

Fusion

Music helps Bellino persevere

By Paul Freeman
Daily News Entertainment Writer



Singer/songwriter
Clara Bellino.

Photo / Chet Helms

At a glance

What: Clara Bellino performance
When: Sept. 19, 8 p.m.
Where: Cafe Du Nord, San Francisco
Tickets: \$8

When darkness threatens to eclipse the work of singer/songwriter Clara Bellino, somehow she finds her way to the light. The French-born performer and longtime Alameda resident has released her latest CD, "Embarcadero Love." The album touches on heavy subject matter, but the eclectic music soars in a rainbow of illuminating colors. Bellino created "Embarcadero Love" while living on a boat in the Oakland marina.

It was recorded in a number of East Bay locations. At her friend's studio, a fire broke out. There were tense days waiting to see if anything could be salvaged from a charred hard drive. Bellino had already expended her savings, and spent a great deal of time on the project. Fortunately, most of the brilliant work had survived. The rest, Bellino and her musicians recreated.

The album represents a leap forward from her days fronting local cult rock band The Flying Monkeys. "I produced this a little bit differently, took a bit more time, too."

Using intriguing instrumentation, she has integrated a delightful array of styles. Because she did so organically, it sounds natural, and her enchanting vocals enhance the musical panorama.

"When I record, I tend to not listen to anything else, to see what comes out of me. I thought more in terms of themes than the actual styles."

The themes reflect our times, delving into war and parted lovers. But Bellino finds an optimistic note. "I think hope comes out of most of them, no matter what the situation. I try to convey that. It's partly my nature. It's also what I think is entertainment. I don't really like songs that wallow in self-pity. I find it more fun when it's uplifting. I think that's what I have to contribute."

Dreams and interpretations

She wrote most of the songs, drawing from dreams, personal experience and invented characters. Among the finest are "Peaceful Solution" and "Potential Criminal." Also gracing the album are wondrous interpretations of tunes from Jackie DeShannon ("Come and Stay With Me"), Tom Waits ("Swordfish Trombone"), Smokey Robinson ("What's Too Much") and William Barnes ("Something Cool").

The album is dedicated to San Leandro jazz musician Larry Blackshire, who was brutally slain. He was the one who had selected "Something Cool" as a good choice for Bellino to sing.

Larry played piano for Bellino for a

year. "Larry was supposed to play a song at my wedding four years ago. He never showed up. He was actually murdered a week before the wedding."

Recording "Something Cool," a sultry little number, Bellino told keyboardist Jimi McKinney she wanted the song to sweat, to feel like they were in New Orleans.

"It was actually during a heat wave. The equipment overheated. We lost everything. We did it again and decided it was in the wrong key. So we transposed and did it again. Then the studio burned down."

Those "Something Cool" tracks were among the few that were not salvageable. So they rerecorded the song again. "I was determined to complete it, and I'm glad I did."

You can hear the entire album performed by Bellino at Cafe Du Nord. Her band features bassist Rustee Allen (Sly and The Family Stone, Bobby Womack), keyboardist Jimi McKinney (The Commodores), drummer Dante "Taz" Roberson (Eric Benet, Toni Tone), guitarist Dean Allen (The Delta Wires), background vocalist Leah Tysse (Leah Tysse Band and Glide Memorial), percussionist Jose Najera (Merle Saunders), trombonist Mike

Rinta (Sly and The Family Stone, Santana,) and guitarist Dan Sachs (The Flamingoes) is flying in from Virginia for the show.

She'll be doing some other numbers, including the premiere of "Hand in Hand," an unreleased '50s song penned by Bobby Sharp ("Unchain My Heart").

Making friends

"I met him three years ago — painted his apartment. We've become good friends. I'm helping him with various things he needs help with. At age 81, he just released his first album. It's fabulous. The other day, he said, 'Clara, do you have a minute? I've been thinking of this song for you.' It's beautiful."

Bellino also bonded with Chet Helms, legendary San Francisco promoter/manager. She helped care for him at the end. He was thrilled to see, just before his death, that his photos of Bellino had been used for the CD. It provided him with his first album cover credit.

"That meant the world to him. I wanted pictures where I could be myself. I was completely comfortable with him. He had that way about him. I separated from my husband a couple years ago and Chet was a great support for me. When I was miserable, I would go to Chet's and he would always take my mind off things. He could make the rest of the world disappear for a bit. And he was a real trouper."

So is Bellino. She's paid her dues. "I've had a lot of adventures. But it's been a lot of hard work, too. If I didn't truly love it, I wouldn't keep at it ... but I don't know of anything else I could do that would be so much fun."

Joy beams from Bellino's music. She studied piano as a youngster at the French National Conservatory, then seriously pursued classical guitar. "Music has always been able to get me through the moment better than anything else. It's always made me happy."

Bellino, who dreams of touring internationally, also works in the realm of voice-overs, commercials and films. On the last Friday of each month, she performs on the Blue & Gold Fleet's Alameda-Oakland-S.F. commuter ferry. It's a gig she greatly enjoys.

These days, she's relishing the release of "Embarcadero Love." "It's hard to describe the amount of effort that goes into a CD, from beginning to end, facing all the bumps in road. But it's so satisfying to finish it. And it means so much to me that Chet got to see it."

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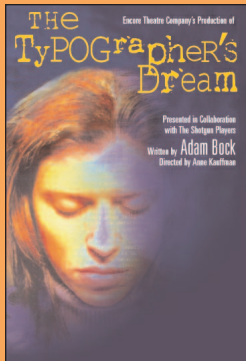
Sept. 16, 11 a.m.- 4 p.m.
Saturday Berkeley Farmer's Market
Center St. at Martin Luther King, Jr. Way
Free

The 2006 Berkeley Old Time Music Convention presents the String Band Contest, the cornerstone event of the "rollicking" four-day festival. Twenty old-time string bands will compete for agricultural prizes — also known as Berkeley Farmers' Market gift certificates. Bands travel from up and down the West Coast to provide Appalachian-style music. The competition takes place Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. This is a free event, open to the public. A crafts fair will also feature handmade gifts by local artists and craftsmen. Visit www.berkeleyoldtimemusic.org for more details.

"The Typographer's Dream"

Sept. 13 - Sept. 16, 8 p.m.
Ashby Stage
1901 Ashby Ave.
Berkeley
\$15-\$30

The Encore Theatre Company presents "The Typographer's Dream," a play that features a panel discussion among a typographer, geographer and stenographer. The play closes its run this weekend at the Ashby Stage. For tickets and more information, visit www.shotgunplayers.com.



Art Opening

Sept. 15 - Oct. 14
FLOAT
1091 Calcot Place, Unit #116
Oakland
Free

Self-taught artist Sally Rodriguez unveils her most spectacular mixed media piece to date at FLOAT on Sept. 15. Gods and Aeroplanes features Rodriguez's piece "Icarus," described as a present-day metaphorical tale. There will be a reception for the artist Sept. 16, from 6 to 9 p.m. at FLOAT, 1091 Calcot Pl., Unit #116. Visit www.thefloatcenter.com for more information.

The Peanut Butter Jam

Sept. 16-17, 10 a.m.- 5 p.m.
The New Zealander
1400 Webster St.
Alameda
Free admission

Alameda's stickiest music festival takes place this weekend, with performances by Eagle & Hawk, Apache Silk, Sun Kings and more. From rock 'n' roll to zydeco — everything's available. New Zealander restaurant will also host a Native American feast. Tickets for the dinner and show are \$20 and must be purchased in advance from The New Zealander at 1400 Central Ave. or calling the restaurant at (510) 769-8555. The music festival is free.

Bonnie Raitt

Sept. 17, 7:30 p.m.
Sleep Train Pavilion
2000 Kirker Pass Rd.
Concord
\$20-\$75

American blues and R&B singer/songwriter Bonnie Raitt visits Concord Sunday for her Souls Alike tour. Supporting her will be blues singer Keb' Mo'. Visit www.ticketmaster.com or www.stubhub.com for tickets.



HILLER
AVIATION
MUSEUM



The Real Guardians The US Coast Guard

Saturday Sept. 16 ~ 10am-1pm
Special lecture presentation at 11am

Come meet the men and women that defend our waters, fight the war on terror and are there for us in the worst conditions

The Hiller Aviation Museum

601 Skyway Rd, San Carlos
650-654-0200 www.hiller.org

Carpaccio

Great Italian Menu. The decor created by Pat Kuleto



Ciya Martorana greets you like family when you open the door and enter this wonderful restaurant on Crane Street. Carpaccio's Northern Italian menu is fairly priced with delicious appetizers, entrees and desserts to choose from. Most importantly, the ambiance is warm and comfortable, perfect for a romantic meal or a business dinner.



1120 Crane St., Menlo Park
322-1211