

Santa Cruz blues guitarist Ken Arconti marks 40 years as a musician with a headlining show at Kuumbwa.

by Graham Haworth
Sentinel correspondent

As technically sound as guitarist Ken Arconti is, his real talent lies in feeling the blues and allowing the emotion to flow through his fingertips into his signature Gibson Firebird guitar. Blues licks are deceptively simple to play, but the only way to do justice to the music is to let go and allow your soul to do the playing. "I always want to get to the point where I'm not thinking about anything while I play," Arconti said from his Santa Cruz home. "I don't even want to think about anything musical, I want to be a conduit for the music" Arconti is no stranger to the Santa Cruz music scene. After growing up and performing in Los Angeles, he packed his bags in 1978 and moved north to Santa Cruz after visiting a couple friends. Most musicians move to Los Angeles, not away from it, to make it in the music business. But Arconti felt something special the first time he visited Santa Cruz.

"One of the things that really affected me was the Cooper House with Don McCaslin and Warmth performing on the street," Arconti recalled. "Seeing live music on a downtown street, it was a really unique experience in a great little town"

This year marks Arconti's 40th as a performing guitarist — 29 of those spent in Santa Cruz — and he's celebrating in a couple ways. He recently remastered and re-released his 1993 solo debut, "As the Years Go Passing By," which catches a few fiery performances at the Catalyst from 1989 to 1992. He's also performing April 27 at the Kuumbwa with some old friends, throwing in a few radio performances in the days prior [see sidebar].

Originally released on cassette tape only, "As the Years Go Passing By" sort of slipped out of Arconti's mind after he sold out of his original order all those years ago. But his fans kept hounding him to put the album on CD. Arconti had his doubts, but those soon disappeared after listening to the master tape.

"I like the album much more now than I did back then," Arconti said. "When you do a project and you listen to it over and over, you begin to dissect it a little too much. Listening to it years later gave me some space, and I found that it sounded really great"

While Arconti's musical legacy in the area is difficult to match, it's his experience teaching guitar to inmates at Soledad and Salinas Valley prisons that's been the most rewarding, he said. Starting in 1992, Arconti went to the inmates and began a weekly guitar class that ran regularly until 2003, when then-Gov. Gray Davis cut the budget for the Prison Arts Program.

"I was pretty scared the first time I went into Soledad to teach, but I had performed there once before, so I knew kind of what to expect," Arconti said. "The inmates are receptive to whatever you can bring to them. At Salinas Valley State Prison, which is a level four prison with very high security, we were able to pull off a successful program where there's really a lot working against the inmates"

Arconti now sits on the board of the William James Association, a nonprofit group that hires artists to go into prisons to teach inmates about the arts. Arconti said the group is on the verge of getting the Prison Arts Program up and running again.

As for the Kuumbwa gig next week, Arconti shouldn't have a problem keeping his audience captive. He's bringing in some old friends from out of town for what promises to be a free-flowing show.

"It'll be exciting and spontaneous," Arconti said. "Since a lot of the guys are coming in from out of town, we've had very limited time to get together and play. We're really gonna stretch out and see what we can come up with"