

Column

Al Martinez ... On Everything Else: Jazz and a Crescent Moon

It was one of those nights when someone passing through the Canyon says to himself, "I want to live here." That usually comes about when the Valley's too hot and the ocean too foggy and Topanga exists in weather of its own, remembering the cool of winter but anticipating summer.

But it wasn't just the meteorological biome that made the night special. I don't even recall what the temperature was, actually, only that we wore light jackets and weren't too cold or too warm. What intrigued me was all of it put together: Topanga, a non-intrusive crescent moon and jazz.

It was one of those moments you remember in some detail even though you might forget your cat's name and your wife's birthday. You walk into a place, the Canyon Bistro in this case, and there's a guy in the corner riffing on an electric guitar making magic to an almost empty outdoor seating area.

That's what we walked into the other night at the Bistro, and I have to tell you that I got into a mellow mood real fast listening to him. Jazz is the kind of music that talks to you and I was hearing it say let go, relax, soar with the sound to a place you've never been on a night that never was.

The man doing all this to me on this perfect night was a jazz guitarist who calls himself Edwing. He was sitting on the floor against a wall impassively plucking at the instrument, its echo lingering over a small Wednesday night crowd as friends at a nearby table listened with the kind of attentiveness just naturally paid to a master. One of the friends was Yvonne Butler, a woman in a bright yellow, wide-brimmed summer hat and yellow summer smock, a vocalist who has sung with the Edwing Trio, and who sang on this night.

We came in a group – my wife, Cinelli, and two daughters, Cindy and Linda – to have dinner and weren't anticipating music with the food and good wine. Larry Cohn's dinners stand alone as far as I'm concerned and we go there often. But I've never been there on a jazz night. It was an added incentive to mellow out and be transported to one of those mystical places of memory that jazz can evoke.

I was listening to Edwing riff idly but intensively, which is where all bravura performances are born, with both ease and concentration that transcends the moment, making it special. He suddenly seemed to pull away from wandering through the chords and began playing "As Time Goes By." If there's one piece of music in the world that will carry me through a thousand memories, it's that one. I can get positively dreamy listening to it and remembering a rainy night in San Francisco when Cinelli and I were young and the future was unrolling like a scroll of time.

Edwing played other pieces that evening, like "Misty" and "The More I See You," as the last of the heavy traffic faded on the Boulevard, leaving the night to music, but it was "As Time Goes By" that got to me. That stormy night in San Francisco found us in a club called Blackhawk awaiting the arrival of Billie Holiday. She didn't show up when she was supposed to and the place was almost empty when she finally did. Only Cinelli and I and a couple of friends were hanging in there listening to Cal Tjader on vibes filling in.

Finally, like two hours late, Holiday wandered in through a side door half stoned, her hair and clothing damp. One could only guess what she'd been doing. She didn't say a word, but just stood at the mike and began singing like a little girl in pain, which maybe she was. She sang steadily for what seemed like half of the remaining night, but it was the tune from "Casablanca" that remains all these years later, evoking perfect visions of the City long ago.

So I want to thank Larry Cohn for having Edwing and Butler at the Bistro, he graying and pony tailed, she in dazzling yellow. They provided the stimulus to lose myself for a moment under the stars, with music as sweet as honey in hot tea and that silly little crescent moon shining bravely in a windless Topanga sky.

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