

The King of Clubs

Catalyst

The Catalyst gets its close-up in a new documentary

BY RICHARD VONBUSACK

"There's a lot of brain cells in this carpet."
—David Lindley, touring the Catalyst

SO. Hostile extraterrestrials land in Santa Cruz. Seeking to punish the criminal pride of this town, they offer citizens a dread choice. Which is to be demolished: City Hall or the Catalyst?

If this event should ever take place, the mayor and city council may take comfort: likely, there's room for town meetings in the Catalyst.

Opening this week at the Santa Cruz Film Festival is *The Catalyst*, an engaging and long-overdue documentary profile of the 40-year-old nightclub. There are students drinking there right this minute whose parents stomped, writhed and were sometimes '86ed from the very same premises.

In this approximately hour-long documentary, former *Good Times* photographer Michèle Benson talks to the bartenders, the talent and the late owner Randall Kane, who died in 2009.

"The Catalyst has been called 'The House that Snail Built.' We're showing the film and then Snail is playing a reunion show," Benson says via phone from the United Kingdom. She's in England to attend the Glastonbury Festival—and to get married—but Benson will be on hand for the film's premiere, along with producer and co-writer Dean Newbury of Felton.

The Snail lineup at the premiere show is Bob O'Neill, Ken Kraft, Don Baldwin and Bret Bloomfield of



JUMP JOINT Huey Lewis & The News on the Catalyst main stage.

Jefferson Starship. The local band's own colorful odyssey is essential to this filmed history of the club. Snail headlined the Catalyst some 65 times.

Kane's Club

There's a perfection to the very name of the Catalyst. It is truly a neutralizer, an energizer, a place of blending, a meeting place for the town and the university. It is a crossroads and a temple of Dionysius. Greg Kihn, the film's unofficial host, tells the camera, "A lot of rock & roll history was made here. The lot is a perennial tailgate party, the main room is just the right size, the ceiling is just the right height

and the backstage is just wild enough."

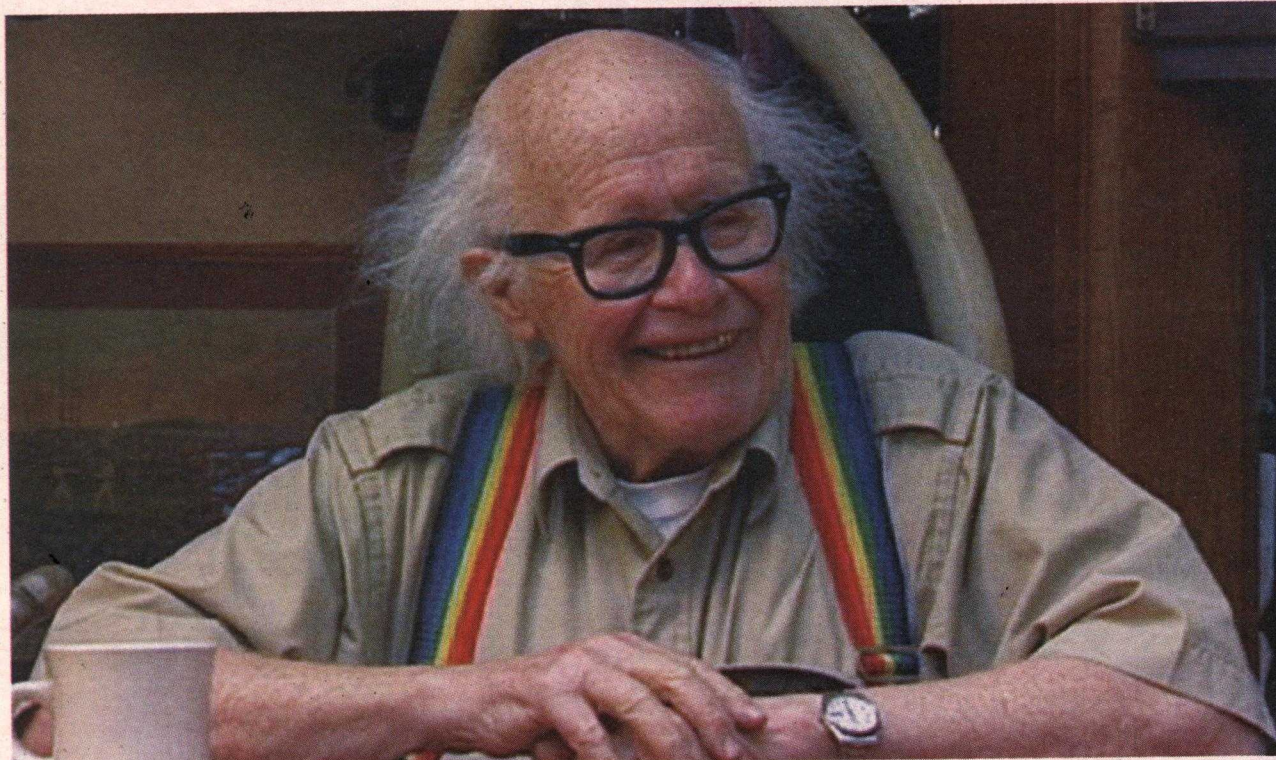
Part of *The Catalyst's* definitiveness as a documentary is a series of interviews with the late owner Randall Kane: monk-bald, in khaki shirt and rainbow suspenders, he reminisces about the talent that came through town ("James Brown was a pain in the ass"). Kane is caught in an afternoon's philosophical mood during the club's troubles with money and a suspended liquor license.

"We started doing interviews with Randall," Benson says, "when the club was closed down for an ABC issue. That was a very nasty thing they did to him—what the hell was that? When you think of what he paid the town in entertainment taxes."

Even though he'd studied English in college, Kane was the Dean of Arts at San Francisco Art Institute for some three years. "Basically, he liked to collect art," Benson says, "and the Catalyst was a place for him to have a living art gallery, as well as a place for him to read his newspaper. Some people thought he wasn't very accessible, but his heart and soul was in the right place."

Kane's art collection included a neon Jesus, an icon salvaged from a destroyed Nicaraguan church and gifted with a miniature Telecaster. And there's the over-the-bar nude, a reference to every frontier saloon you've seen in a Western.

"I got that



MICHELE BENSON

RAISING KANE Randall Kane, legendary owner of the Catalyst, is interviewed at length in Michèle Benson's and Dean Newbury's new film.

because I felt every bar ought to have a nude painting hanging over it," Kane tells the camera. (The curvy model in the picture OD'd later on.) The now well-known Portland artist Kitty Wallis painted it—under financial duress, Kane claimed. Kane's brother shot the polar bear that became the rug.

Early Times

The long-remembered may recall the old Catalyst, run by Al and Patti De Ludovico, as a deli and coffee shop in what had been the print shop for County Bank. On camera, Kane dismisses the first music shows there as folksy I-gave-my-love-a-cherry stuff.

Former local journalist Carter Young recalls, "The first incarnation of the Catalyst was dank (the roof leaked). A smugglers' den where Rimbaud would feel at home: drug dealers, William Burroughs, Jr. at the helm of the dishwasher, poncy leather boys drinking jasmine tea...The new site was cleaner, brighter and more varied: Friday happy hours that had the odd cheer of the Titanic's last call, Sunday burgers after the media league

softball games, playing pinball upstairs while in the zone...and the best music hall for the times—epic shows by the Specials, the Beat Farmers, Neil Young and the Ducks, Doug Sahm and the Texas Tornados, Tom Petty, Van Morrison...more than an intoxicated youth can remember."

This place we sometimes can barely remember is in the site of a former bowling alley owned by the Van Winkle family; reportedly a mural depicted their ancestor, the time-traveling kegler Rip van W. The opening in 1976 had people lined up to see what was behind the construction workers' plywood.

Benson and co-writer/producer Dean Newbury had been there almost from the beginning. Newbury booked the Catalyst for a time and started the Catalyst Follies, an annual tradition that allowed the bartenders to take the stage.

Benson, a Fort Lauderdale-born film major who had grown restless in Southern California and wound up in Santa Cruz the old-fashioned way—by stopping for gas—worked as a staff photographer at *Good Times*, photographing bands for the "Night

Moves" column and eventually writing the thing for two and a half years. Benson remained on the *Good Times* masthead even after she left in 1980 to go on the road with the Doobie Brothers.

"Dean was very enamored of Randall as a father figure," Benson recalls. "He and I co-wrote a loose script. We decided to break the film up into sections, one section on happy hour, for example. We had a very good videographer, Eric Thiermann of Impact Production, and Kevin Monahan was our sound engineer. Eric came in on his good graces and got paid in blood, sweat and tears.

"We had no money. It was a labor of love and passion, and if it wasn't a digital world, we never would have finished the film."

The Legend Lives On

The excerpts from live shows demonstrate the Catalyst's salient features: its excellent sound system and its ability to attract a wealth of talent. Eddie Vedder stage-dived from the

balcony; Nirvana blasted their music from the stage.

The Catalyst is not a subject I can write about unmoved. I was happy to live right around the corner from the place on Elm Street, despite the occasional parking-lot donnybrooks at closing time. We were close enough that we hosted an impromptu after-party for Bow Wow Wow. My housemate Dale Palarz and I hauled out five jumbo garbage bags full of beer cans the morning after. That same summer, I tried unsuccessfully to hang a bedsheet banner on the side of the building reading "Santa Cruz Welcomes the Gang of 4" when that band of British revolutionaries arrived.

We were close enough to the Catalyst that we hosted an impromptu after-party for Bow Wow Wow. My housemate and I hauled out five bags full of beer cans the morning after.

A faction of staff writers politicked hard to get X's first trip to Santa Cruz put on the cover of *City on a Hill*. It worked, and we got thanked from the stage. Everybody I knew went to both of the two nights Iggy Pop played; some friends and I cornered him afterward, getting him to autograph a

can of Alpo in honor of his tune about dog food. (The noted guitarist Peter Tripodi: "I used to listen to you in junior high school!" Iggy: "Uh...I went to junior high school, too!")

It's sadly touching to see the late Mr. Kane having some daytime night-thoughts about his club. In his estimation, only 10 percent of the people who went had ears for the music; most attended for the scene and the hope of meeting warm bodies.

"I'm not terribly fond of nightclubs," Kane says in the film. "The only reason I'd go to a nightclub by myself is if I were trying to meet a girl. Young people are still trying to get laid or whatever, so they go where the action is." He also hints at the Catalyst's financial problems in those later days, sighing, "It hasn't been profitable for quite a few years. It's not a business I'd recommend getting into."

"These are things my hardworking editor Denise Gallant wanted to take out," Benson says. "I have to tell you, Randall was so charming and giving, and his heart was open. I did want people to hang on the fact: this is a film about the human condition, and we wanted to show Randall's humanity."

Under its newer ownership, the Catalyst has changed but it stays the same. All-ages shows are a big part of the current Catalyst; rock bands are getting younger, as Mike Connor noted in this paper back in 2003 when interviewing long-time booker Gary Tighe.

This anniversary party in documentary form finds the Catalyst congratulated by the people who made it such a beckoning light in the coastal fog.

"It's a power place, for some reason," Benson suggests. "Music sounds better, people are happier. It's a place that just cannot be replicated. I'd like to see it around for a thousand years."

**PREMIERE OF 'THE CATALYST' &
SNAIL CONCERT**

Friday, 8:30pm

The Catalyst, 1011 Pacific Ave,
Santa Cruz

\$30 adv/\$35 door at
www.thecatalystfilm.com