MUSIC

Cabrillo band reunites to honor its leader

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Since one of them will be arriving all the way from Barcelona, Spain, you could say that they'll be coming from all over the world. And given that many of them haven't seen each other in 35 years, they might need name tags.

But, somehow, by Saturday night, they will be a band. Pappy will see to it.

“Pappy” was the nickname of the Cabrillo College Jazz Band in the 1970s bestowed upon its bandleader, the indoubtable Lyle O. Crowe, who on Saturday will be both the top attraction and the guest of honor at an event in the Kuumbwa Jazz Center titled “Celebrate Lile Crowe”.

The event is a reunion of about 30 of the players who made up the Cabrillo Jazz Band during one of its most artistically creative periods. Crowe has been celebrated for his contributions in founding Cabrillo Stage, the professional musical theater company that has become a fixture on the Santa Cruz summer performing-arts calendar. What's less known is his earlier efforts in establishing the Cabrillo Jazz Band, a fundamental element in creating the rich jazz scene in Santa Cruz County today.

BAND

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The idea was the brainchild of alto-sax player Richard Penno, who was having lunch with music friends, reflecting on the recent death of longtime friend and drummer Jim Bruhm. "The idea was to do a tribute to Lile," said Penno who recently moved back to Santa Cruz after living for years in Austin, Texas, "while we still could do it and everyone was in good health.

The reunion turned out to be something of a logistical headache, given that literally hundreds of players had played in the band during Crowe's long tenure. Penno put together a Facebook page for past players in the band and found that 74 musicians were interested in taking part. That number was cut down to 18-20 and will include such notable jazzmen as Paul Contos, Paul Nagel, Brad Recht, Rich Lewis, Dale Mills, Bill Theuer, Matt Simon — he's the one traveling in from Barcelona — and several others.

"I inherited a 'pep band,'" said Crowe, 77, of his first year at Cabrillo in 1970. He had been hired from Yuba City High School and his aim was to re-invent the jazz band. "The word 'jazz' was not to be used.

Crowe transformed the staid "pep band" into a progressive big band that might appeal to the new generation of the musicians who had come of age in the late '60s. What Crowe didn't want for his band was to be a nostalgia act, re-creating the swing of the '40s which, by the early '70s, was deeply unfashionable.

Instead, he wanted to find progressive arrangements and bring the big band instruments more in line with the times.

"I was what you would call a 'chart freak,'" said Crowe. "I was obsessed with finding all these different kind of charts that were a bit unusual!"

He also had to find the players to match his vision. "Lile had a talent for finding students like me," said Penno. "My dad was an arranger, so I had it in my blood.

Penno originally came to the area to attend UC Santa Cruz. He said Crowe visited him one day in his UCSC dorm room to convince him to play in the Cabrillo band.

"His genius was in designing this playground where we could play," said Penno. "He was a tough rehearser, really exacting. But it was all about having fun with the music."

It was a colorful group, said Crowe, a mix of Vietnam vets going to school on the G.I. Bill and hippies steeped in the '60s creed — among the songs the group performed was Frank Zappa's "Willie the Pimp."

“He would stomp on us sometimes,” said saxophonist Paul Contos. “And we would deserve it. We were a pretty free-wheeling bunch.”