

Kenny Cox boasts musical endeavors

By JIM WINDELL

Kenny Cox is an articulate spokesman for jazz musicians in the metropolitan area. A smart dresser, he looks right at home at Tweeney's Cafe in Birmingham where he plays piano in a duo or trio setting on weekends.

Cox has strong interests in the economics of music and clear insight into the finances of jazz. He advocates with verbal agility the music and the music business.



Kenny Cox on the piano is the main attraction during jazz-entertainment weekends at Tweeney's. (Photo by Jim Windell)

"I'M VERY SERIOUS that all artists become professional business people," he said, in his clipped and quiet voice, during a recent nighttime interview.

Concerned about self-determination in the arts, Cox does not blame society as much as the individual artist for poor subsidies to the arts, especially to the musician.

"Our society gives very little merit to artistic endeavors and you need only compare the subsidies in this country with those in other countries to know this is true," he said.

Cox has very little time for the artist or musician who wants the money but won't take the time to do the paperwork that goes with it. He would like to see all musicians receive a crash course in grantsmanship. But he has other plans up his sleeve.

"I THINK in the near future you will see one of the first cross-trade associations ever in this area. The trade association will deal with musicians in terms of continuing education, health and welfare," he said.

The trade association would not replace the musicians' union. "There are unions for jazz musicians, but jazz musicians have some particular kinds of problems socially and politically other musicians and artists don't have," he said.

In addition to economic and social concerns, Kenny Cox happens to be one of the finer jazz pianists in the area. He has appeared Fridays and Saturdays at Tweeney's for more than a year. Cox will continue for a long time in the future, said Tweeney's owner Yvonne Gill. The Cable-Nelson baby grand piano

newly ensconced in the center of the downtown Birmingham restaurant suggests the class that is found in the cafe, from the food to the ambience to the entertainment.

"Very few rooms give as much time and consideration to the music and the promotion," Cox said.

SOMETIMES the music, as in any restaurant, is secondary to the main business of feeding people elegantly. For Kenny Cox, this only presents an additional challenge. While he is willing to take requests, something which many jazz purists wouldn't think of doing, he is unyielding when it comes to the jazz he plays with his crisp, honed technique.

At times he is classical in his approach, but the swinging is never sacrificed, as he heats his way through a popular tune like "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?" or a jazz standard such as "A Train."

In a bossa-nova standard like "Wave," the notes wash back on themselves much like the waves of an ocean, with regular bass player Melvin Jackson providing support that acts as foundation and counterpoint.

Cox's tunes are often elegantly worked-out versions that are long and lingering. Sometimes he doesn't want to let go of a number, and his style helps the casual listener feel the same way.

Cox's piano style is a product of the variegated jazz world of the Motor City of the late '40s, '50s and '60s. Despite a classical-piano background, Cox found jazz always hovered around his consciousness somewhere.

"I BEGAN PIANO at the age of 7, but I didn't want to be a piano player. I wanted to play the trumpet like Louis Armstrong and Harry James," he said. "My mother, for whatever reason, told me I could have a trumpet and even take trumpet lessons if I first took the piano for three years. I did and she kept her promise."

An insistent piano teacher, recognizing a young child with musical talent, had him study piano at the Detroit Conservatory of Music where he would remain for eight years. In addition, he also took trumpet lessons, although he doesn't really know how his mother managed both piano and trumpet les-

'The idea of being a martyr is unfair and outdated. The artist must become a businessman.'

— Jazz musician Kenny Cox

sons when there were three other children in the family.

His jazz, he said, was picked up in the streets at the time he was taking classical lessons. "I had this friend in junior high school who was a trumpet player. Before band rehearsals at school, he would stand around and play a style of music I hadn't heard before. He introduced me to the funny music being played at that time by Miles Davis and Charlie Parker," Cox said.

Playing along with his friend meant a trumpet duo, which wasn't very practical. "One day he suggested I play some chords on the piano. That started my instruction in the improvisational art form," Cox recalled.

Going on to Cass Tech High School, he was in the music curriculum. When he finished in 1958 he immediately went on to the Detroit Institute of Musical Arts, the music college for the University of Detroit. He stayed in college for only a year, however.

"I GOT the bright idea I was going out on the road where I would make lots of money and then I could afford school. I never went back, and it seems like I've been on the road ever since," Cox said. Using New York as a base, he traveled with singer Etta Jones from 1961-68 as her accompanist.

Whenever he returned to New York City, though, he was able to work with some of the brightest lights in jazz of the '60s. He gigged with Philly Joe Jones, Roy Haynes, Joe Williams, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Kenny Dorham and Freddie Hubbard, among others.

"New York was musical Mecca

than," Cox said. "Those now-famous musicians were just the guy down the street."

In the late '60s Cox recorded two albums ("Introducing Kenny Cox" and "Multidirection") for Blue Note Records. Critics praised the records, with noted jazz writer Nat Hentoff saying, "Cox's playing reveals a broad knowledge of jazz roots along with searching openness to new possibilities of enlarging and reshaping the language."

The buying public was somewhat less enthusiastic.

"SOME OF THE things we wanted to play were too adventurous and the recording dates were too constrained. So the company wound up with something they couldn't market anyway," he said.

Tending to feel he was losing his musical grip, Cox returned to Detroit to gather some perspective. Detroit is more laid back than New York, and getting yourself together a little more possible in this city, he said.

For the last 10 years, Cox has been gaining his perspective, as he has played around the city's jazz clubs and continued to get involved in the economic and social aspects of music.

Cox will continue at Tweeney's because of the challenge and the excellent working conditions. "It's an opportunity to present jazz to the uninitiated," he said. "Hopefully my music will be as palatable as the meal."

Benefit opens music store

Da Eastside Guitar Works, 16412 E. Warren, is celebrating its grand opening through Saturday with special musical performances each day.

Father Dustin and friends are featured Thursday; bluegrass with Jethro

Burns from Homer and Jethro, with his mandolin and the Bluegrass Boys, will take place Friday; with special musical performances each day.

The entertainment is free, with the musicians donating their time.

Imagination adds spark to the liveliest parties

Tom Schoenith revealed his and wife Diane's secrets of party-giving, last week at the Coffee & Conversation series at The Community House in Birmingham.

"Times are tough, but that doesn't mean you don't have to entertain. You can still do it with glamour," he said. Imagination more than money is called for, Schoenith said.

"I went to three steak-and-lobster dinners in a row last weekend. It was a little boring and it cost those people a lot of money. I'd rather have a great hamburger," he said.

Schoenith's illustrated talk began with slides showing ideas for party invitations, centerpieces and other creative touches.

"DON'T HESITATE to use things from around the house," he said. Paper plates were combined with center baskets for decoration. Candles were set in the most inexpensive of candle holders: bright red, real apples.

One of the suggestions was to prepare a cold dinner in advance, gift wrap each meal individually and put it in the refrigerator till party time.

Clever invitations included a firecracker made from a cardboard tube (Schoenith was born on the Fourth of July), or one shaped like a crystal ball ("Now that is a party you wouldn't miss").

One slide read: "Our Pet Peeves: Lengthy cocktail parties. Ambiguous dress. Not enough information given to RSVP. Don't get guests bombed." He recommends enclosing a stamped card for the RSVP.

After the slides, Schoenith took questions from the women in the audience, answering in his straightforward, amusing style.

What do you do about the guest who's late? "I serve that dinner without them. You cannot waste food," he said.

THE NEW After Nine Room at Cooper's Arms in Rochester is where the Metropolitan Repertory Theatre will make its home.

After a year of truck and van shows, the repertory company will open this weekend with "Sailor Beware," a musical revue conceived and directed by Robert Casemore of Birmingham.

Casemore and Eric Jones of Oak Park are partners in the theater group that is designed to fill a gap because "there is no cabaret entertainment in this area," Casemore said.

"We want to stress it is not dinner theater. It's a great alternative to Neil Simon."

The show, loosely, is about 20 American sailors who come into Am-



Ethel Simmons

sterdam from Brussels for two weeks on the town. Musical numbers will include international song hits, sung in English, with snatches of some lyrics in French, German and Spanish.

ROGER KNAPP, owner of Cooper's Arms at 306 Main, has revamped the former Uncle Bela's cocktail lounge in his restaurant. The After Nine Room now is filled with tables and chairs, both on the main floor and balcony, for intimate seating of 90.

The stage area has been redesigned and a new lighting system installed. Shows will change every eight weeks.

Casemore's partner Eric Jones said, "We encourage people to eat and drink during the show." Dinners will be served before and during the cabaret theater entertainment, offered Fridays and Saturdays beginning this weekend.

Productions will start after 9:30 p.m. For reservations call 651-2266.

The all-professional cast includes Penny Masouris of Detroit, John Heem of Troy, Jeanine Head of Dearborn, Sue

Chekaway of Lathrup Village, Walt Kozicki of Detroit and pianist Joe Mathia of Livonia.

GONZO THEATRE, the new satirical revue supposedly about Detroit, is at its funniest when the show actually does talk about Detroit and its environs.

Familiar names and places bring laughs more easily than other material in this production, which opened the new Stouffer's Showcase (in the old Grogshop) at Northland Inn, Southfield.

The cast is the best asset of Gonzo Theatre. The apparent leader of the clan, big, bespectacled Ralph Valatka; curly-topped, whimsical Beth Hall; and Hal Doyle, boyish with curls, and David Turrentine, boyish and blond, all perform with the prescribed zinnism.

But the material doesn't, in most cases, do them justice. Kind of a "Saturday Night Live," some of the bits are more tiresome than bold (such as the exhibitionist and voyeur who share facing apartments). Many knockouts go by so fast you feel like you're suffering jet lag.

The payroll says they're going to have new material every few weeks. I certainly hope so.

The better skits are the longer ones, including one about a guy from Hazel Park submitting to a bargain-priced, taped tour of paintings at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

VALATKA IS director of the Southfield Repertory Theatre, which is presenting "Gonzo Theatre." He has a charm that combines innocence and malevolence, with a voice that is greatly appealing.

The best part of the show came at the end when Valatka led the audience in a sing-along about Motown. "It takes a lot of nuts to make a town!"

If the end of the show could be switched to the beginning, that would get Gonzo Theatre off to a rousing start. It would make sense to have Valatka only the show by introducing the segments and getting cozy with the audience.

Gonzo Theatre includes a tasty Stouffer's dinner, tossed salad, roast beef with bread stuffing (or alternate entrees), broccoli, and dessert.

The evening includes dinner at 7:30, show at 9 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.



Tom Schoenith talks about parties with pizzazz.

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