

Best of City's jazz past

Kimball's concerts cover more than four decades

By Philip Elwood
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

WE'RE RESIDENT musicians," said pianist Larry Vuckovich on Wednesday night as he debuted the first of four presentations at Kimball's, announced as the "San Francisco Retrospective All-Star Jazz Festival — 1950-1991."

Vuckovich, bassist Al Obidinski, drummer John Markham, tenor saxist Pee Wee Claybrook and clarinetist Vince Cattolica (most of them often colleagues over the past 30 years) played wonderful stuff from The City's jazz past, and the crowd, most of them also from the jazz past, loved every minute of it.

The evening's first set at Kimball's not only confirmed the integrity of our local mainstream community, it also reminded us of the endless attraction of Duke Ellington's compositions — to performer and listener alike.

"In A Mellotone" proved a perfect early-set swinger, allowing especially the two reeds — Cattolica's clarinet, Claybrook's tenor — to match musical wits in swapped

choruses, backup riffs and bright chase-choruses.

"C Jam Blues" (Barney Bigard's tune that was born as "C Blues") gave the ad hoc quintet a chance to roam not only the modern swing era's potentials, but also considerable bebop stuff.

"This music is too good to be sitting home to," said leader Vuckovich in one of his many delightful, if incongruous, remarks. He was right. Claybrook, who played the old Strekfus line that plied the Mississippi for a number of decades, performed according to the old book.

The notes were right, the harmonic comprehension still mellow after all these years. And when Pee Wee got into "Stardust" (verse and all), the 50 or 60 folks in the house sat back, overflowed with such fine emotional playing.

Cattolica moved smoothly into "In a Sentimental Mood" (Ellington '35) with stronger ideas than BG ever got on the grand tune. And the band played on — "Serenade in Blue," "St. Louis Blues," a slow riff-blues. Fine performances all the way.

The remaining festival events at Kimball's feature Benny Miller and Chuck Travis, and Cattolica with trumpeter Allen Smith. On Saturday, with Omar Clay on drums, and Smith, Obidinski, Vuckovich, Carl Lockett (guitar) and Peck Allmond (trumpet), the series ends on a modern note.