Travel and Adventure: Jazz it up in Sacramento

by David B. Goldman

If it's just Arnold Schwarzenegger and politics, lobbyists and budget deficits, which come to mind when you think of California's capital city, Sacramento, then think again.

By the time I drove off the freeway and dropped into the downtown section of California's tree-lined capital for the first time on a Memorial Day weekend, nearly a decade ago, and heard the luscious wail of a hot clarinet coming off the street, I'd already learned my own Sacramento lesson. Which is that if you want a hotel room in the city on Memorial Day weekend, which this year is May 25-28, you'd best book it right away, since those days mark America's biggest, swingingest jazz gathering, the annual Sacramento Jazz Jubilee.

STRAIGHT AHEAD - If you love jazz, then you want to be part of the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee each May. Here a Dixieland jazz band plays for the crowd. CNS Photo courtesy of David B. Goldman. KAZOO YOU - Sacramento Jazz Jubilee fans chime in with their own tones during the four-day hot music festival. CNS Photo courtesy of David B. Goldman.

STRUMMIN' THE OLD BANJO - The banjo is one of the most popular instruments of the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee. CNS Photo by David B. Goldman. Beginning 34 years ago with a handful of bands playing mostly traditional Dixieland jazz pretty much as a party on the banks of the Sacramento River, the four-day event, usually basking in the warm, early summer breezes coming off the water, has grown to more than 100 bands and today draws over 100,000 visitors.

By Friday afternoon the politicians have fled the capital and we jazz enthusiasts have taken over. We flood the city from all over the country, arriving by car, by RV and by plane. We're wearing madras shorts, tank tops, hats and lots of suntan lotion. We've come for the music, for a good time and, perhaps even more, for this pure slice of Americana, to revel in America's indigenous music, perhaps the country's major contribution to world culture.

The musical menu has expanded over the years. Today, in addition to classic Dixieland two-step out of New Orleans, we'll get "straight ahead" jazz Kansas City style, big bands a la Benny Goodman, the string stylings of small groups following the work of Gypsy jazz legend Django Reinhardt, a smattering of gospel and blues, ragtime piano soloists, red hot mamas who belt it out all over town, a dash of cooler trio music, some salsa and several zydeco groups.

True, the annual weekend headliner is not necessarily a jazz icon, but more likely an aging name with links to jazz, a name like the Ink Spots or Steve Allen, with this year's star being the Rebirth Band of New Orleans.

For us jazz aficionados, this might just be the best place in the country in which to enjoy our favorite music. Especially for those of us who love the music but hate to sit for very long in a concert hall or a nightclub seat. Sacramento hosts over 30 venues, and on this weekend jazz bursts out of small green parks downtown and from classic old movie theaters, from the decks of a refurbished riverboat and out of hotel ballrooms, from rumbling caverns under the freeways, from nightclubs and from tented parking lots. If you don't enjoy what you're hearing in one place, then all you have to do is get up and move on, either by foot or aboard the bus shuttles continually moving from venue to venue.

You caught the Chicago Six at the Top of the Hyatt up by the Capitol and you loved them? You can follow the group around all weekend, catching them several times in the same day. Although, even at a large locale like the Firehouse Courtyard downtown in Old Sacramento, there can be a line for a popular returning group, like the costumed musicians who call themselves Igor's Jazz Cowboys.

Those of us who like our music "straight ahead" are marking our schedule so we know where and when to find Tom Saunders and his Emperors Jazz Band. His sidemen are some of the best anywhere in jazz, guys like Chuck Hedges on clarinet, Russ Phillips on trombone, Jake Hanna on drums, Paul Keller on bass and Johnny Varro on piano.

We'll be standing at the back of the room by the bar with a cold beer in one hand and a dripping Italian sausage sandwich in the other, the food and drink most likely dished out by one of the nearly 4,000 volunteers who put the Jubilee together. That's if we haven't already filled up on barbecued oysters, grilled pork ribs, hamburgers and corn dogs , which are seemingly everywhere.

This year, as every year, features several bands from overseas, like Paco Gatsby's guys from Guatemala and the jazz band from Leningrad. They'll be joining musicians from closer to home, bands such as the High Sierra Jazz Band from California's own Three Rivers, the Quartet from the Hot Club of San Francisco and the Jazz Ensemble from Travis Air Force Base. The tunes will be mostly the classics. You just can't get away from "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Beale Street Blues" or "Avalon."

And the dancers, did I mention the dancers? Many of the music spots have dance floors, and it's no secret that swing dancing is "in" these days. You've got the younger couples, arriving with their dance shoes in hand, some of them obviously fresh out of dancing class, but nearly all vigorously into practiced routines. Fabulous to watch. They'll dance all weekend long. Watching them is like watching the choreography from a really

good 60-year-old musical.

But my own favorites are the oldsters, the white-haired couples who have clearly been together forever, still dancing beautifully, always perfectly in step with one another - even if they are only on the floor for the slower numbers. They're in for a treat this year, since on Saturday night several of the venues are going to feature Glen Miller-style rhythms.

In the background the shimmering, recently refinished Capitol dome shines in the center of blossom-filled Capitol Park. The park is where I go to get away from it all, to stretch out in the quiet warmth of early summer in California's capital. Although even here you can hear music from the Hyatt Regent Hotel across the street on a lazy, music-filled weekend in the Golden State's capital.

Weekend passes, all four days: $100. Half or full day passes also available. For information: Tel: 916-372-5277, www.sacjazz.com.

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