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NAPA VALLEY

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NAPA HIGH-TECH
RESTAURANT BUDO
MASKED MUSICIANS

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The Masked Musicians of Napa Valley

BY DAVINA RUBIN

YOU SEE THEM EVERYWHERE — AT WORK, OR IN RESTAURANTS OR SUPERMARKETS. They look ordinary enough, but it's all camouflage. For under the cloak of everyday professions, beneath the veneer of real estate broker, electrical engineer and the like, lie — musicians. And in the Napa Valley there are a host of them.

While music may be food for the soul, musicians still have to eat and pay rent. Many of them find a way to use other talents in jobs at which they are also gifted, and which pay the bills. Living in the Napa Valley comes with a high price for these artists, who have found that the large performance venues, rather than nurturing local artists, have a penchant for importing big names from elsewhere, while ignoring the rich pool of talent in its midst. And so they

labor away at their careers, and those careers are how many, if not most, know them. But when work is done, the true musicians hiding inside their everyday veneer come out to play.

There are so many of these accomplished artists in the Valley that an entire issue could be devoted to them. We would like to introduce you to four that we think are worth a look and a listen.

AMBER ESTRADA - Web Site
Designer/Vocalist-Guitarist

Amber Estrada grew up around music. "My mother has been in bands ever since I was one. There were always musical instruments around me." Amber learned to play piano, drums and harmonica, but now chiefly plays the guitar and writes and sings her own songs. "My mom gave me her old guitar when I moved to Los Angeles to work on my acting career."

Even though Amber didn't have her eye on a music career, she ended up practicing guitar, putting her poetry to music, and performing at open mics. She also went to work for Diane Warren, a top lyricist for such greats as Celine Dion. It was here that she learned the business end of the music industry. "One of the most important things I learned had to do with work ethic. I saw how dedicated she was to her craft and it kick-started something in me and I started writing songs."

Most of her material comes from her own life experiences. "I tend to write about things outside myself, things I've observed. Not all of it is about relationships." Amber's latest CD just received a positive review from The Music Connection.

For the past five years Amber has been a web site designer. But she has not let go of the dream of making music her life. One of her more difficult decisions was to move back to Napa and be "a big fish in a small pond" for right now. "The community of music is so much more saturated down in L.A. than it is here. I realized that there is a lot of music going on in Northern California, and in Napa

Valley itself the music opportunity is growing." She intends to be part of it every step of the way, helping in forming the Napa Musicians Guild, and working on getting more venues for musicians. She looks forward to getting her songs published, even if they are done by other artists, and is also working on producing music videos. Visit her website, <http://amberestrada.com/buy.html>, to find her two EPs and more information about her.

PHILLIP GRADY SMITH - Real Estate Broker/Saxophone player

Ask any musician about Phil Smith, and they all say the same thing: "Phil's not really a real estate broker. He's a musician."

Born in Blytheville, Arkansas, Phil is the son of a farmer who was a frustrated musician with a dream of being a singer with a big band. Since that wasn't possible, he and his wife lived vicariously through their sons, all of whom became musicians. "When I was eight years old they gave me a clarinet. It wasn't a

matter of me picking an instrument, they gave me the clarinet and said, 'Here, play this.'"

Phil played his first professional job when he was ten, and his three brothers formed the Smith Brothers Combo. "We were cute little guys, and we'd go around and play all the Kiwanis, Jaycees and Lions Clubs. They'd give us a roast beef dinner and five bucks, and we'd be happy."

Phil's musical gifts eventually won him a music scholarship to college. The band director there was an accomplished jazz pianist, so Phil was able to study jazz and eventually played with a large band which traveled the country. He later studied at the Berkeley School of Music in Boston. "I probably learned more there in a year than I had learned in any formal institution of music. I also saw all the great jazz players come through there."

Phil played music up until 1989, when he married a "ready made family," and his priorities changed, so he got into the real estate business.

Then in 1994 the lure of music called again, and Phil went to play and lead the band at the Coconut Grove in San Francisco, a first class establishment reminiscent of the 1940's supper clubs. Phil left when the place closed. Though he still has the talent and connections to play with the large bands, he has chosen to work in real estate in Napa, where he still teaches music, and can be seen Wednesday and Friday nights at Uva Trattoria in Napa. His album, "Songs in the Key of Love," was featured in the last issue of this magazine, and can be found on Amazon.com and Cdbaby.com.

GEO SARKISS - Electrical Engineer/Flamenco Guitarist

Geo Sarkiss has, in his words, "always strummed on something." At the age of 9 he



found his first guitar, and began playing music. Influenced by Renaissance, contemporary jazz, and rock 'n' roll, he finally took formal lessons when he was 20, and ended up performing with a rock 'n' roll band.

At some point, Sarkiss went through an overnight transformation. "I realized that rock 'n' roll was not really doing it for me, and I had a vision of my becoming a classical guitarist." Literally the next day, he bought a classical guitar and committed himself to learning the instrument.

Friends were at first surprised, but after a while they realized that Geo was actually becoming a better all-around musician. Sarkiss smiles when he comments, "The funny thing is that today, because of all my classical training, I play better rock than I did before."

The fact that Sarkiss is an electrician and electrical engineer helps immensely with the technical aspect of music. He manages to keep up to date with all the latest technology, and not only engineers his own recordings, but also does sound editing for documentaries and music videos as well.

"I've already been a successful musician and been paid top dollar for my music, so now I'm ready to move on to my next passion." His "next passion" is to work towards the aid of the environment, promoting solar power for broader use; his music will be a powerful vehicle for getting the message across.

