

## SANTA CRUZ

# Downtown landmark the catalyst for new film

*Catalyst*  
Club focusing on  
live music featured  
in documentary

By Wallace Baine

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There's no question The Catalyst is a downtown Santa Cruz landmark. For generations it served as a social nexus, a nighttime hub and a gateway for young musicians looking to get noticed.

It's also the footprint that the rock 'n' roll revolution left behind in Santa Cruz and a storehouse of memories for music lovers to connect bands, shows and moments in their lives.

On Friday, the club will again be the center of attention, this time for a birthday party and the local release of a documentary about the club's storied history.

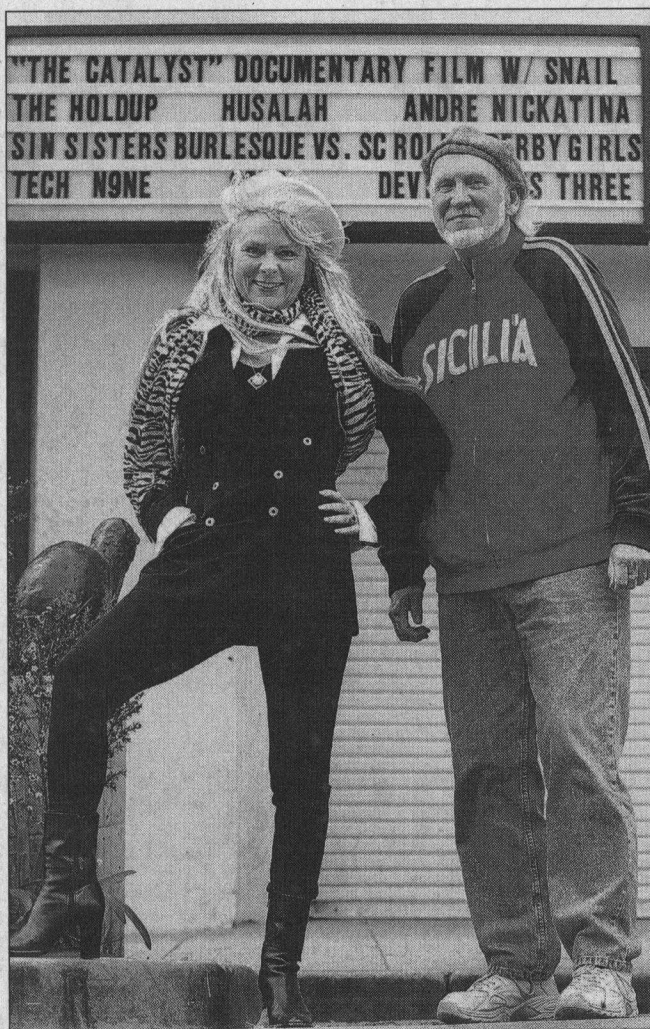
The hourlong "The Catalyst" film is the product of director Michele Benson and producer Dean Newbury. Ten years in the making, it is not only a frenetic cataloging of all the bands and musicians who've played the Catalyst — everyone from Neil Young to Nirvana — but it's also a peek into the club's culture and its standing in the Santa Cruz music scene.

But "The Catalyst" is also a tribute to longtime owner Randall Kane, who died in 2009. With his horn-rimmed glasses, unkempt white hair and trademark rainbow suspenders, he was a downtown icon.

"I told him, 'Randall, when I finish this, I'm going to send a limo to pick you up,'" said 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."

Benson began her association with The Catalyst in 1976, when she was 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. The film features some of her photographs, including some from the stage, which adorned the walls of the club for years.

"I spent four, five nights a week there," she said. "It was my living room. I think I spent more time in The Catalyst



DAN COYRO/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Film director Michele Benson and producer Dean Newbury will be showing their documentary, "The Catalyst," at the Santa Cruz Film Festival.

**"If you hadn't been 86'ed at The Catalyst, you're nobody."**

— Michele Benson, director

than I did in my own house, not counting sleep."

Newbury 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. "I miss him dearly. And I really wanted (the film) to be Randall's vision of what he thought the club should be."

Kane was an unlikely music impresario when he bought The Catalyst from its original owners in its original location, at the St. George Hotel where the 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, he said, because he was restrained by hotel residents from presenting live music.

"I'm not terribly fond of nightclubs," Kane admits in an interview in the film "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 also had a

## IF YOU GO

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

**When:** 8:30 p.m. Friday. Music begins at 10 p.m.

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

**Tickets:** \$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. Monday at the Nickelodeon. Go to [www.santacruzfilmfestival.org](http://www.santacruzfilmfestival.org) for more information.

strong fondness for 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 hit-maker Greg Kihn. Kihn serves as a kind of narrator to the film. And Snail members Ken Kraft and Bob O'Neill reminisce about the role the club played for their bands in the late '70s and early '80s.

The first time Snail played at the old Catalyst, Kane was on vacation. The gig coincided with a police raid to find underage drinking.

"Randall said, 'They'll never play my club again,'" said Kraft, who plays guitar in Snail. "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."