SAN DIEGO®

AUGUST 2004

Ready, Set, Dine!

Best Restaurants

Embattled Charity Priest Answers Financial Charges

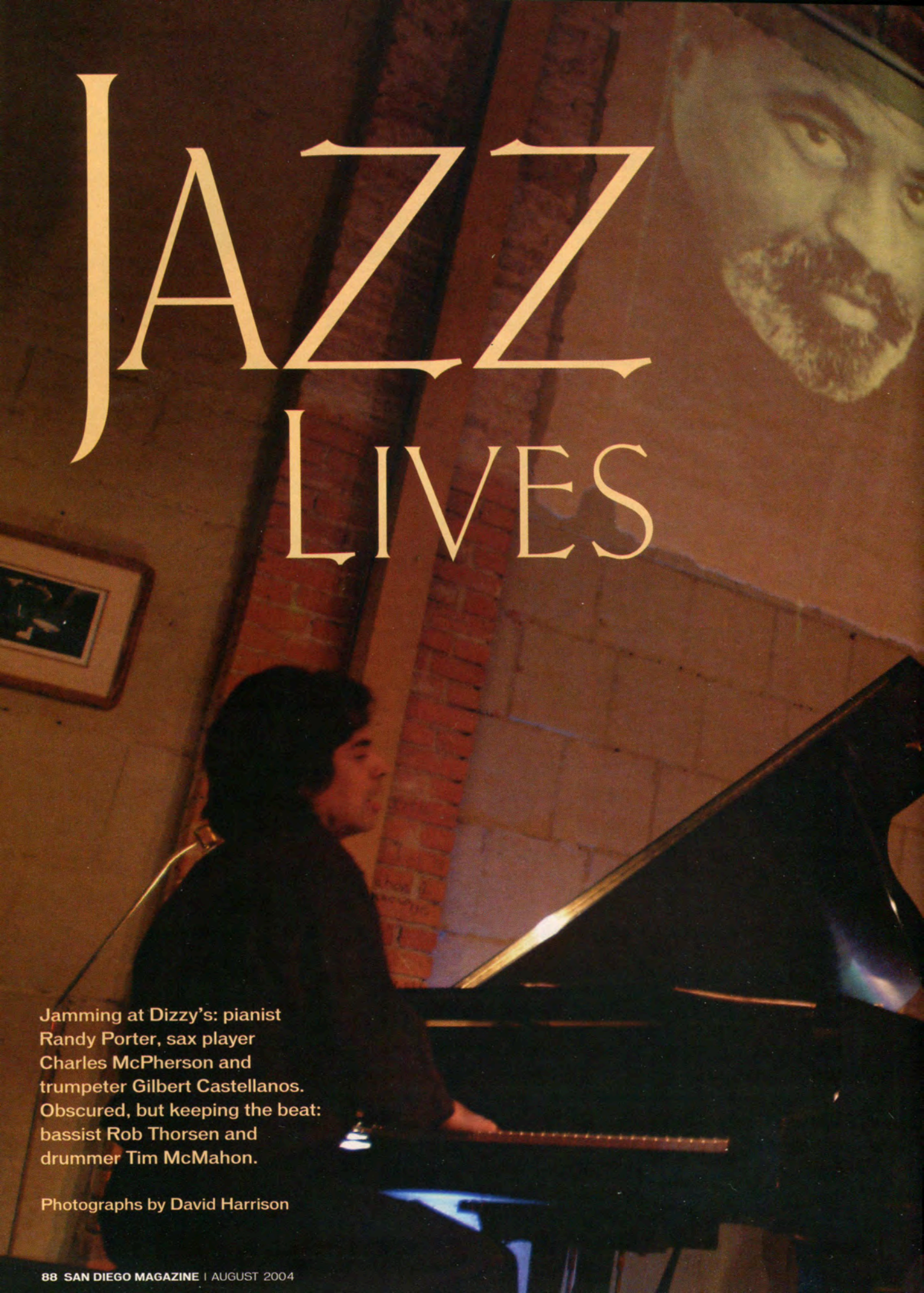
Sexy Mamas & Class Acts at The Learning Annex

Turmoil in Our Tourism Industry

$3.95

659719 08
0 878088 1
sandiegomag.com

JAZZ LIVES



Jamming at Dizzy's: pianist Randy Porter, sax player Charles McPherson and trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos. Obscured, but keeping the beat: bassist Rob Thorsen and drummer Tim McMahon.

Photographs by David Harrison

The San Diego jazz scene ebbs and flows. But even as part of an underground musical force, somebody can be found laying down a cool beat seven days a week.

By Eilene Zimmerman

SATURDAY NIGHT. The downtown air is chilled. On this block of Seventh Avenue there's an eerie phosphorescent glow coming from Petco Park. But inside a club called Dizzy's, the lights are dim. All seats are taken. A cross-section of San Diego is here for legendary saxophonist Charles McPherson.

Dapper in white shirt, black-and-white striped jacket and purple tie, McPherson takes the stage with bass player Rob Thorsen, trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos, pianist Randy Porter and drummer Tim McMahon. All but Porter are locals. The music begins, and the audience is rapt.

If honey had a sound, it would be what's floating out of McPherson's alto sax—golden sweetness. Thorsen's hands fly up and down the bass. Porter plays with eyes closed. Castellanos, on his way to becoming a legend, plays solos that send the crowd into convulsions of applause.

There *is* a jazz scene in San Diego. It just takes a little work to find it.

Another night, I'm at the subterranean Onyx Room on Fifth Avenue, a club reached by climbing down an unmarked flight of stairs below a lounge called Thin. About 50 people wait anxiously for the Gilbert Castellanos Quartet to start. The music won't begin until 10, but that hasn't put anyone off. Castellanos has stuck to the spirit of a true jam session. He starts late and gets better as the night wears on. The show is in the back room, where a slightly elevated stage faces about 40 small, candlelit tables. Bassist Thorsen says the place has "a real Dean Martin vibe."

Guadalajara-born trumpeter Castellanos has been in San Diego for more than a decade. He gets much of the credit for jazz's current local reinvigoration. He performs nearly every night. It's been reported he practices six hours a day. He's played with legends like Dizzy Gillespie, Poncho Sanchez

and Wynton Marsalis. Castellanos' forte: drawing the under-50 crowd. He's made jazz hip again. On this night, groups of twentysomething girls with low-riding jeans and young men with surf shirts clamor for tables up front. And when Castellanos takes the stage and, without a word, puts lips to mouthpiece, you can see why.

The quartet plays a Dexter Gordon tune, and after a roaring trumpet solo—now it's standing room only—the crowd goes wild. Castellanos thanks the audience and steps back to allow the others improvisational moments. He taps his leg unselfconsciously, his eyes close, and he smiles while he listens. The night is young. The place is packed. He's just getting started.

McPherson plays "golden sweetness."

JAZZ, EVEN IN THE MORE SOPHISTICATED urban environs, isn't mainstream music. In a select few cities, such as New York or Chicago, there is an abundance of dedicated jazz clubs, with national acts regularly coming to play. But in San Diego, as in most other cities, you have to seek it out. What you'll find here is a thriving community of nationally celebrated musicians who play in clubs, restaurants, concert halls, libraries—even at the airport. If you wanted to see quality jazz every night in San Diego, you could.

Jaime Valle, an internationally recognized local jazz guitarist, rarely travels. "I've been a working professional for decades in San Diego and can play as many nights as I want," he says. "I find that artistically and creatively, it's incredibly stimulating."

Listenership at local jazz radio station KSDS-FM is at its highest in 30 years—76,000 people tune in at least once a week, according to Arbitron ratings. KSDS is one of the last stations of its kind in the country: free-form jazz where deejays with decades of experience as musicians and fans play what they love.

Last year, to accommodate rising interest in the genre, the University of California, San Diego added a jazz concentration to its undergraduate music program. "Jazz in the Park," in its fifth year at the San Diego Museum of Art, sells out nearly every performance. The Athenaeum's jazz series, begun in 1989, has been selling out for years. San Diego State University's jazz program is one of the largest of its kind in the country, and Bill Yeager, its director, describes the amount of talent in it as "phenomenal."

Talent is something San Diego has in spades—up-and-comers as well as nationally known players like McPherson, Mundel Lowe, Hollis Gentry, James Moody, Bob Magnusson, Mike Wofford, Holly Hofmann, Shep Meyers and a host of others. But talent needs a showcase, and the biggest complaint among musicians is the paucity of clubs.

Even as the population grows and downtown is revitalized, it's a constant hustle for most jazz players to find regular, well-paying gigs. Late-night jam sessions, often where a jazz community comes together, are pretty much a thing of the past. Clubs devoted to the genre—Elario's, Chuck's Steakhouse, Our Place and others—once offered traditional jazz five or six nights a week. Those days—and clubs—are gone.

Hofmann, a nationally known jazz flute player, booked acts at downtown's Horton Grand Hotel for seven years, when it showcased national

Castellanos helps draw younger crowds.

and local talent. She says demand for jazz was greater a decade or so ago. "The Horton Grand was incredibly successful," she says. "Jazz helped keep it afloat during a bankruptcy."

Chris Klich, a saxophonist who also plays clarinet and flute, recalls that 20 years ago when he was graduating with a music degree from UCSD, "I knew I was about to join a burgeoning jazz scene. There was a huge demand." He finds the current lack of venues depressing. "We have more people than we used to, but we're still a little provincial in San Diego," he says. "People don't move here for culture reasons, they move here for the weather."

Hofmann tends to agree. "One of the biggest problems—and this is in Southern California as a whole—is that the good weather causes people not to want to come indoors and hear music."

Lori Bell, a San Diego flautist who has been twice nominated for Grammy Awards and who teaches in SDSU's music program, says 20 years ago she felt part of a bigger community. "I used to run into a lot of other musicians all the time," she says. "We'd hang out and listen to each other play. Elario's back then was set up like a real old jazz club, and all the great players came in—Moody, Charles McPherson, all of them—and all the younger players, we all knew each other."

ALTHOUGH SAN DIEGO HAS A CORE of dedicated jazz fans, widening the audience is tough because most of the places that offer jazz now are also restaurants, where patrons are focused on dinner, not music.

That is the situation when Bell and guitarist Ron Satterfield play at the University Club on the top floor of Symphony Towers on a Wednesday night. In this posh, private supper club, every table has a spectacular view of downtown and the bay. While Bell plays "They Can't Take That Away from Me," the crowd mostly eats dinner. Occasionally, they look up, see her, and applaud. Afterwards, she laughs and says she's used to this, that it's still a good place to play, and the management treats her very well.

Aside from a scarcity of dedicated jazz clubs, San Diego also lacks a venue with national standing. But Dan Atkinson, director of arts, humanities and languages at UCSD Extension—and the jazz program coordinator at the Athenaeum Music & Arts Library in La Jolla—says we're not alone. "On the West Coast there are only four national-level jazz clubs: two in L.A., one in Oakland and one in Seattle," he says (respectively, The Jazz Bakery, Catalina Bar & Grill, Yoshi's and Jazz Alley).

That's one reason artists like Hofmann—and her band Flutology—tend to play outside their hometowns. The Holly Hofmann Quartet plays occasional local gigs and includes local musicians like bassist Thorsen, percussionist Jim Plank and Hofmann's husband, pianist Mike Wofford.

Wofford is an internationally recognized pianist who began playing at 7. He's worked with Ella Fitzgerald, toured with Sarah Vaughan and is surprisingly modest considering the breadth and depth of his talent and experience. ("I've always been a blue-collar musician," he says.)

Wofford spent 15 years in Los Angeles, primarily doing studio work in Hollywood, but moved back to his San Diego hometown to raise a family. He performs here often, despite his touring schedule. Four nights a week, Wofford plays at the University Club (when he's on the road he finds his own subs). He's performed free at the Pacific Beach Public Library with several other musicians, and he and bassist Lisle Ellis participated in Spruce Street Forum's Fresh Sounds concert series at the Museum of Art in Balboa Park.

McPherson has lived in San Diego nearly 40 years; he moved here from New York to be with his ailing mother. He plays in town three or four times a year. Although McPherson believes the local scene has declined, he also says jazz ebbs and flows, here and in other places. "Even in New York, it isn't like it was in 1960 or 1945." McPherson lived there from 1959 until 1978 and played with many jazz greats, including bassist Charles Mingus. "I would have done better had I stayed in New York City. That's still the place to be if you're in jazz. There's a network and a hub of activity musically that you don't have in many other places," he says.

YET A GOOD NUMBER of local jazz players, both well established and new, disagree. Thorsen, for example, plays every week—usually several nights in a row—and is involved with about four different groups at any one time. "Sure, there's not a six-nights-a-week gig anymore, but you can do okay here; you just play different places. Some nights there are four or five jazz events going on at the same time," he says. He doesn't lament the lack of venues but instead

CONTINUED ON PAGE 226