate developer John Anagnostou - who owns the Fox Theatre and the Little Fox, among other buildings - was approached, he immediately said yes.

Anagnostou is one of several driving forces for redevelopment downtown. In 1999, he led the push to create a public plaza in front of the historic, domed Redwood City courthouse building, which required tearing down the 1930s era government building - a project of the Works Progress Administration - that had been wrapped around the stately structure. The plaza has become a major magnet for family entertainment, drawing hundreds of people on any given night for free outdoor movies, salsa dancing, concerts and art fairs.

"I truly believe that music and art is the soul of a city," Anagnostou said. "For years, they told us shopping centers were it, but shopping centers are a dying model. That's why they're creating lifestyle centers which are fake downtowns. I want to grow a world-class downtown that other cities will emulate, especially with a city once known as Deadwood City. I want people to ask, 'How did it become so alive?'"

Musicians like the energy of the jam, the way it is efficiently run, that it has a professional soundman at the mixing board, and are pleased to see the jam spreading the blues gospel to the public.

Karen Walters, 50, of Redwood City, a self-employed telecom broker, goes to dance at the Little Fox almost every week, with girlfriends.

"I love the excitement of the audience, the local talent that comes to the Little Fox and just the comfortable feeling when I go there," she said. "I'm single and I feel safe there. I feel like it's a 'Cheers' bar. It's just great."

Robinson, the bass player, notes that the crowd is "mature," and that there are "no knuckleheads, guys who've had a couple of drinks and try to start fights."

The level of talent, he said, is "very good, and that makes it fun for me."

Freund, who lived in Chicago for 19 years and played with some of the greatest blues musicians that city had ever seen, is glad he met Caminiti and to be playing at the Little Fox. Freund was noodling on Craigslist.com one day, looking to buy a new speaker for his amplifier and e-mailed Caminiti, who had one for sale. They ended up chatting and learned they'd grown up a half mile from one another in Brooklyn, but had never met. When Caminiti started the jam session, he asked Freund to come down and play. Now Freund, who runs the Mojo Lounge blues jam himself, is on the rotation at the Little Fox every three months.

"I tell my friends, 'Yeah, I'm playing in Redwood City on Wednesday' and they say, 'Aw, there's nothing down there,'" Freund said.

For the record, he notes, "This is a little bit of a phenomenon. It's happening. It's great."

If you're going

The Redwood City Blues Jam is from 7 to 11 p.m. every Wednesday at the Little Fox Theater, 2209 Broadway, Redwood City. Call (650) 369-4119 or go to www.rwcb bluesjam.com. Admission: Free.

Coming up

Wednesday: Blues guitarist Kenny "Blue" Ray hosts.

Aug 22: An all-star benefit will be held to raise funds for the financially ailing Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival. Headliners include Kenny Neal, Craig Horton, Mark Hummel and Pat Wilder.

Admission: Free, but contributions for the beneficiary will be solicited from the audience.

To see a video report and hear music from the Redwood City Blues Jam, go to www.sfgate.com/entertainment.

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