

# Taking stock of valley arts

## Culturally rich area lacks own identity

By LUKE M. BUNDLE

**F**rom a cultural standpoint, the San Fernando Valley is an enigma. It is rich with artistic outlets, yet it has no cultural identity of its own.

Many major motion picture and television studios make their homes in the Valley, and much of their filming is done

Second in a periodic series on the San Fernando Valley and its character.

here, but Hollywood claims the title of Entertainment Capital of the World.

Successful nightclubs abound in the Valley. In Sherman Oaks, the L.A. Connection is a weekend stop for improv, stand-up, comedy sketches and music, while the L.A. Cabaret features different comedy acts each night in Encino.

The Palomino is a nationally known club featuring top-name country talent, while jazz of all kinds flourishes at The Baked Potato, Carmelo's, Donte's and other Valley locations.

Many of the most famous rock, new wave and pop music acts appear regularly at the Universal Amphitheatre, along with such family-oriented fare as "Fantasy on Ice," featuring Olympic skaters Randy Gardner and Tai Babilonia.

And many Valley restaurants and piano bars provide live entertainment.

To all this, add a wide variety of exhibits, studio tours and a long list of talented, non-profit theatrical and music organizations alive and relatively well in the Valley, and it would appear there is a lot of direct interest in matters of culture.

Through the years, cultural offerings in the Valley have been found in such diverse and sometimes ill-suited places as school auditoriums, church halls, multi-purpose rooms, college theaters and gymnasiums, public park recreation buildings, service club halls, restaurants, nightclubs and the occasionally operative Starlight Bowl in Burbank.

As a result, the Valley's cultural heritage is a long one, but it is largely unknown.

Valley residents have enjoyed classical musical offerings, for example, by the San Fernando Valley Symphony Association (a group with a 37-year tradition of free concerts whose 1984 season was severely curtailed by rising costs and shrinking grants), the San Fernando Valley Community Concert Association, Los Angeles Solo Repertory Orchestra, Cota Symphony (dedicated to rarely performed works for orchestra, chorus and soloists), Southern California Conservatory of Music, The Glendale Symphony Orchestra and the Valley Master Chorale (now



Herz Character, Daily News

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celebrating its 10th anniversary).

There have also been performances by the Valley Opera, Valley Youth Orchestras/CSUN Youth Orchestra Academy, the Van Nuys Civic Orchestra, the San Fernando Valley Theatre of Performing Arts, the Royal Cavaliers Youth Band and Valley Cultural Center's Concerts in the Park.

For dance there is the Americana Dance Theatre, Ballet Folklorico Estudiantil Cuicacalli and the Valentine Oumansky Dramatic Dance Foundation among others. Dance is also experienced as a part of the Special Guest Artist Series at California State University, Northridge.

Visual arts opportunities in the Valley have been provided by the Brandes Art Institute, Burbank Art Association, California Art Club and artist associations such as West Valley Artists, the San Fernando Valley Art Club and the Valley Artists Guild.

Among the many equity waiver theaters and theater-related organizations in the network of Valley art institutions have been Actors Alley, Back Alley Theatre (a very active 93 seats), Encino Theatre Group, Granada Community Theatre, Main Stage Theatre, the Megaw Theatre, P.A.R.T. Theatre, Players Theatre, Synthesis Theatre Company, Theatre Exchange, Room for Theatre, Showboat Theatre and Victory Theatre. Several of these groups have won awards for

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excellence and all have active followings.

There are even historical groups whose mission is preserving cultural landmarks as art forms of the past and interpreting their history for the future. In this category are the San Fernando Valley Historical Society, Chatsworth Historical Society and Northridge Cultural Arts/Historical Society, as well as Bottle Village in the Simi Valley.

This is only a partial list of the groups which have had a cultural impact on the Valley. And it may come as a surprise to arts patrons who identify legitimacy with the offerings over the hill in Los Angeles. It may, in fact, even be a shock to some who live here.

Several major institutions with multi-disciplinary arts programs of national repute are found in the Valley, including California Institute for the Arts which presents approximately 800 different music, theater, dance, film and art offerings to the public each year. The majority of these are concerts given by the students; however, about 100 are presented by visiting artists. Most are offered at no charge, but the largest space available can seat only some 325 patrons.

The School of the Arts at California State University, Northridge, presents a minimum of 350 performances by students and faculty and approximately five professional stagings open to the public. These are situated on stage in either the 400-seat, the 200-seat or the 150-seat theater.

Several fine community colleges are located in the Valley — all producing public arts programs with offerings by students and faculty, and by way of touring and artist-in-residence programs.

Pierce College gives student performances in theater, dance and music of about 60 each year and offers some 25 visiting artists to the public. Valley College gives around 80 student-based and 18 visiting-artist performances. Mission College offers student performances of Ballet Folklorico.

In a more commercial realm, the Valley is the real home to the nation's motion picture and television industry. Columbia Pictures, Disney Studios, The Burbank Studios, Universal Television, Universal Features, Dick Clark Productions and the National Broadcasting Corp., among others, employ thousands of highly creative actors, directors, writers and technicians to turn out movies and television programs seen around the world. Surrounding the studios are countless small production and technical companies that make films, records, props, costumes and the like.

Still, the San Fernando Valley has nothing that can be considered a cultural center, and a number of groups — including the Cultural Foundation, the San Fernando Valley Arts Council and the Valley Cultural Center — wish to change that situation.

The Valley's geographic size, growing population (more than 1.6 million) and economic good health are major arguments used by local arts backers in support of a cultural complex of the Valley's own.

The average family income in the Valley in 1981 was \$27,758. Recent surveys show that many of these families are looking for first-class, convenient cultural outlets on which to spend some of their discretionary dollars.

A report prepared by Struman & Associates in mid-1984 revealed that even though Valley residents are unhappy with the lack of cultural facilities in the San Fernando Valley, 30 percent of the Valley's adult residents had attended at least one cultural event in the past year. Many indicated they would have gone to more but were inhibited by distance and travel time.

At present, the areas of fastest growth are the West Valley communities of Agoura, Calabasas, Newbury Park and Westlake, and Valencia on the Valley's north fringe. As people move farther from the Los Angeles core, one argument goes, they will find it increasingly troublesome to attend cultural events at downtown locations.

A recent study by the Harrison Price Co. of Los Angeles indicated that Valley residents believe their quality of life would be greatly enhanced if they had more cultural attractions in better facilities close at hand.

To that end, the Cultural Foundation, a non-profit organization directed by about 40 area corporate and civic leaders, will begin a campaign this year to

raise funds for two state-of-the-art cultural complexes in the Valley: ● Arts Park L.A. — a 164-acre site in the Sepulveda Basin on federal land controlled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and administered in cooperation with the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, where plans call for phased development of a 40-acre landscaped lake with lagoon and waterfall, a 2,500-seat theater, indoor and outdoor artist work and exhibit spaces, a 2,000-seat outdoor performance glen with natural amphitheater seating, a museum and other family-oriented spaces. The site plans for that area were developed by the local architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

● Warner Performing Arts Square — a section of Warner Park in the West Valley area where a small theater district is being developed. Architectural plans in progress by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, considered one of the finest theatrical architectural firms in the country, include a 650-seat theater, a 1,200-seat concert hall, a 150-200 seat "black box" experimental theater that can double as a 99-seat equity-waiver theater, a rehearsal hall and a variety of support facilities in a performing arts center complex. Further enhancement of the passive park on the remainder of the site is planned, with on-site parking for theater-goers included.

The price tag for both facilities is projected at \$72 million, with a planned completion date of 1990. A survey of financial resources is scheduled to begin within a few weeks.

Since 1980, the Cultural Foundation has spent about \$250,000 a year on research into the Valley's cultural needs and on completing legal, architectural and environmental requirements.

The projects have considerable civic and political support, but opposition is strong, too.

For an area the size of the sixth largest city in the United States not to have major professional visual or performing arts facilities of any kind is depriving the citizens of that area easy access to a cultural life. I support and encourage the plans to build cultural centers in the San Fernando Valley."

Some backers of a proposed \$100-million expansion project planned at the Los Angeles Music Center question the need for additional facilities in the Valley, pointing out that a large number of Valley residents — particularly those from the East Valley — already attend events there. They suggest the money might be better spent on improving facilities downtown.

However, Allan Colman, president of the Music Center's operating company, disagreed. "I believe the addition of facilities to make a greater number of cultural and entertainment offerings available in Southern California is a positive step," he said.

Valley Councilwoman Joy Picus said, "The San Fernando Valley has matured in terms of the kinds of cultural activities it needs and demands. Valley residents should no longer have to travel all over the Southland to attend plays, concerts, art exhibits and special cultural events. We deserve our own facilities right here in the Valley."

Robert Fitzpatrick, president of California Institute of the Arts is not so sure. "There is an enormous potential audience in the Valley, and clearly we need additional cultural activity, but civilization, as tempting as the thought might be, is not just a question of bricks and mortar and building facilities."

He emphasized, "It is a question rather of openness of spirit, a willingness to take risks and to welcome new ideas and new artists. The Valley will have come of age when it learns to be comfortable with being uncomfortable ... when it spends more on resources nourishing the mind than that it spends on its front lawn."

Moral support has come from other geographic areas.

Arts backers in Orange County, responding to similar studies showing that members of their community were also balking at the time and distance from home to the Music Center, has moved ahead with a project to build an \$85-million facility all their own. At least some of them see the Valley projects as a boost for the arts in general and a boon to patrons.

"Because the Music Center is booked solid much of the time, it seems logical that with the opening of the Orange County Performing Arts Center and completion of the two projected theater projects in the Valley, more affordable shows could be presented in Los Angeles," said Dick Kitzrow, public relations director for the Orange County center.

Tom Mitze, producing director of the 8-year-old La Mirada Civic Theatre says he believes there is tremendous potential for successful performing arts facilities in the Valley. "Millions of patrons deserve to have their own theaters and concert halls," Mitze added.

Commissioner Madeleine Landry of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, echoed that view. "The desire of Valley residents for theatrical and arts facilities of their own takes nothing away from their pride as residents of Los Angeles that the Music Center just celebrated its 20th anniversary and is planning for expansion. We see the projected new facilities in the Valley as complimentary rather than competitive," she said.

Surveys and statistics notwithstanding, one of the arguments against a Valley cultural center is a belief that local patronage would be inadequate to support such a complex.

The demise of the Valley Music Theater, a much less ambitious in-the-round facility built in the 1960s and closed in the 1970s, is cited as an example of lack of support. The building now houses the Jehovah's Witness Valley Assembly Hall. Why, it may be asked, should another theater be built when one has already failed?

Times have changed, says the Cultural Foundation. The public has grown, and so has its support. Valley residents have become more selective about the manner in which they spend their leisure time.

The needs of performance groups are also growing. The foundation sees Arts Park L.A. and Warner Performing Arts Square as providing local groups with first-class facilities in which to perform and offering artists options for development of new projects, thereby encouraging increased financial support of local arts entities.

It also sees the proposed facilities as providing an outlet for groups who currently may not be able to perform in the Los Angeles area because the Music Center operates at capacity.

The Cultural Foundation envisions the presentation of an array of musicals, plays, ballet, opera, symphony, jazz and pop offerings that will alter attendance habits throughout Southern California by allowing residents of the San Fernando Valley to regularly attend cultural events, visit museums and utilize two park sites without having to travel long distances.

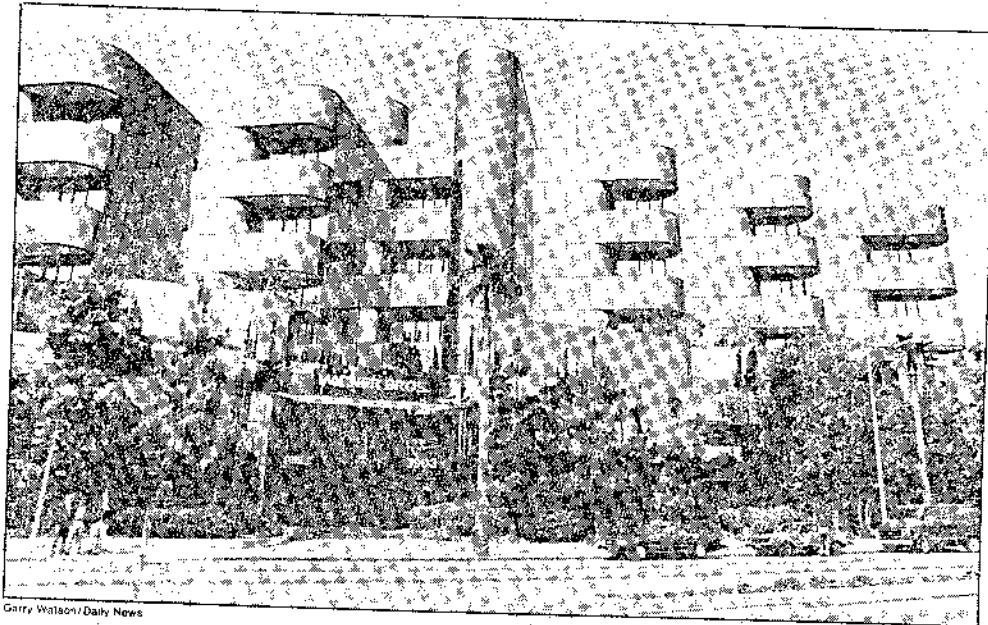
While a high percentage of people surveyed are in agreement that cultural facilities are needed in the Valley, not everyone is in agreement on which ones, what kind, how many, in what location and on what time-frame.

Perhaps the fact that the Valley is a community of communities has made the issues more difficult to address.

It has been said the real problem of establishing a cultural identity for the Valley may stem from an overabundance of strong-minded, talented individualists unready to compromise on the means to achieve the goals — even though their ultimate goals are the same.

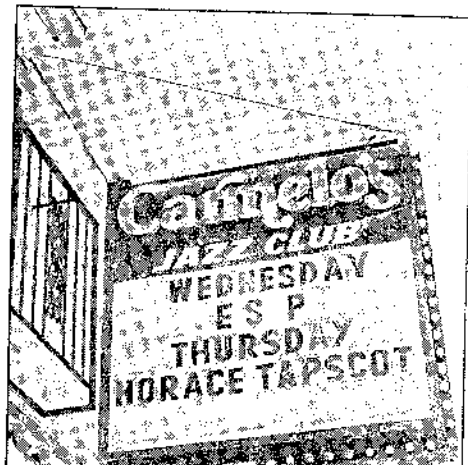
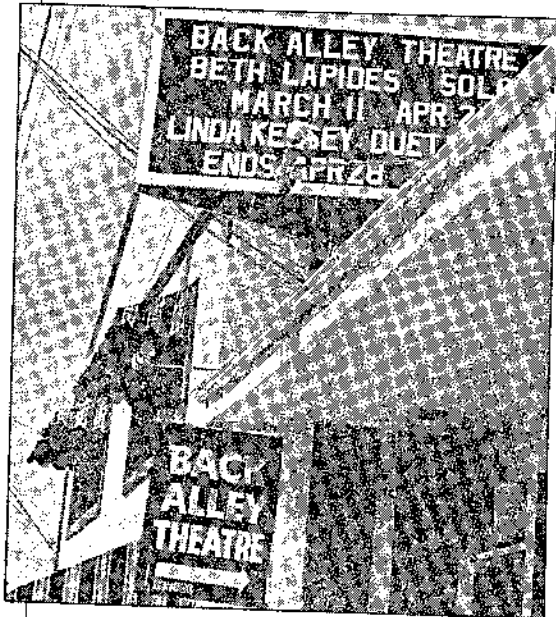
There are also still mavericks — those people who insist that to change one blade of grass will ruin the real, down-to-earth value of living in this area. And there are those who will answer that change, even change for the better, can be painful.

When a large community of people are involved, it is inevitable that there will be disagreement. But it is clear there is a growing cultural consciousness in the Valley, and that can only be good for the arts.



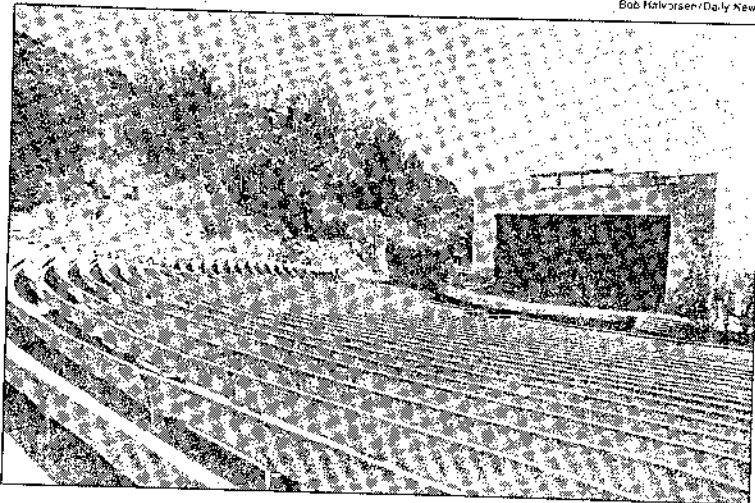
Garry Watson/Daily News

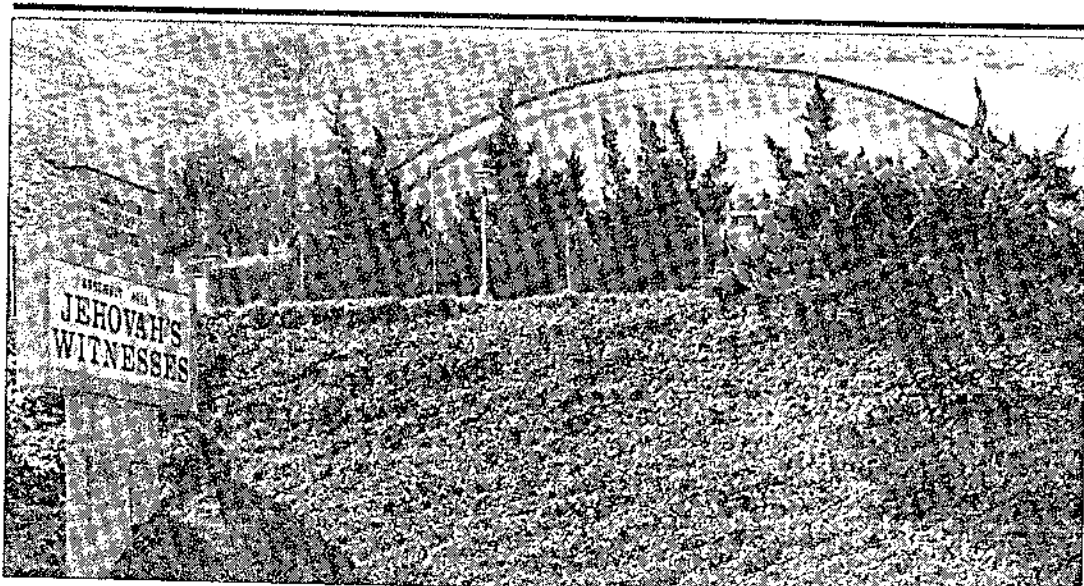
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Bob Halverson/Daily News

The Valley's artistic outlets are many. Clockwise from top: Warner Bros., part of the Burbank Studios, is among the many film companies located in Burbank and Universal City. Carmelo's, in Sherman Oaks, is one of several well-known local jazz clubs. Burbank's Starlight Bowl has had an up-and-down life as a site for concerts and plays. The Back Alley Theatre stages equity waiver performances in Van Nuys.



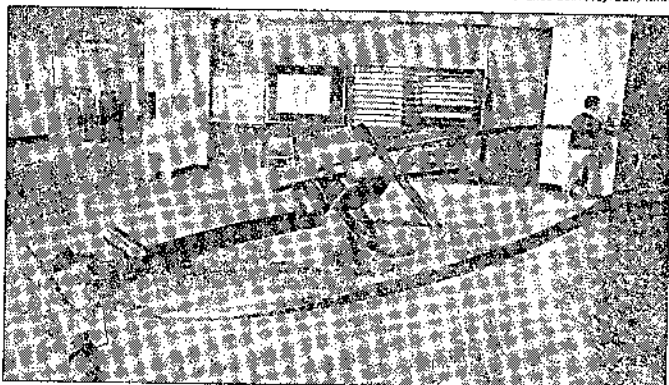
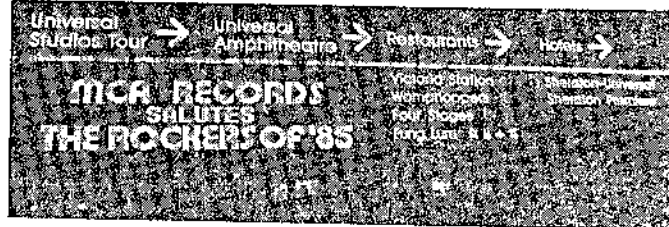


The Valley Music Theater, an in-the-round facility, overlooked Ventura Boulevard in Woodland Hills. It featured some well-known

names in musicals, but inadequate support led to its demise in the 1970s. The building is now used by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

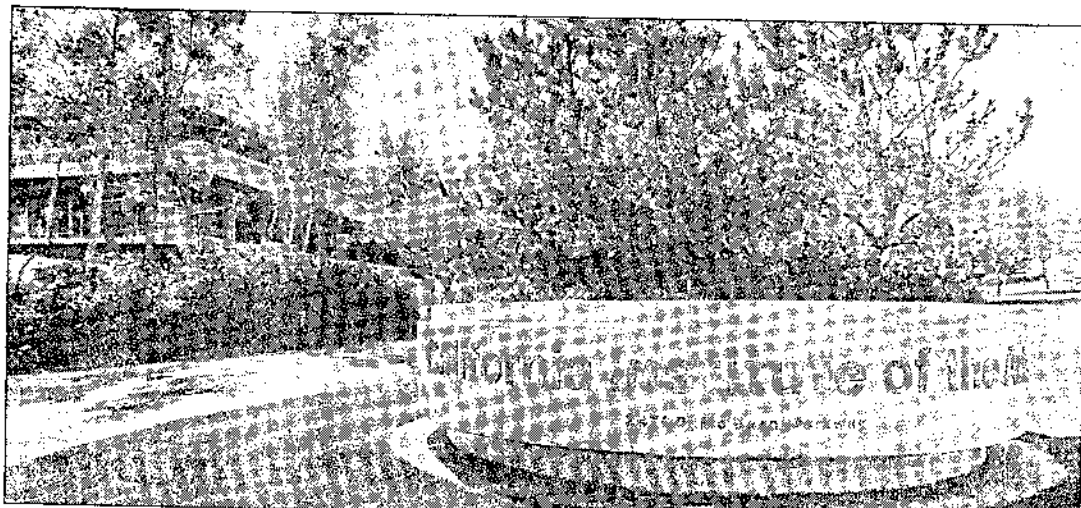


The Burbank Studios and others make the Valley the genuine film capital of the world.



Top, the marquee outside Universal Studios complex points the way to entertain-

ment. Above, a piece of sculpture at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.



CalArts offers multi-disciplinary programs of national repute. Each year, about 800 music, theater, dance, film and art programs are

offered to the public, including about 100 by visiting artists. The Valley area is not without its share of cultural riches.