

*At Keystone Korner***A Brush With a Top Jazz Drummer***By Conrad Silvert*

If the audience is lucky, Philly Joe Jones will take a moment away from his purely musical activities at Keystone Korner this week to launch into his extra-fine Bela Lugosi impression, or some other kind of verbal foolishness.

Were he not one of the most original drummers in the history of jazz, Jones could have made it as an actor or a comedian. As it is, his brand of percussion is as wittily incisive as can be, and his general demeanor on stage is that of a fine entertainer. Joe is slick, smooth, suave — but never glib at the expense of his own imagination.

Tuesday night's opener did not produce all of the drummer's advertised personnel (such as trumpeter Tommy Turrentine), but there wasn't much opportunity to notice, so good was the band he assembled. Jones, traveled west with tenor saxophonist Charles Bowen and bassist Andy McKee and, after he arrived in San Francisco, completed the combo with pianist Larry Vuckovich (who is taking a week's leave from the gorgeous Bosendorfer he regularly plays at the Hyatt Union Square's One-Up room).

Dapper as usual in a three-piece suit and a white tie with red polka dots, Jones was in an amiable, lyrical mood. He is a particularly warm drummer, as has been evident ever since his days, 25 years ago, as an indispensable fifth of a great Miles Davis band. Nobody can play the brushes quite like Joe, with as many subtleties — nuances of the stroke — and with such command of dynamics.

Jones could easily play an entire set with nothing but the brushes, but of course he saves them for ballads and such. Tuesday, he used them on a Cedar Walton tune, "Midnight Waltz," indulging in delicious little cross-handed variations, 13 different types of caresses upon the cymbals, and so on.

When he picks up the sticks, Jones can be as brash and militaristic as the next drummer, to be sure, but he is anything but monochromatic. He is constantly altering patterns, interrupting soft sections with a single startling rimshot, or leaning over the kit to strike a few beats on the face of the bass drum.

He loves to "interpret" the material, whether that means rhythmically translating the melody during his solo, or working up a satiric, literal translation of the words — such as "Tune Up," where the introduction consists of the four musicians "tuning up" like a miniature symphony orchestra.

Bowen, who played on Jones' most recent Galaxy LP, "Advance," was a perfect complement to the drummer. Relaxed, but never static, Bowen moved swiftly from one mood to another, employing a sometimes feathery tone that from time to time heated up as the situation demanded. His use of circular breathing was judicious, not for mere effect, but in spots where it fitted the emotion or momentum of the moment. He was especially good on the ballad "Soul Eyes," which Mal Waldron wrote and John Coltrane recorded.

McKee, by far the youngest member of the quartet, sounded nonetheless mature, not at all out of his league. He played nimble lines with his long fingers, had excellent intonation and was able to sustain long, flowing ideas, whether soloing or playing in ensemble.

Vuckovich, as always, played with a taut combination of fire and restraint. He may have the soul of a profuse sentimentalist, but he edits himself rigorously, and his solos have a condensed, polished personality. He had time for only a brief rehearsal with the band prior to Tuesday's opener, but he'd played with Joe many times before (mainly in Europe), and the familiarity showed.