

# Venerable jazz house Yoshi's thrives with musicians like Klugh

By Susan Wood

OAKLAND – Guitarist Earl Klugh played to a sold-out crowd this month at the legendary Yoshi's – proving why he has been nominated for a dozen Grammy awards.

For 30 years, Klugh has been honing his skills as an artist.

Yoshi's Oakland, which is celebrating 40 years in business this year, brought out jazz enthusiasts on a recent Saturday night to Jack London Square to hear and see Klugh with his accomplished quartet of musicians. Any one of them could have stolen the show judging from their solo performances.



Earl Klugh plays to a sold-out Yoshi's Oakland on Nov. 3. Photos/ Kathryn Reed

The circular stage and tiered seating added value to an

intimate setting. And the sound engineering was astoundingly on the money – an absolute rarity in many large concert arenas or supper clubs.

Klugh must have liked the sound. He started and ended the show smiling.

“This is why people dream of living in such a place,” Klugh said early on of a tune inspired by a trip to San Juan, Puerto Rico. The ensemble seemed to instantly transport the captivated audience, who intently watched a pickless Klugh strum his acoustical guitar with ease as if he were providing a master’s course demonstration.

For that number, he collaborated with legendary jazz performer George Benson, whom he toured with years ago.

Through the years, Klugh, who started playing guitar at age 10 in Detroit, has collaborated with a number of jazz greats. These include Chris Botti, Peabo Bryson and Kirk Whalum in South Carolina. Next April in Colorado, he’ll share the stage with the king of jazz ballads, Jeffrey Osborne.

At Yoshi’s, it was the perfectly in tune ensemble of the quintet that made the show.

Saxophonist and flautist Nelson Rangell took the performance to a whole new level when he whistled an entire tune – hitting a high C with the precision of an instrument. The song was extremely romantic. While one man yelled “crazy,” the rest of the audience roared and gave him a standing ovation. Rangell also played the flute like a cascading waterfall.

All the band members had their chance to shine. Drummer Ron Otis showed the beautiful delicacies of the syncopated jazz beat.

David Lee on keyboards took the audience on a journey from sentimental keystrokes to an amplified mini rap number.

Bassist Al Turner plucked and pounded at his guitar, turning the usual backup instrument into a solo act. The groovy rhythm instantly got the audience nodding and rocking in their chairs.



Yoshi's Oakland is an ideal venue for listening to the likes of jazz great Earl Klugh and his four friends.

When they weren't on their feet or swaying to the beat, the audience members kicked back to take in the tenderness of the sound. One woman was so relaxed, she placed her elbows on top of the counter as if Klugh played a personal concert for her.

From Puerto Rico to South Africa, it was world beat meets jazz from the Klugh-led musicians. Klugh has played all over the world, becoming the acoustical king of "cool jazz."

"This is a beautiful piece of music," Klugh said to open the song "Sonora." He sat down with his guitar as if resting in the desert. Like a jazz music station, Klugh's concert was less talk, more music – much tender and sentimental like his well-known "Living Inside Your Love." His rendition of "Alfie" brought a collective hush over the nightclub. (The show was worth the \$35 price tag for Saturday night and definitely \$25 for Sunday.)

In its four decades of sharing superior jazz acts, Yoshi's has hosted a lineup of great performers – most recently David

Sanborn, often Spyro Gyra and occasionally the sultry sound of Diana Krall.

Photos on the wall between the nightclub and the restaurant provide a glimpse of the long, storied past.

Yoshi's began in 1972 as a small, North Berkeley sushi bar owned by a trio of struggling students. Its founder Yoshie Akiba, who was orphaned in World War II, came to the United States to study fine arts and dance. She opened the Yoshi's Japanese Restaurant with two of her best friends – journalist, carpenter Kaz Kajimura and painter, Japanese cook Hirojuki Hori.

After two moves resulting in its 17,000-square-foot location that took the seating from 25 to 220, Yoshi's brought on club artistic director Peter Williams to orchestrate the mix of world, neo-soul, blues, jazz and Afro-Cuban acts. Then, along came Executive Chef Shotaro "Sho" Kamio, who greatly expanded the Japanese menu.

Like the ensembles playing in the nightclub, a diner could be satisfied with a combination of items sprinkled across the eclectic menu. (Highly recommended for two are the panko fried organic Brussels sprouts with spicy miso aioli; veggie sushi rolls with wasabi; and grilled rosemary wagyu beef skewers that melt in your mouth. Bypass the classic tofu dish.)

If not for the inevitable aftermath, a diner may want to spend the entire night glued to the cocktail menu with its varied assortment of libations. (In a minute I would reorder the Ginger and Jazz libation, which includes ginger liqueur, vodka and lemon.)