

Editorial

‘World Music Day’ deserves an encore

*Downtown Palo Alto event draws thousands
for a relaxed, easy-listening time and
was a great way to begin the vacation season*

It seemed seamless, natural and as if it just sort of happened — at least to everyone except the volunteers who were behind the organizing and preparing for the 5 to 8 p.m. musical occupation of downtown Palo Alto last Sunday.

The first “World Music Day” in Palo Alto drew an unknown number of visitors, but the sidewalks were crowded for blocks as several thousand at least showed up on a perfect evening to hear 40 different musicians or musical groups play a huge range of music representing worldwide traditions, from Klezmer to Celtic and Chinese to American jazz and folk.

The event was the creation of Claude Ezran, 53, a high-tech executive, member of the city’s Human Relations Commission, native of France and past candidate for the Palo Alto Board of Education — he has two children in Palo Alto schools.

But this event emanated from his eclectic love of music.

Ezran witnessed a similar event in London and decided it would fit well in Palo Alto. The concept originated in France in 1982 and has spread around Europe, Ezran recounts. Despite early skepticism, with the help of a group of enthusiastic volunteers and several co-sponsors (including the Weekly) the event took on shape and substance.

There were no street closures, but cars easing their way down University were just a minor nuisance and a modest hazard. The good mood of musicians and attendees alike overrode the occasional engine noise. Restaurants, many with doors wide open, were either full or doing a brisk business.

There were important differences between this event and the “Palo Alto Promenade” experiment of July 20, 2007. In that case, University was closed to traffic on a Friday afternoon rather than a quiet Sunday evening, causing major traffic jams. The street also was closed for many hours due to construction of elaborate sound stages.

Despite its “learning experience” flaws, the Promenade was a success for those who experienced it. People enjoyed sauntering down the street devoid of its usual traffic.

This time there were no stages, musicians were unpaid except for donations from passersby, and most music was acoustical or boosted a bit by small musician-owned amplifiers. That means the street need only be closed a minimal amount of time and on a non-commute day — not at the end of a week when tired drivers are struggling to get home.

By all means, bring World Music Day back next year, and in collaboration with downtown merchants close off University during the event. It was a great beginning last Sunday and it deserves an encore.