



**Cotati's Nick Alva's readying MorningStar for Spreckels theater May 3**

## **Cotati playwright's 'Morning Star' story headed for Spreckels debut**

By Jud Snyder

Sonoma County historians know about Lou Gottlieb buying 30 acres on a hillside near Graton and turning it into Morning Star Ranch. Folk music groupies remember Gottlieb as a bassist/vocalist with the Limelighters trio of mid-1960s when acoustic folk trios dominated the pop music charts.

Gottlieb died in 1996; the Limelighters are no more and Morning Star Ranch simply faded away to its natural rural state. Not even a bronze marker on the site.

Flash forward to 2002. Cotati's Nick Alva became intrigued with the Morning Star

saga when a co-worker at the Rincon Valley public library, Jodi Mitchell, said “You remind me of Lou.” She had a “Morning Star” scrapbook and loaned it to Alva.

“I discovered Lou Gottlieb had deeded his 30 acres to God,” he said. “I realized this was a true theatrical moment. It had to happen.”

Alva was motivated and began his research.

Now, six years later his “Morning Star” play with original music, opens May 3 on the intimate Condiotti experimental theater inside Spreckels Performing Arts Center for a three-week run.

“Jodi put me in touch with Ramon Sender in San Francisco. He knew Gottlieb and was involved with his Morning Star project,” said Alva. “I began sending the stuff I wrote down to him and we had many exchanges over the years while the play was taking shape.”

Morning Star Ranch existed only from 1966 to 1972, based on Gottlieb’s motto of “Open land: access to which is denied to one.” It became a unintended commune and generated a good deal of media coverage. Unfortunately, it became a target of scrutiny by county regulatory agencies including public health, building regulations, courts and other agencies. The idea of dedicating “30 acres to God” didn’t fit in with bureaucratic rules. Morning Star Ranch collapsed under the weight and Lou’s heirs took ownership.

But the “spiritual energy” of the land seemed to hold. In fact, it was almost deeded to the Catholic Church by John Beecher (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s grand-nephew), a previous owner. Many people think the site should be preserved as a uniquely American shrine.

Alva’s play is a step in this direction. The production is directed by Michael Fontaine, well-known to Spreckels and Cinnabar Theater playgoers. Lyrics and music are by Alva, Sender, Tanya Boone-Alva, Alicia Bay Laurel, Joe Dolce, Brian Skinner, Mira Alfasa, Kelly Ann Walton, Wilder Bentley, and of course, Lou Gottlieb.

Born in Castro Valley, Alva, 45, is a graduate of Rohnert Park schools including Rancho Cotate High, Santa Rosa Junior College and holds a BA in history and music from Sonoma State University.

“The play, like Gottlieb’s intent, is not a protest, but to focus on solutions through a theatrical form,” said Alva.