

## A green shade of blues

### Ken Arconti stakes out new musical territory

By WALLACE BAINE

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Ken Arconti has himself a nice little 50th-birthday present to show off. And he wants an audience to be there when he does.

It's called "Samsara Blues," and it's his second CD, showcasing the Santa Cruz guitarist's latest step in his musical evolution.

Arconti appears with his band tonight at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center to celebrate the release of "Samsara Blues," an all-instrumental album of edgy jazz, gritty but urbane rock and sophisticated but muscular blues.

"I'm essentially playing blues-oriented music," said Arconti, "but I've played a bit of everything — rock, jazz — for a long time most people knew me primarily as a country guitarist. I just don't like to be pigeonholed."

For a guy who grew up at the altar of Hendrix and Clapton, Arconti has embraced a number of different influences on "Samsara Blues," from the fiery rock god Joe Satriani to mellow jazz man Grant Green.

"I would never consider myself a jazz artist," he said, "though I've certainly listened to and studied John Scofield, Grant Green, Wes Montgomery, people like that. I love playing straight blues. It's great. But I also like going outside the 12-bar blues structure."

Arconti came to Santa Cruz in 1978 (if you are scoring at home, that's exactly half his lifetime ago) from his native Los Angeles. As a kid in LA, he got turned on to music at the age of 11 by the Beatles. From there, it was a short jump to guitar-player royalty: Hendrix, Clapton, Johnny Winter. He also sucked up old Motown and Stax soul records and the blues of Albert King. At one point, he said, he sold all his rock records and stocked up on jazz: Coltrane, Miles, the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

After moving to Santa Cruz, Arconti established himself on the Bay Area blues circuit and opened up for some of the giants of the blues world: Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, John Mayall and more.

He also keeps busy as one of Santa Cruz's more visible guitar teachers, working through Union Grove Music. He also spent 11 years teaching in the state prison at Soledad.

Arconti recorded his first album in 1993, a collection of live recordings culled from his performances at the Catalyst. "Samsara Blues" is his first in-studio recording. His studio band included sax man Tom Politzer, drummer David Rokeach, keyboardist John R. Burr and others.

On the new album, Arconti delivers a couple of overt tributes: "At Your Beck and Call" honors the great British guitarist Jeff Beck; "Detour on Green Street," as its name implies, plays with a Grant Green lick.

But Arconti is never too far from his foundation. As for the influence of Hendrix and Clapton on "Samsara," he says, "Oh, they're always there."