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Festival Attracts Diverse Group of Musicians

BY DEAN HAIR
ARTS & DIVERSIONS EDITOR

Merl Saunders and his Rainforest Band along with the New Riders of the Purple Sage will join Solar Circus, Ras Alan and the Lions, and Natural Healing for EastWest '95, a celebration of today's best live music.

EastWest Fest '95, sponsored by InnerSun Productions, opens in Raleigh today at the Ritz Theater, 2820 Industrial Drive before moving to the Horn in the West Amphitheater in Boone, NC for a 10-hour concert on Saturday.

The concert will feature a blending of different extremes of music from worldbeat boogie blues to rock-folk sounds.

Headlining the concert will be Merl Saunders and his Rainforest Band. Starting out in San Francisco, Saunders has shaped music for more than 20 years. Having a unique sound and creating excellent music, Saunders has performed with the likes of Jerry Garcia, Miles Davis and B. B. King.

Saunders started playing the piano in second grade and had his own band by the time he was 13 years old. He has formed a very unique idea of music. "I was told at a young age that there were two kinds of music, bad and good," he said.

"Jerry Garcia was in my band, the Key-stones, for about 4 years," Saunders said. "We started getting together in the early 70s. We lived only three blocks away from each other. Me, Jerry and a drummer started hanging out at the Matrix in New York, and that was the first bar we ever played. It started with just 10 people coming out, and then the next weekend it would grow to 20 and then to 100 people."

"Jerry and I toured around and played a lot of great music. He is gone, but the music and chemistry that we had will live forever, and as long as I am alive I will play it." A life changing event for Saunders was going to the rain forest in Peru. "A film company out of Miami sent me to Peru



Merl Saunders and his Rainforest Band will perform at the annual EastWest Fest '95 at the Ritz Theater in Raleigh today with guests Solar Circus, Ras Alan and the Lions, New Riders of the Purple Sage and Natural Healing.

and I was able to observe firsthand what happens in the rain forest and talk to the children," Saunders said. "The album I did went to No. 4 on the Billboard chart's New Age section. I have gotten letters from doctors and lawyers saying this music is healing, and other people call me telling me they got married to it and had babies listening to this music."

One of Saunders' greatest thrills is per-

forming live before a small audience. "Doing live shows gives you a certain energy," Saunders said. "I did some concerts with the Grateful Dead in the early 70's, and it got out of proportion, and you could not see the people. I like playing bars and small theaters where you can see the people. That is what would get me off."

"If it ever gets to where I play stadiums, I won't do it. It is a rip-off to the fans. It is

awful to look down at tiny people and them having to look up at screens when you are right there."

Tickets, \$12 in advance and \$14 at the door, may be purchased for the Raleigh concert at The Ritz, at all School Kids Records locations in Raleigh and Cary, and at Monster Records in Chapel Hill. For further information on EastWest Fest '95, call 910-488-3620.

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