

## TAJ MAHAL

### YOSHIS

DECEMBER 31, 2002 – JANUARY 1, 2003



The Significant Other and I hopped over the water to Oaktown to watch Taj Mahal usher in the new year at Yoshi's Jazz club. The venue had been sold out within days of its announcement in early December, and as the ticket grants you only general admission, we stood in a long line at six pm to reserve seats for the first set. beginning at nine. Got our seats and then headed across the square to dine at Kinkaid's with a view over the water. the entire Square was hopping with packed houses in all restaurants and we got sat in the bar area -- which still was not too shabby as we had those fifteen-foot high windows looking out on the marina.

Hustled on back to take our seats and watch a real master of the Blues take the stage. But not before a representative handed Taj the Congressional Medal of Honor for Lifetime Achievement. This show was also broadcast live on the KPFA Coast to Coast network, so a special excitement filled the air.

Mahal came out dressed in a black baseball cap, trademark shades, colorful Nigerian/Camaroons shirt and baggy pants. His ax throughout the first set was a custom Gibson f-hole archtop semi-hollow body with a jet black finish and fingerboard of what looked like ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. If you didn't understand his position from this, the large silver medallion of Africa that hung about his neck would cinch the look.

But man, did that man play. Sixty years old, from Springfield Mass., born of a Jamaican father and Afro-American mother, Taj shook and shimmied and pranced like a boy half his age, getting the audience to shout, clap and stomp along with him after a cool reception. Moving easily across the vast breadth of his musical encyclopedia, he played regga, ska, funk, and old school blues, starting with a definitive Wes Montgomery jazz sound. Mahal, who plays over 20 instruments is entirely self-taught, but you would think he graduated from the Conservatoire du Paris, such was the extent of his musical knowledge.

With over 32 albums to his credit, playing over 200 dates a year, Grammy-winner and frequently honored, the man can play. He took the old chestnut, "Staggerlee", and turned it into a Django Reinhart groove with not a hitch. For the second set, he moved from the cooler jazz style to a more funkier blues set with nods to Chicago. Playing a blond ESS-335 styled f-hole guitar similar to

the black one, he proceeded to rock the joint, not forgetting to remind the people, characteristically, that this music comes from a huge world that includes the Caribbean, Central and South America and Africa -- a world that most Americans appear dreadfully ignorant of to their peril.

"Man, just look at your breakfast table in the mornin'," he said. "You got coffee from Ecuador, pineapple from the Central Pacific, bananas from Costa Rica and nuts from Nigeria. Wake up!"

He then launched into a gumboots thing called "Where ya gonna run to?"

Of course, preaching to the mixed cultural crowd at Yoshi's was hardly necessary, as the room was filled with people from all those places and more -- one reason Taj likes to come play the East Bay.

