

Sparks January 2021

Please attend our annual meeting

Free to the Public via Zoom on Sunday, January 31, 2021 at 3 p.m.

Our annual meeting begins with some business (see the agenda below) and then features a talk focusing on the city's jazzy past.

A Co-op Nightclub? Lu Watters' Great Experiment

A Presentation by Chris Sterba,

Lecturer in American Studies, San Francisco State University

Attend via Zoom with the following link

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88911070573?pwd=QXdydDI1TnZHVGMzLzduNVV4TIR2UT09>

Meeting ID: 889 1107 0573

Passcode: 236872

One tap mobile

+16699006833,,88911070573#,,,,,0#,,236872# US (San Jose)

+13462487799,,88911070573#,,,,,0#,,236872# US (Houston)

Lu Watters and the Yerba Buena Jazz Band

By Chris Sterba



Lu Watters and the Yerba Buena Jazz band perform at Hambone Kelly's in El Cerrito in the late 1940s. Courtesy of Chris Treadway.

The El Cerrito nightclub Hambone Kelly's played a major role in the revival of New Orleans-style jazz during the late 1940s.

The club was also unique in that it was run as a cooperative by the members of the Yerba Buena Jazz Band, who not only performed several nights a week, but also lived on the premises and cooked and served meals to hundreds of patrons.

The driving force behind the co-op was Bay Area native Lu Watters, the band's larger-than-life cornet player and founder. Tremendously talented, Watters toured the country with a swing band when he was a teenager and by his mid-twenties was writing arrangements for his own dance orchestras.

Watters' true passion, however, was the intense sound and freedom of early jazz, which was practically forgotten as a genre when big band swing took over in the late 1920s.

Lu's interest began while he was on tour in New Orleans. There he met and jammed informally with older African American musicians and began to collect as many recordings of the original artists as possible.

He soon found kindred spirits in San Francisco, creative musicians like himself who were disgusted with the commercial dance tunes they played night after night. Lu organized after-hours jam sessions and then a full-time gig for the group at the Dawn Club in San Francisco.

The seven-man Yerba Buena Jazz Band then formed and quickly developed a huge following. Although World War II broke up the group when the men enlisted in the armed forces, the movement they helped to inspire, the great revival of traditional jazz, was only just beginning.

The Rise and Fall of Hambone Kelly's

It took some time after the war to find a new venue where the band could perform regularly. Somehow Watters heard about the vacant Hollywood Club in El Cerrito, the big, window-less blockhouse recently operated by the famous stripper Sally Rand.

The building's racy past appealed to Lu, as did as the neighborhood where it was located, known as "Little Reno." Its many gambling establishments and bars along San Pablo Avenue resembled Storyville, the New Orleans district made famous by Lu's hero, Louis Armstrong.

In early 1947, Watters and the other Yerba Buena Jazz Band members formed a cooperative, each investing \$1,250 to completely renovate the club. On their own, they installed a massive dance floor, a 100 foot-long bar, and a kitchen large enough to serve hundreds of customers every night.

They also converted the building's many back rooms (believed to have been used for prostitution) into living spaces, where all of the musicians and their families lived at one time or another over the next three years.

When Hambone Kelly's opened on June 20, 1947 it was a big success. The music appealed to patrons of all ages, ranging from Cal students to old-time jazz fans -- and even to an under-aged Clint Eastwood, who fondly remembered, "I'd stand in the back to hear Lu Watters and Turk Murphy."

It was important to the band to educate its audiences about the music's origins. The names of dozens of songs were painted on the wall behind the bar; the club offered ragtime era dance lessons; and silent films were shown with the band providing the sound track.

Watters also started a music label and made several live recordings at the club. Most significantly, the band invited many of the African American musicians who created the music, important figures like Kid Ory and Bunk Johnson, to perform as concert headliners.

By 1949, however, the club was struggling. Some of the musicians had never been thrilled with the co-op arrangement and left to form their own bands.

And Watters was not a great businessman. Despite the crowds, the club never seemed to generate any real profit. As one band member recalled, “it was the biggest house party in history.”

Hambone Kelly’s closed on New Year’s Eve, 1950. Though only thirty-nine years old, Lu Watters was worn out by the experience, and he retired from the music business. The cooperative experiment in El Cerrito was his last great effort as an influential chronicler and advocate of early jazz.

For more on Lu Watters and Hambone Kelly’s, see Jon Bashor’s article for the Historical Society: <http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/hambonekellys.html>

Agenda, Historical Society Annual Meeting

3 pm. Sunday, January 31, 2021

Via Zoom

1. **Welcome** by president Dave Weinstein.

Dave thanks departing board member and former vice president Chris Horn for his service on the board from 2018-2020, and for his historical writing and tour leading dating to 2017.

2. **Treasurer’s report**, Pat Shaw.
3. **Goals for 2021**: Dave Weinstein..
4. **Public comments**. Invite people to speak.
5. **Election of officers**. Any nominations from the floor?

Total about 15 minutes for business meeting.

We offer for consideration this **slate of officers** for

2021: <http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/boardmembers.html>

- a. **President** – Dave Weinstein, incumbent
 - b. **Vice President** –Chris Treadway, incumbent
 - c. **Secretary** – Dianne Brenner, incumbent
 - d. **Treasurer** – Pat Shaw, incumbent
 - e. **At Large** – Tom Panas, incumbent
 - f. **At Large** – Joanne Rubio, incumbent
 - g. **At Large** – John Falconer, incumbent
 - h. **At Large** – Pat Durham
2. Our **program**, A Co-Op Night Club??? Lu Watters’ Great Experiment, a presentation by historian Chris Sterba.

El Cerrito's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration



Hundreds march down Moeser Lane in El Cerrito, during a parade to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday, Jan. 19, 2004. Mark DuFrene, West County Times, Contributor: [ZUMA Press, Inc.](#) / Alamy Stock Photo

Monday January 18

“Expanding the Dream Toward Global Peace”

A Car Parade, Drive-In Theater Style. Stay in your car. Wear a mask. Social distancing required. Bring your own chair!

8:30 a.m. Gather at Del Norte BART, Key Boulevard and Knox Street.

10 a.m. Depart, car parade down San Pablo Avenue

11 a.m. Program and rally at El Cerrito Plaza BART. Music. Fun. Food. Entertainment. For information, Patricia Durham, 510-234-2518

Are you interested in providing financial support this volunteer-run parade? Contact Patricia Durham. Sponsors of the event including St. Peter Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the NAACP.

The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications, the Forge, which is a print publication, which we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication which we aim to produce monthly. Both hark back to one of El Cerrito's original settlers, William Rust, a blacksmith who worked at his anvil producing, among other things, sparks.

