

## HOT TUNA AT THE FILLMORE

MARCH 08, 2002



When any musician has reached sufficient stature to headline at the famous Fillmore Ballroom in San Francisco, you can be sure that any subsequent performance -- even if it be the last -- will be the most energetic, electrifying and superlative of that musician's career. At least until the next time the band is invited back again.

Built in 1912 to host grand balls and dances, the venerable Fillmore has seen its ups and downs, as has the neighborhood in which it resides. Now a part of "Japantown", for a while in the middle of the century the area became known for down-and-outers, footloose mariners, junkies and Section 8 housing. As America stirred sluggishly during the intolerant 50's the old ballroom began to provide a venue for the Beat generation to host performances of bongos and

poetry. But it was not until the impresario Bill Graham glommed onto the venue in 1965 that something of the room's former glory returned. Beginning with benefit concerts for the SF Mime Troupe (which still continues to offer gratis open air performances of politically charged theatre) the hall under Graham's continuous patronage presented the most superlative of American music, from Count Basie to Jefferson Airplane up until the late 1980's, when the demand for larger floor-space caused Bill Graham to move the concerts to a more modern venue on Divisadero.

But this period, 1962 to 1987 also included momentous events in our Nation's history, and the Fillmore took part in that tumult. The official History, which can be found on [www.thefillmore.com](http://www.thefillmore.com) mentions one police raid that ended in a melee. Twelve kids and the always feisty Graham himself were hauled off to jail for daring to criticize the government.

The hall was closed in 1989 after the Loma Prieta Earthquake, as were many other businesses. But in 1994, the grand old ballroom was reopened with restored crystal chandeliers and velvet drapery. The "opera boxes" were also reconditioned as they were when the hall was first opened for masquerades and dance socials. Now, in place of the dive once known as "Jacks", where I can recall fifteen years ago transvestite hookers trolling the crowd any day of the week, the exclusive "Boom Boom Room" owned by the estate of John Lee Hooker edges the trendy and opulent margins of Japantown. The Boom Boom Room is across the street from the Fillmore and the internationally known Tab Benoit headlined the night we passed by.

A glance at the line-up at the Fillmore through its history past and present shows just why a certain energy infects the performances there, for there is not one serious performer or group in American music who has not performed there. And the chaff is astonishingly few. When a performer steps up on that stage, he or she stands among a field of ghosts and must compete or cut heads with those who have been designated the very best in what they do. And the performers appear very conscious of the history that oozes from the walls. And this affects performers no matter what their age. When me and the Significant Other saw Beck perform there almost 10 years ago, the waifish boy sang and pounded his instruments as if demented or possessed, infected with some ferocious energy as if every word, every note meant a demonic struggle with Life Itself.



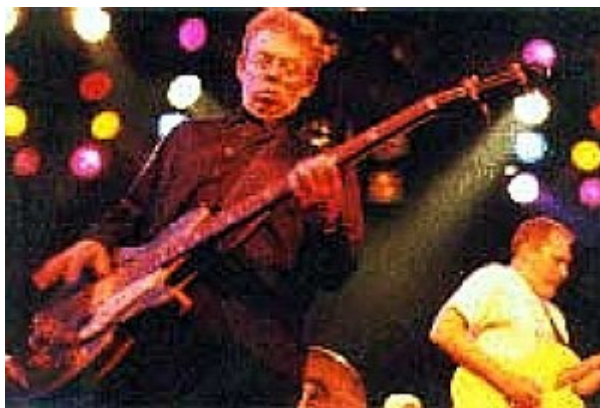
On Friday's prime spot this week, we had the distinct pleasure of hearing one of the pioneers of American music, Jorma Kaukonen, perform with his lifelong friend, Jack Casady. Jorma was born in Washington, D.C. in 1940 of Finnish/Russian parents. His father worked in the foreign service and so he

spent a fair amount of his young life moving about. He went to a private catholic college in Ohio, dropped out and spent time in New York City where he took music lessons from a fellow named Reverend Gary Davis. During this time he took part in various short-lived bands, one of which featured an unknown singer named Janis Joplin.

Not a shabby musical beginning that.

Deciding, or persuaded, to resume his education, he wound up at the University of Santa Clara in California, the only college that would accept his former credits. While in California he met another fellow named Paul Kantner. Together they formed this group based on a joke name for a mythical forgotten blues artist named Jefferson Airplane.

After creating and solidifying the electric sound that would establish the "California sound" for the next twenty years, Jorma determined the Airplane was too small and that Marty Balin's songs were too "trite". Nevermind that the band was pulling in millions of dollars a month. Jorma, with his friend Jack Casady,



formed a largely acoustic group called "Hot Tuna", reportedly because the record company execs refused to have anything to do with the scatological name

originally conceived. This group performed intermissions and openers for Jefferson Airplane for a time, but then developed its own life, focussing on doing covers of old school blues artists like Rev. Gary Davis.

At some point, the original compositions by Jorma became hits on their own merit, to such an extent that his "Embryonic Journey" instrumental has become the most frequently requested track for "period sound" of any song bar none.

In the process several generations of acoustic guitarists have now been body slammed with the "must learn" requirements of Kaukonen's blues interpretations. The man has become a defacto point of departure for anyone now seeking to understand and interpret the old school blues.

Friday night, the boys walked onto this famous stage of the Fillmore like walking into a livingroom and setting down to do an intimate little thing among friends. Highlights were the jazzy done-up version of the old spiritual "Good Shepard" and a very impassioned "Death Has No Mercy In this Land". He performed, as a virtual requirement, "Embryonic Journey" and his *de regeur* love ballad "Genesis", plus his signature version of Rev. Gary Davis' "Hesitation Blues".

The second set lagged a bit during a sequence of religious spirituals, but picked up quickly during "Uncle Sam Blues" and then hit the stratosphere during a very energetic "Another Man Down", which segued beautifully into the prison blues "Parchman Farm", during which his famous right hand picking technique blazed vapor trails across the hall, culling amazing impromptue 16 bar riffs on the

signature Gibson acoustic while Jack blew the doors off of rhythm guitarists possessing two extra strings on his four string semi-hollow body f-hole archtop bass.

The two seemed to casually dip into ragtime with the "San Francisco Bay Blues" which had the packed hall stomping and hollaring. Then there was an amusing lesson during the old timey "Big River Blues". For the encore, the pair did "9 Pound Hammer" while the crowd hollared out "More! More!" But with the performance starting at 9:00 and ending past 12:30 am, it must be remembered that acoustic music is far more physically demanding than its electrified counterpart, and the jams on pieces such as "Good Shepard" lasted easily 10 minutes or more.

Jorma now lives in Ohio, where he says, "I love to come to California, but, I sure don't miss the taxes here."

Me and the Significant Other finally found ourselves trundling back across the Bay after 2 am. The following day, she got a tan, but I felt inspired to go out and get that Tacoma Dm-9 that had been calling me for some time. All solid wood and American-made with a satin finish and pure tone that sends chills down the spine -- what more could a boy want?