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2.16.22
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SCENE IN FOCUS

Former GT photographer Michèle Benson traces the history of Santa Cruz music in epic documentary project

STEVE PALOPOLI P16

IN SESSION Michèle Benson interviews Mike Barnes for her documentary *'All Access—Music in the Cruz.'* PHOTO: STEVE DIBARTELOMEO





SCREEN TIME

Michèle Benson tells the story of the Santa Cruz music scene **BY STEVE PALOPOLI**

I'm standing in the parking lot of the Westside studio where Michèle Benson has been shooting her documentary about the history of the Santa Cruz music scene. We're waiting for her next interviewee to arrive, and she's telling me how this project has ballooned and sprawled in every direction, growing exponentially into something she couldn't have imagined when she first got the idea that she should preserve a few local musicians' stories for posterity. In six years, she's filmed interviews with more than 200 people, from every era of Santa Cruz music. And not just musicians—she's also interviewed the club owners, promoters, band managers, record-label heads, photographers, audio techs, instrument builders, recording-studio engineers, DJs and fans of the local scene. If there's anyone in the Santa Cruz music scene she hasn't talked to, she's probably trying to set up an interview with them right now—although god knows where she'll make room for it.

"I've got three 20-terabyte drives—full. Because I'm shooting three cameras, 4k high-def, for at least an hour to two hours each person," she says. "It's a gig a minute per camera. When I get done here, I go home and I download what

I've done. If I shoot for two hours, I go home and download for six. And that's not even looking at it."

In other words, this movie is her life. Not just the movie, which has the working title of *All Access—Music in the Cruz*, but everything swirling around it, including a web archive through which she plans to allow literal "all access" to these hundreds of hours of interviews she's shot for the film.

"I'm going to edit down each person's interview, and that'll live on a website called All Access Film Archives," says Benson. "Because there's no reason for me to be the only person that hears each one of these. They might get a couple minutes in the feature documentary, but there's so much that is profound. Like Rick Turner, who builds Renaissance guitars for Lindsey Buckingham, he told me all this really cool stuff that somebody who wants to be a luthier and is coming up the ranks would love to hear. So they're all gonna have their own little place. It'll be like our own Library of Alexandria, where you had all the scrolls, you know? And then people that are coming up can add the new bands—then it's a living library."

It's a hugely ambitious project, which she says could also include a compilation album of Santa Cruz music from subjects in the film.

There is so much to do to realize this vision, and it would be easy to be overwhelmed by it all. But when this afternoon's interview subject, Mike Barnes, walks up, Benson practically bounds into the studio with her trademark energy.

Barnes is a longtime local producer and songwriter who, among other accomplishments, worked for one of Santa Cruz's most revolutionary music companies, E-mu Systems. E-mu produced groundbreaking digital sampling synthesizers like the Emulator series, which through the '80s and '90s was used by a diverse range of artists like David Bowie, Stevie Nicks, New Order, the Residents, Herbie Hancock and Tangerine Dream. Many of the sounds on iconic '80s and '90s pop records like Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, Peter Gabriel's *So* and Depeche Mode's *Violator* were created using the Emulators; in the 2009 BBC 4 documentary *Synth Britannia*, the Pet Shop Boys' Neil Tennant revealed that every single sound on "West End Girls" besides the vocals was created using an Emulator 2.

Over the next 90 minutes, Barnes will spin an incredible tale of Santa Cruz's surprisingly huge role in the evolution of music technology from the late '70s to the 2000s. This is exactly the kind of largely unknown



SANTA CRUZ STORIES Singer Tammi Brown sits for her interview with Benson. The award-winning vocalist is one of the more than 200 people connected to the Santa Cruz music scene that Benson has filmed. PHOTO: MICHÈLE BENSON

wouldn't let you touch cameras until the middle of your junior year. I didn't want to learn theory forever," she says. "So I looked into San Jose State, and you could be hands on right away. Charles Chess was the film professor there, and he studied under Stanley Kramer. So I transferred to San Jose State, and I used to drive over the hill all the time. And the day I graduated from San Jose State, Jay Shore offered me the job as a photographer at *Good Times*."

Shore, of course, was the editor and publisher who started *GT*—"Santa Cruz's First Entertainment Paper," as the masthead proclaimed—in 1975. Benson arrived in the early days, and she loved the energy.

"I'd say it was a combination of the best Dream Team and the Wrecking Crew," she says of the staff then. "Richard Curtis was the first art director, and then Randy Nowell came in, but I was there as staff photographer through all those transitions. I'd not only go out and shoot everything for the paper—I mean, the restaurants, the music, the lead stories, the cover or whatever—but then I had to go back, develop the film, do the contact sheet, pick the shots, do the half-tones, make sure the art director still liked it. So it was an interesting time. But we worked really well as a unit. It was strong and I think the community resonated with *Good Times*."

Music, though, was her favorite thing to shoot, and she was often at the Catalyst, the Civic, the Coconut Grove and other local clubs several nights a week. She loved shooting up-and-coming local bands of the time like the Humans and Tao Chemical (which featured *GT*'s Rob Brezsny as frontman), as well as groups like the Doobie Brothers and Snail that had already gone on to some fame. Meanwhile, with Santa Cruz as an established hub for touring acts by this time, she was getting to regularly shoot the likes of Jerry Garcia, Neil Young (who was briefly a local musician—Benson has live shots of the Ducks from 1976), Tina Turner, Iggy Pop, B.B. King, the

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Santa Cruz music history Benson is pulling together in *All Access*.

But before the interview, there's the prep. Benson flits around the recording space, testing levels and making adjustments while catching up with Barnes. She asks him who he's working with these days, and he praises local singer Kat Factor (whose "future folk" group Gone Gone Beyond released their sophomore album *2030* last summer).

"She's one of Santa Cruz's best," he says.

Benson pauses, as if making a mental note. One of the first things you notice about her is that she's rarely still, except when her eye is looking into a camera. Suddenly, she's right next to Barnes on the soundstage, as they discuss whether or not he should wear his

pretty-hip-looking hat during the interview.

At first she says no, but after tweaking the lights for a little while decides, "Now I can do either. If you keep it there, I'm good to go."

"Just for a little color, given that I'm wearing black, and the background's black," he says.

Benson nods, whirling over to the other side of the cameras. "That's just the way it is," she says. "So many years of rock and roll, and you end up having a wardrobe of black."

EVERYTHING CLICKS

Benson would know. For decades, she could be seen at the front of stages all over Santa Cruz, her long blonde hair in sharp contrast to her black outfit and cameras. After growing up in South Florida in the late '60s and graduating high

school, she moved to Southern California, but it wasn't the surf-and-sun California she'd imagined. Then one day in 1974, she took a fateful car trip.

"I'd always liked photography, but I wanted to go to film school, and it was either New York or L.A.—and I don't like being cold. So it was L.A., but I ended up in Simi Valley, and there was no ocean, and it was really strange. I kind of just got in my car and started driving north and I stopped in Santa Cruz for gas. This is where I stopped. I looked around, and then I basically drove back down to Simi Valley, got my stuff, packed my car up and moved up here."

She did start film school in San Francisco, but had no idea she would find her true calling in her newly adopted home.

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SCREEN TIME

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"Michelle was great," says Randy Nowell, who was GT's art director in '80 and '81. "She had great contacts around town. And when she'd do studio work, she was terrific at connecting with people. She reminded me of how Annie Leibovitz used to get her great stuff in the '70s—just relating to people."

Benson was GT's first woman photographer, and locally one of only a few in two male-dominated worlds: photography and rock 'n' roll. But anyone who saw her at work knows she was absolutely commanding—and she'd go to any lengths to get a good shot.

"One time at the Coconut Grove, I was supposed to shoot Talking Heads and B-52s, and I was so little, I couldn't see," she remembers. "And this guy goes, 'Hey, come over here.' And he heaves me up and puts me on his shoulders."

The late, great Bay Area writer and artist Susan Subtle actually got a photo of this moment. "There's a whole crowd of people, and you can see the band, and there's the back of my head, with me on some guy's shoulders in her shot," says Benson. "And she went, 'Click. Well done.'"

FILM CLUB

By the late '90s, Benson was off on other projects, but she was still in love with the Santa Cruz music scene.

"Every time I walked up to the Catalyst stage with my camera—every time—I fell in love all over again," she says.

And she was starting to imagine a film specifically about the club that had been central in sparking that love affair. It took a decade of shooting interviews and compiling her material, but her first documentary *The Catalyst* was finished in 2009. It's a definitive history of the legendary Santa Cruz spot, with great live footage of Patti Smith, Willie Nelson, the Tubes, the Humans and so many others, along with some pretty hilarious stories, like Greg Kihn talking about playing

the Catalyst on mushrooms. But what struck me the most the first time I saw it was the level of access she had to the Catalyst's behind-the-scenes workings, like the wild "Catalyst Follies" that were thrown for many years by the staff but not known to the public.

"They were my family. That's it. That was really the thing," says Benson. "There was the musical family, but then there was the Catalyst family. And, you know, I did spend more time in the Catalyst than I probably did in my own living room. *Good Times* was across the street, so I'd go interview a band or shoot some show, or see a soundcheck. And I lived close enough that I could walk home, and the bouncers would walk me home, because I had 55 pounds of camera gear on my shoulder and now it's 1 in the morning."

COLLECTING STORIES

Jay Shore, who hired Benson at *Good Times* and kept her on the masthead until he sold the paper in 1988, says people often underestimated Benson, thinking she must be some kind of groupie because she was a woman doing rock photography. "She was a very serious journalist," says Shore, who now lives in Oregon. He thinks she's the natural choice to be doing a documentary on Santa Cruz music. "I'm not surprised she's doing this," he says. "In retrospect, I think she must have always had it in the back of her head, to tell this history."

That may be so, but Benson remembers the exact moment she decided to make this idea a reality.

"I was doing an interview with Larry Hosford up at MARS Studio [in Aptos] in the summer of 2016," she says. "And it was Larry and Ken Kraft and Roger Buffalo and Ken Capitanich. I was just doing an interview to pick up some stuff for a little documentary I was working on about Tom Scribner, and on the break, as we're changing and putting mics on and moving people

around, I'm listening to these guys banter about 'Oh yeah, I remember when we flew down to L.A. and we went in Columbia Records to do the recording for Larry's album, and next door was George Harrison.' So what ended up happening is George Harrison came in and was working with Larry, and Tom Scribner is there with a saw, and now you've got a Beatle, you know. And I'm listening to this random talk and going, 'There's a way bigger story here than what I'm doing.'

After thinking about it all day, she called Capitanich that night to get the whole story. That kicked off a string of more than 200 interviews that has yet to end, but might be wrapping up soon.

One of those interviewees was Tiran Porter, who found fame as a guitarist for the Doobie Brothers, and has played with countless Santa Cruz musicians, his work immortalized on more than 40 albums. Porter has known Benson since 1981, back when she was a *GT* photographer.

"I played in maybe five or six different bands that played the Catalyst," says Porter, "and every time I played there, she was right in front with her camera. I would always approach her if I saw her in the street and go, 'Hey, can I see some of those shots?' And she would never show them to me." He laughs, and I get the feeling this is some long-running joke between them. Benson has a lot of those.

Porter got involved in the film after running into Benson at the Whole Foods in Capitola a few years ago. She told him about the documentary, and he asked if she had a narrator in mind. When she said no, he volunteered, and since then he's shot several interstitial segments for the film with her, as well as sat for an interview himself.

One thing Porter has noticed about Benson's interviewing style is that it gets far beyond the record-keeping of names and dates, into more philosophical territory.

"She's a very spiritual person," he says. "She's coming at this from a really deep place—and it becomes all

the more deep when you realize that she's been doing this all through the pandemic, when most musicians have not had a way to ply their trade." He says that's given many people involved with the scene the time "to really think about what we're doing."

For Benson, *All Access* has given her something to throw herself into through the catastrophes of the last two years, including personal ones.

"It's kept me alive," she says. "Through the pandemic, through the fires, through the illness and the loss of my husband."

She sees the documentary and its spinoffs as a chance to give back to a place that has been the center of her personal and professional world—and that she's still a bit in awe of, almost five decades after she arrived.

"There's this alchemy between all of us that really rises Santa Cruz to the top when it comes to music," says Benson. "And that's why I did it, because I just have a love for this place. I thought I was going to move to Florida with my husband, but I couldn't leave without telling the story. And I wanted to give back to the community that has given to me for decades, helped me build my chops as a photographer, as a writer, as a filmmaker—and as my friends and family."

Porter believes Benson is the right person to tell this story, one that's long overdue to be told.

"I think it's important because the Santa Cruz music scene is important," he says. "We've been a really glowing example of a music community for a long time. And it's about time that somebody outside of Santa Cruz knew it."

HELP THIS FILM GET MADE

Michèle Benson is seeking financing for post-production costs on 'All Access—Music in the Cruz.' To learn more about the project and to donate, go to allaccessfilm.net.

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