

# King of Clubs

Santa Cruz's landmark nightclub, the Catalyst, the subject of a nostalgic new documentary

*Catalyst*  
By WALLACE BAINE

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It is a downtown landmark, a point of orientation that Santa Cruzans use to talk about what is where on Pacific Avenue.

It is a social nexus, a meeting place for generations of locals to hang out, hook up and party on.

It is a nighttime hub, often buzzing with activity from scores, even hundreds of people waiting to get in.

It is a storehouse of memories for music lovers to connect certain bands, certain shows and certain moments in their lives.

It is a gateway to opportunity for young musicians looking to get noticed by audiences.

And, it is the footprint that the rock 'n' roll revolution has left behind in Santa Cruz, the touchstone for people who live in Santa Cruz County to access America's post-Elvis musical history.

So, isn't it about time someone made a film about the Catalyst?

On May 6, the fabled nightclub will be the center of attention, as it is most nights downtown. But this time, the Catalyst will be celebrating itself with a night that includes the local premiere of a documentary about the club's storied 40-year history and a live show from Snail, the great Santa Cruz band that, for most of that history, held the unofficial title of the Catalyst's house band.

"The Catalyst" — an hourlong narrative of "the Cat" and its glorious, if eccentric, back story — is the product of director Michele Benson and producer Dean Newbury. And, if all had gone according to plan, it would have been released long before now.

The film was 10 years in the making, having begun filming back during the club's 30th anniversary year in 1999, which also featured a live performance by Snail. The film is not only a frenetic cataloging of all the bands and musicians who've played the Catalyst over the years — an unfathomable list that includes everyone from Neil Young to Nirvana — it's also a peek into the club's unique inner culture, and its standing in fostering the Santa Cruz music scene.

But perhaps most of all, "The Catalyst" is a tribute to the one individual most associated with the club, its longtime owner Randall Kane. Thanks to his horn-rimmed glasses, unkempt white hair and, especially, his trademark rainbow suspenders, Kane was an icon in downtown Santa Cruz for decades, presiding at



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

ABOVE: Photographer Michele Benson and producer Dean Newbury got the Catalyst story on film and will be showing their documentary at the Santa Cruz Film Festival. RIGHT: Randall Kane owned the Catalyst before his death in 2009.

the Catalyst or riding around town on his bicycle, often with thousands



SEE CATALYST ON A2





Ken Kraft, Bob O'Neill and Brett Bloomfield wail away at the front of the stage as the Snail plays the Catalyst's fourth anniversary St. Patrick's Day party in March 1980.

DAN COYRO/  
SENTINEL FILE

# CATALYST

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of dollars of cash from the previous night's take in his backpack.

The great sadness at the center of Friday's celebration is that Kane will not be there. He died in 2009.

"I told him, 'Randall, when I finish this, I'm going to send a limo to pick you up,'" said director Benson. "And he said, 'You always think big. Follow your dreams. I'll be there. And I was really heartbroken that it didn't happen that way. That was, in fact, literally the last thing he said to me, that day on the steps of the post office."

Benson began her long association with the Catalyst in 1976, when she was first hired as a photographer for the local weekly, *Good Times*. She chose to spend her free time hanging out at the Catalyst, shooting bands and fans.

"I spent four, five nights a week there," she said. "It was my living room. I think I spent more time in the Catalyst than I did in my own house, not counting sleep."

Newbury's history with the Catalyst goes back further. He was first hired in 1972 as a busboy and eventually became the club's booking agent.

"I loved Randall," said Newbury, who came up with the idea of a documentary film about the club. "I miss him dearly. And I really wanted

## IF YOU GO

'THE CATALYST'

**WHAT:** A screening of the documentary, followed by a live concert by Snail with Ken Kraft, Bob O'Neill, Brett Bloomfield and Donny Baldwin.

**WHEN:** 8:30 p.m. Friday, May 6. Music begins at 10 p.m.

**WHERE:** The Catalyst, 1011 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz

**COST:** \$30 advance; \$35 at the door

**DETAILS:** [www.catalystclub.com](http://www.catalystclub.com).

**NOTE:** The film is part of the Santa Cruz Film Festival, and will be also be shown at 2 p.m. May 9 at the Nickelodeon. Go to [www.santacruzfilmfestival.org](http://www.santacruzfilmfestival.org) for more information.

(the film) to be Randall's vision of what he thought the club should be."

Kane was an unlikely music impresario. He purchased the Catalyst from its original owners in its original location, at the St. George Hotel, where Bookshop Santa Cruz is now. At the time, the Catalyst was a kind of bohemian coffeehouse. The music played there was strictly folk and acoustic.

Kane came to Santa Cruz after having served as dean at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1976, he moved the club several blocks down Pacific Avenue to a former bowling alley at its current site at

1011 Pacific, mainly, he said, because he was restrained by hotel residents from presenting live music.

In the film, Kane surprisingly admits, "I'm not terribly fond of nightclubs. Old fossils like me don't hang out in nightclubs." Indeed, Kane's artistic passion was visual arts, and the Catalyst, during Kane's tenure, functioned as a showcase for Kane's eccentric tastes in art.

Kane was famously irascible, and he had several legal run-ins with the city. But, said those who knew him, he was also possessed of a strong fondness of artists and musicians. "Randall is a lot kinder in my memory than he was when he was around," said Newbury. "He acted gruff, but he had a great heart on the inside."

Kane was instrumental in allowing a musical culture to flourish in Santa Cruz by giving opportunities to young local bands, including Snail, Tao Chemical, the Humans and the Call.

The film features the two musical entities that played the most at the Catalyst — Snail and San Francisco singer/songwriter and hitmaker Greg Kihn. Kihn serves as a kind of narrator to the film. And Snail members Ken Kraft and Bob O'Neill — who played the Catalyst more than 65 times through the years — reminisce about the role the club played in their moment of fame in the late '70s and early '80s.

The long Snail-Catalyst relationship started off rocky. The band first played at the old Catalyst when Kane was vacation. The night of that first gig coincided with a police raid on the Catalyst to find underage drinking.

"Randall said, 'They'll never play my club again,'" said Snail guitarist Ken Kraft. "His famous quote was, 'I wouldn't let those guys play a comb in my place.'"

"If you hadn't been 86'ed at the Catalyst, you're nobody," said Benson. "When I first started showing up at the Catalyst, Randall would say, 'Who is that girl, and why is she in my joint?' But we eventually became close."

"Randall used to hire poets, writers, out-of-work musician bums like myself," said Newbury. "That's the kind of person he would hire. He loved anyone who tried to make a life like that."

"The Catalyst" features concert footage from over the years. Benson, an accomplished still photographer, also features some of her finest shots from the stage at the Catalyst, many of which adorned the walls of the club for years.

The film is also a part of the upcoming Santa Cruz Film Festival. After the May 6 screening at the Catalyst, the film will be shown again at 2 p.m. May 9 at the Nickelodeon.

For details, go to [www.santacruzfilmfestival.org](http://www.santacruzfilmfestival.org) or [www.catalystclub.com](http://www.catalystclub.com).