GAIL RICH AWARDS

CREATIVITY IS CULTURAL LANGUAGE IN SANTA CRUZ

TEXT BY WALLACE BAINES
PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County is that place where the guy behind the café counter is a singer/songwriter, the woman showing you a house for sale is a landscape painter and your next-door neighbor is writing her third novel.

Creativity isn’t some indulgence for the idle elite; it’s a common language among neighbors. It’s why many of us choose to live where we do.

It’s no surprise that artistic expression is an abundant natural resource in an area in which surfing, yoga and the Grateful Dead — eccentric pastimes in many communities — are serious lifestyles. Visual artists, writers, musicians and performers, both professional and amateur, are as grapes on the vine, and their spirit of restless creativity often rubs off on people who would never think of themselves as artists.

For the 17th year, we celebrate that defiant spirit of creativity by highlighting a handful of the people who make up the crazy quilt of Santa Cruz County’s artistic community. Each January, we select a number of locals who embody this area’s astoundingly rich cultural heritage.

Named for a woman who embodied this community’s deep commitment to the arts, the Gail Rich Awards again raises a toast to the artists, businesspeople and arts supporters that give this community its distinctive vibe.

We are again proud to highlight just a few of the people who make up this constantly renewing artistic community.

Follow Sentinel reporter Wallace Baine on Twitter at Twitter.com/wallacebaine.

tammiBROWN
SINGER

For the past five years, R&B singer Tammi Brown has had trouble saying ‘no’ to anyone who has asked her to sing. She has regularly performed in several ensemble shows in Santa Cruz from ‘Planet Cruz Comedy Hour’ to ‘An Altered Christmas’ to the White Album Ensemble. She continues to sing on various recordings for other artists, one of which was nominated for a Grammy back in 2008. But these days, Tammi is poised to step into the spotlight in her own right. Reared in the Pentecostal church, she built her musical talents around a base of gospel before branching out into blues, jazz, pop and R&B. And, in 2013, all that hard work is set to pay off when she releases her debut album on the award-winning Motema label, unleashing on the world what audiences in Santa Cruz have to this point treasured as their best-kept secret.
As a visual artists go, Skip Epperson must be the envy of many. After all, people typically encounter his work by sitting in a comfortable seat and gazing at it for an hour or two. Skip’s art is theater set design and few would argue with calling him Santa Cruz County’s finest in that field. A theater arts faculty member at Cabrillo College for more than 20 years, Skip is most known for his innovative designs for Cabrillo Stage, the professional musical-theater company that operates out of Cabrillo’s Crocker Theater each summer. From ‘Into the Woods’ to ‘Wizard of Oz’ to last summer’s zany holiday comedy ‘A Night at the Nutcracker.’ Skip’s signature style is not going for the obvious, for often opting for the abstract or surreal. His distinctive work was noticed in a big way when he was awarded the prestigious Rydell Visual Arts Fellowship for 2008-09, given to the area’s elite visual artists.