

Bill Tapia: An Appreciation

The amazing thing about Bill Tapia is not his age. It's his music. To know the music is to know the man. It's all about ease, elegance, flow, and, yes, timelessness.

For most of his musical life, Tapia's been known as a jazz guitar virtuoso. In a career that spans the 20th century and swings energetically into the 21st, he's played with many of the leading lights of American and Hawaiian music.

One particularly meaningful close encounter occurred in Hollywood before World War II, when he befriended electric guitar pioneer Charlie Christian. "He was my hero," Tapia says. "I loved that guy. He had a style of his own, and until today every guitarist plays some of his stuff. We jammed from one to 4 a.m. after his gig at the Palomar with Benny Goodman, just him and me and a bass player."

These days, however, Tapia is most closely associated--not with the guitar--but with the childhood instrument that launched him on his musical journey and which bookends his career--the ukulele. To his far-flung fans, he is the once and future "Duke of Uke."

Like the man who plays it, it's a humble instrument, but one that can slip easily into life's ebb and flow. User-friendly and highly portable, it can move through the world without fanfare. But in the hands of a master, its expressive capabilities are vast. It can even be flashy at times.

This brings us to a consideration of Tapia's inimitable sartorial style: the impeccably coordinated, colorful, yet strangely appropriate outfits; the hats--fedoras, caps, and tams in every conceivable color and pattern above his snow white hair; and last but not least, the socks (Tapia may be the only person on the planet who can wear socks covered in polka dots or reindeers without losing an ounce of dignity). Much like his music, his visual presentation vividly underscores the often blurred distinction between trendiness and genuine style, which at its best is both personal and original.

Tapia has been described in recent years as the world's oldest performing musician. While no pretender has come forward to challenge the assertion, it somehow doesn't quite ring true. It just doesn't seem right to characterize this man as "old." For those who have experienced his personality and his art, he might just as well be described as the world's youngest performer (with apologies to Justin Bieber and his compadres).

But that doesn't obviate the fact that Tapia has been around for a while. At the time of this writing, he is 103 years-old; that he's still going strong is a testament, not only to good genes, but to a life well lived. In fact, it's a life brilliantly lived.

There's an essence here that all of us youngsters--whether or not we remember the Eisenhower administration--can derive hope and inspiration from. It's in the man; it's in his story; and most joyfully for us, it's in his music.