

# Calistoga's lion of jazz plays on

By Tom Chorneau

Editor

The only jazz pianist from Calistoga to have backed Mel Torme at a nightclub in San Francisco in January 1963 was trying to remember the details of his first paying gig.



Larry Vuckovich, now 86, had more than 60 years of memories to sift through, many of them spent with some of the greatest jazz talents of the last half-century.

He remembered the Torme gig, and he remembered playing with John Handy, who he met while both were studying at San Francisco State. Handy played with Charles Mingus, who in turn played with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker.

Vuckovich recalled playing with Gerry Mulligan, who worked with Miles Davis and Dave Brubeck, among others. And he remembered Vince Guaraldi, an early mentor who is best known as the composer for the "Peanuts" cartoon's musical theme.

Vuckovich could rattle off times and dates of notable performances, even quoting what some reviewers had to say. But he was having trouble coming up with that first professional job.

"It would have been in the late fifties," he said. "Maybe earlier."

A fixture in Calistoga for nearly two decades, Vuckovich grew up in an affluent family living in a small coastal town in Montenegro. His early music studies were the classics: Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. But his teacher encouraged him to appreciate the freedom and romance of Baltic folk music.

"She was no square," he said. "She got us to like gypsy music."

During World War I, Vuckovich's father fought with the Allies and later he sheltered American airmen during the Nazi occupation. The family fled Communist Yugoslavia in 1951, and Vuckovich arrived in San Francisco at the age of 14.

The city boasted a vibrant jazz community, with which he was already familiar from broadcasts behind the Iron Curtain by the Armed Forces Radio Service. Once in San Francisco, he was fully committed to becoming a jazz musician.

"I'm going out to the Patio Ballroom and the Paramount Theatre," he said. "I'm listening to Oscar Peterson and Miles Davis. That was my schooling."

Vuckovich attended Lincoln High School, which had

***"Mr. Vuckovich mixed a mainstream swinging attack, romanticism that bordered on the expansive Erroll Garner manner, a strong blues sensitivity and exotic reflections of his native Yugoslavia."***

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an advanced music department with an instructor who had ties to the jazz community. It was



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PARSONS

***Renowned jazz pianist Larry Vuckovich will play at the Cameo Cinema in St. Helena on Sunday, Sept. 10.***

through the school that he was introduced to Guaraldi, who was by then a well-known pianist.

Guaraldi saw the talent and the desire and took Vuckovich on as his only student.

Through Guaraldi and Cal Tjader's wife, Vuckovich was introduced to other musicians, including Jon Hendricks. During the late 60s and the 70s, he toured Europe, spent time in New York and returned to San Francisco as one of the nation's top jazz pianists.

He and his wife came to Calistoga almost 20 years ago after being priced out of the market in San Francisco.

Vuckovich remains busy pro-

fessionally. He'll be performing the works of Thelonious Monk at the San Francisco Jazz Festival in October and will be at Yoshi's in Oakland in December.

Closer to home, he'll play at the Cameo Cinema in St. Helena on Sunday, Sept. 10.

But what about that first gig? "We used to play sometimes at this gym in Chinatown," Vuckovich recalled. "I was playing with John Handy then. It was a dance, so they wanted us to swing, you know, but John stood up, and we started to improvise, and this guy came running out from the end of the gym, yelling at us. 'No bebop! No bebop!'"