

Harmony Among the Redwoods

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LONG BEFORE the 50-year-old camp comes into sight, music wafts through the redwoods and across Austin Creek the strains of a brass quartet, string trios and jazz ensembles meld into a single, indescribable melody that surges and ebbs on the breeze.

“It’s almost like music overtakes you amongst the magnificent trees,” says Cazadero Performing Arts Camp founder Bob Lutt. “You hear music all through the grove.”

Some 100,000 young musicians have crossed Cazadero’s signature suspension bridge over the years. They gazed down at the babbling stream, traipsed their way across the swaying bridge and burst into excited laughter at the prospect of another summer session at Caz, sleeping under the stars and making music under the towering old-growth redwoods.

On this particular morning, a string group rehearses in “Cello Grove.” Trumpets and saxes hone their improvisation skills at the lodge, while the orchestra works on Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Capriccio Espagnol” in the bandshell under a soaring, sail-like awning.



Sherry LaVars/Times



Where music takes root

Tepees and redwoods

Jazz, the camp dog, bounds across the campgrounds, and the smell of Sloppy Joes wafts from the cafeteria, where the kitchen crew all musicians too are whipping up lunch.

And young musicians, such as Danville sixth-grader and repeat camper Keli Kahawaii, revel in the whole experience. “I thought I was going to have lots of fun, definitely, but it was thrilling,” he says. “Me and (my friend) Nick really liked it, of course, because how couldn’t you? We told everyone at school.”

It was 1955 when Lutt, Berkeley High’s just-hired band director, and his young wife, Beth, first discovered the rustic encampment near Guerneville. The camp had housed the infamous “Bohemian Grove” in the late 19th century, but when the Lutts came upon Caz, it was a 30-year-old summer camp owned by the city of Berkeley.

“We grew up on the plains of Nebraska,” says Bob. “And here were these magnificent trees.”



Dan Honda/Times

Inspired, Lutt asked the city if he could create a two-week music camp for his Berkeley High teens and he invited members of the San Francisco Symphony, who didn't have a summer season back then, to join them that first summer of 1957. They brought their families and taught music under the redwoods. It was, he says, "a perfect mix."

The blend included the Lutts' growing family. Beth remembers bathing her young children in a camp washtub, and soothing fussy babies in the misty early morning hours, when fog draped the 1,500-year-old trees in "a forest primeval feeling."

"The next year, Berkeley High's orchestra reserved a week, too. Then the choir came. In six years, we took over the entire summer," says Bob. "It was very, very rustic tepees. We built new frame tents, a dormitory, a bandshell. It was just sort of a love affair."

Children slept under the stars, cavorted in the creek's dammed-up swimming hole and played music in the grove. They built friendships that lasted into adulthood. And their connections permeated every facet of Bay Area music, from the San Francisco Symphony, Opera and Ballet orchestras to Tower of Power and virtually every school bandroom.

It was Caz faculty, for example, who first came up with the idea of a professional baroque chamber orchestra composed entirely of period instruments. The result: San Francisco's internationally renowned Philharmonia Baroque, founded by the late Laurette Goldberg.

As Cazadero's 50th anniversary approaches, the people who toted musical instruments across that swaying suspension bridge all sing a similar refrain. They speak of music, magic and trees.

The Caz connection

"It's about the camaraderie, the caring, the nurturing, the vision and the magic," says Norm Dea, director of Walnut Creek's Las Lomas High School music program. "Cazadero is about inspiring the total student."

Randy Porter, music director of Oakland's Westlake Middle School, talks about the sheer "magic" of playing and teaching "amongst the old-growth, giant redwoods." And Orinda Intermediate School conductor Greg Mazmanian recalls the emotional impact of playing under the trees and in the woodsy bandshell both as a camper and later as a conductor and father of a camper, daughter Rose.

"Every morning they had Reveille, every evening they had Taps," he said. "I was the only violinist ever to play Taps. I was so into it."

These days, Doris Fukawa divides her time between the top post at the Crowden School, Berkeley's prestigious music academy and private school, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music faculty, and performance engagements with the San Francisco Symphony and Opera orchestras.



Dan Honda/Times



Dan Honda/Times

But that path began in 1969 with a camper scholarship to Caz. It was “an entry point into a whole different world,” she says; not just classical music, but jazz, funk and rock.

“It was a very powerful place for me,” says the Cazadero board member. “Music becomes part of the fabric of your life. You have the freedom to be who you are.”

Caz jazz teacher Jon Brummel calls Cazadero the “musical mafia of the Bay Area” because so many of the area’s musicians have crossed paths there. There’s a personal angle, too Brummel met his wife, Liz, when they were both on staff. They were married in 2000 in the Cazadero bandshell.

“You made friendships,” says Liz, who teaches music in the Lafayette schools, “that literally have lasted us all the years.”

That includes years when Cazadero was more of an idea than a place. In the mid-1970s, after a disagreement with the city of Berkeley about the direction of the camp a venue for serious music students versus a more generalized approach the Lutts’ music camp moved, first to Mendocino, then Danville and finally to Marin. But Lutt’s children, who literally grew up at camp, had other plans.

Resurrection

In 1995, Bill Lutt, then executive director of the Berkeley Symphony, phoned up 50 former “Caz kids” to see if they would be interested in resurrecting the music camp of their youth: More than 35 showed up with open checkbooks, open hearts and work gloves.

The next summer, hundreds of young musicians traipsed across the suspension bridge at Cazadero Performing Arts Camp once again. They stopped to gaze at babbling Austin Creek, then poured into the grove. They set up their cots on the tent cabin decks and propped teddy bears atop sleeping bags. And a new generation of kids began doing all those Caz things once more.

Several of those young musicians were the children of Oakland City Council staffer Kathy Dwyer, who became executive director in 2001. Dwyer was just 13 the first time she crossed the camp’s bridge herself, toting a huge string bass. Back then, the creek was dammed to form swimming holes





for canoeing and swimming, she says. Campers would cross the bridge to buy cherry Cokes and french fries at the old Elim Grove restaurant, and vie for clean-cabin points to win milkshakes.

Floodwaters swept the dams away long ago, but the milkshake contests are still a beloved part of camp. Hans und Franz, the ridiculous bodybuilders of “Saturday Night Live” fame, are resurrected every skit night. The camp store still sells Choco Tacos. And the stacking cup game and cacophonous sound of falling cups still drives grown-ups nuts.

UC Santa Cruz student Heather Knight was a 9-year-old flutist and first-time camper when Cazadero reopened in 1996. This is the first summer she’s not on staff, she says, and it feels strange. But her younger

brothers, both El Cerrito High students, are working in the camp kitchen. She’ll see them next Sunday when Caz throws open its doors, so to speak, for 50th reunion festivities a concert, luncheon and the chance to see old friends and reminisce about the music, campfires and goofy scavenger hunts.

Like Knight, nearly every staff member is a former camper who just keeps coming back.

“Once they came, they didn’t want to leave,” says camp director Jim Mazzaferro. “I didn’t.”

Mazzaferro, a string bass player who teaches music at Elk Grove’s Sheldon High School, first came to camp in 1970. Cazadero sort of rhymed with Mazzaferro, he says with a laugh, but it was the camp experience that hooked him.

“It was the music in this setting,” he says. “I was finally with a group of people who were passionate about the same thing I was passionate about. You finally felt like you belonged. You fit in. You mattered.”

Mazzaferro’s wife, Anita, also a former camper, heads the kitchen crew. It’s a job the former Marriott food production manager acquired by default in 2001, when Jim took over the camp directorship. Everything that could go wrong did that summer, including torrential rainfall and a series of culinary mishaps. Cook No. 1 quit the night before the camp began. His replacement promptly burned himself so badly he couldn’t work, and the third guy couldn’t cook at all.

Six years later, Anita’s still here, barbecuing tri-tip, assembling lavish pasta, taco and salad bars, and serving up Sloppy Joes. Their daughter is the girls’ camp dean and resident paramedic, and a son teaches bass.

Bob and Beth Lutt still come up for concerts from their Berkeley home. Granddaughter Sara Beth Lutt-Pournoor flies out from Minnesota every summer for camp. This year, she’s a counselor-in-training who says she “can’t imagine being anywhere else it’s amazing to watch these kids develop as musicians and people at the same time.”

Fifty years later, Cazadero plays on.

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