



parlor showcase

Story by Laura Preble
Photography by Paul Grupp

Sue Palmer, San Diego's Queen of the Boogie Woogie piano, is perched above the crowd at a local café in what she calls "the go-go cage." Like a trio of hot-jazz angels, she and her band hover above the coffee-sipping crowd and send down heavenly beats and blues tinged with just enough of the devil in them to make a listener want to testify.

But Palmer doesn't consider herself above the crowd, an elite jazz snob. Although she's obviously gifted as a pianist and entertainer, her message about music is a simple one, devoid of ego and pretense: music heals, musicians are healers, and everybody could use a little of that medicine.

"I grew up in a real musical family," Palmer says. "And it wasn't perfect — but everybody played music and it always lifted everyone's spirits."

This mission of carrying music forward and passing it on to future generations resonates in Palmer's choice of work: she's a woman of the twenty-first century playing boogie-woogie piano tunes that were written by, for the most part, old black men and women from an era when live music was entertainment, not window dressing or background on a movie set.

At North Park's Caffé Calabria, home of the go-go cage (actually a second story loft above the main room), Palmer treats the java drinkers each week to a trip backward in time when music was an integral part of socializing, dining, and just being. On a recent night, the homey feel of velvet throw pillows, a crackling fireplace, and the scent of fresh-roasted coffee mingled with the soul-soothing tunes dished out by Palmer and her fellow missionaries, vocalist Deejha Marie and bassist Sharon Shufelt. But this wasn't a hushed, reverent concert performance for a bunch of well-heeled intellectuals; the audience was as varied as the coffee menu and the tunes. A gaggle of excited kids perched in a booth for a birthday party (and shared the cake with everybody in the place); a man with a slobbery dog sat outside chatting with a friend; a mom and her eight-year-old daughter ate a sandwich together; couples chatted and sampled each other's desserts. It was like an old-time family living room, where all the generations gathered after dinner around the piano, sang a tune or two, celebrated milestones, and made the day better by sharing the company.

Palmer is a serious musician, but part of her charm is her approachability. When you hear her play, it feels as if she's playing for you. And this, perhaps, is part of her mission: to get people to appreciate the human connection of live music, and to pass that appreciation on to the future audience.

"It isn't just like turning a knob," she says. "A lot of people don't play music in their homes. If they [children] don't see you doing it or appreciating it, they won't have that mentality. A lot of the music that kids like is so elec-

tronic, you can't just spontaneously start doing it."

Palmer has honed her skill over many years, and she recognizes the value of that long apprenticeship, something lacking in the Britney Spears' world of instant fame and fortune, which depends more on a flat stomach than on a sharp technique. And this is one reason she's shied away from established record companies, choosing instead to produce and market her own CDs and concerts.

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"I'm not sure a record deal is the way to go for me. I'm trying to work the Internet and sell through catalogs. It seems that with self-produced I can make more money. I probably could get a record deal somewhere, but they expect you to tour six months of the year. It's a hard life; it's difficult to have children and friends."

Instead, Palmer picks and chooses her tour dates, often with blues diva Candye Kane. "I usually go on one cool tour a year somewhere I've never been. Last year she [Kane] got me to go to the Ascona Jazz Festival, a traditional jazz festival in Switzerland. We had a private party in Guam at the French embassy one night. This year I'm doing a couple weeks with her in Prague and Germany."

Not surprisingly, Palmer's brand of vintage jazz is

Sue Palmer Heavenly from a Jazz

more appreciated in Europe than here in the U.S., where it was born. While in towns the size of San Diego, music clubs used to spring up like mushrooms. Today they've been replaced with the more popular (and cheaper to run) venues touting house music and deejays.

"It's pretty much like that everywhere," she says. "Everybody takes local people for granted. San Diego has fantastic musicians here — world-class people like Charles McPherson, James Moody, the Cheathams, Candye Kane." While overseas these acts draw huge crowds of adoring fans, here, "people take them for granted."

"American producers aren't willing to invest," Palmer says, "because they only want what is already a proven formula for instant success. I don't know what the record companies think. People don't just get good all of a sudden. You have to play in places where you can make mistakes. They don't invest any time in the artists. The record business is really not friendly to grooming talent. It's corporate and money oriented."

Perhaps that corporate focus on the bottom line is



Sue with her band Tobacco Road, which she fronted from 1986-1994. Left to right: Eric Hybertsen, Sharon Shufelt, Preston Coleman, April West, Phil Shopoff, Sue Palmer

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mer Beats Angel



one reason Palmer has doggedly stuck to her principles when it comes to music. In the era of Clear Channel monopolization of radio airplay, Palmer notes that people “only get one point of view and whole genres get dropped.” And because her mission depends on bringing the music to audiences in a real, tangible way, she has steered clear of the factory-produced *American Idol* brand of insipid pop. But there is hope.

“The whole record business is changing right now. We’re in the middle of that.

All these things are happening on the Internet. The style of music I play isn’t real top 40ish. Never has been. Getting a record and producing it and getting distribution is also becoming passé. You can’t tour as easily. There



Sue Palmer and Preston Coleman

aren’t that many venues to book yourself in across the country.”

So, reaching fans through the Internet is one way to break those barriers and find a whole new generation of fans. Taking a trip through Palmer’s website is like stepping into a retro time machine that is history revisited: a photo of the Motel Swing maven in a ’30s style hat and dress coexist with a mini-trailer for a new animated feature, *Attack of the Killer Tikis from Outer Space*, for which Palmer wrote the soundtrack and on which she

perched in her go-go cage at the Caffé Calabria, rattling the roof with a taste of music served up the way it used to be. With a joy and passion missing in so many pop artists, watching the Queen of Boogie Woogie do her thing is worth its weight in Missy Elliott’s bling-bling. So grab a kid, get a sandwich, and start helping recruit the next generation of live music aficionados while people like Sue Palmer are still around to testify.

For complete scheduling information, check out Sue Palmer’s website: www.suepalmer.com and also the calendar on page 14.



Sue in a beehive hairdo and Candy Kane

performs with her Motel Swing Orchestra. As usual, Palmer manages to take the past, tweak it slightly, and turn it into something hip, as she did with her *Soundtrack to a B Movie* album and the more recent *Live at Dizzy’s*. In checking out the site, fans also find out that Palmer’s first album, *Boogie Woogie and Motel Swing*, was nominated for both Best Blues Album and Best Jazz Album at the 2000 San Diego Music Awards. *Soundtrack to a B Movie* was nominated for Best Blues Album in 2001 and *Live at Dizzy’s* was named Best Blues Album in 2003.

Not exactly a fringe artist, Palmer is still looking for a way to attract a fan base worthy of her talent, especially in San Diego. “People don’t drink as much, so they don’t want to go out,” she states simply. “That’s how they [clubs] paid for a lot of that entertainment. People used to go out and support that sort of thing. Maybe that’s when I was younger and people went out more, and now I’m over 50, people who might be following me don’t because they have to stay home and make their kids do their homework. It’s difficult to draw. You have to keep finding new audiences.”

Palmer also remembers a time when playing what musicians call a steady gig was a regular occurrence. “Things have really changed since I first started. Some of my friends whom I met at that time were professional musicians with engagements playing five nights a week for months. Now, unless you’re at another level — like playing Caesar’s Palace — that doesn’t happen. It’s hard to get even a once-a-week gig now.”

Despite the obstacles, Sue Palmer isn’t one to com-



Woodcut illustration: Julie Warren