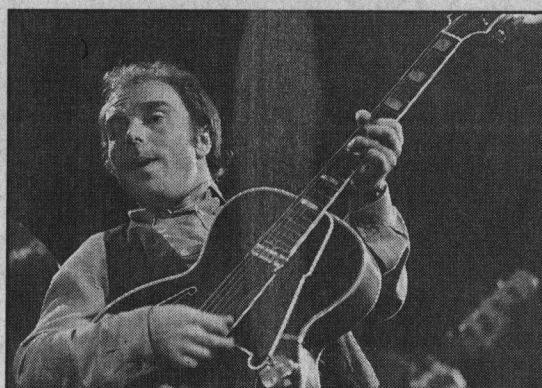


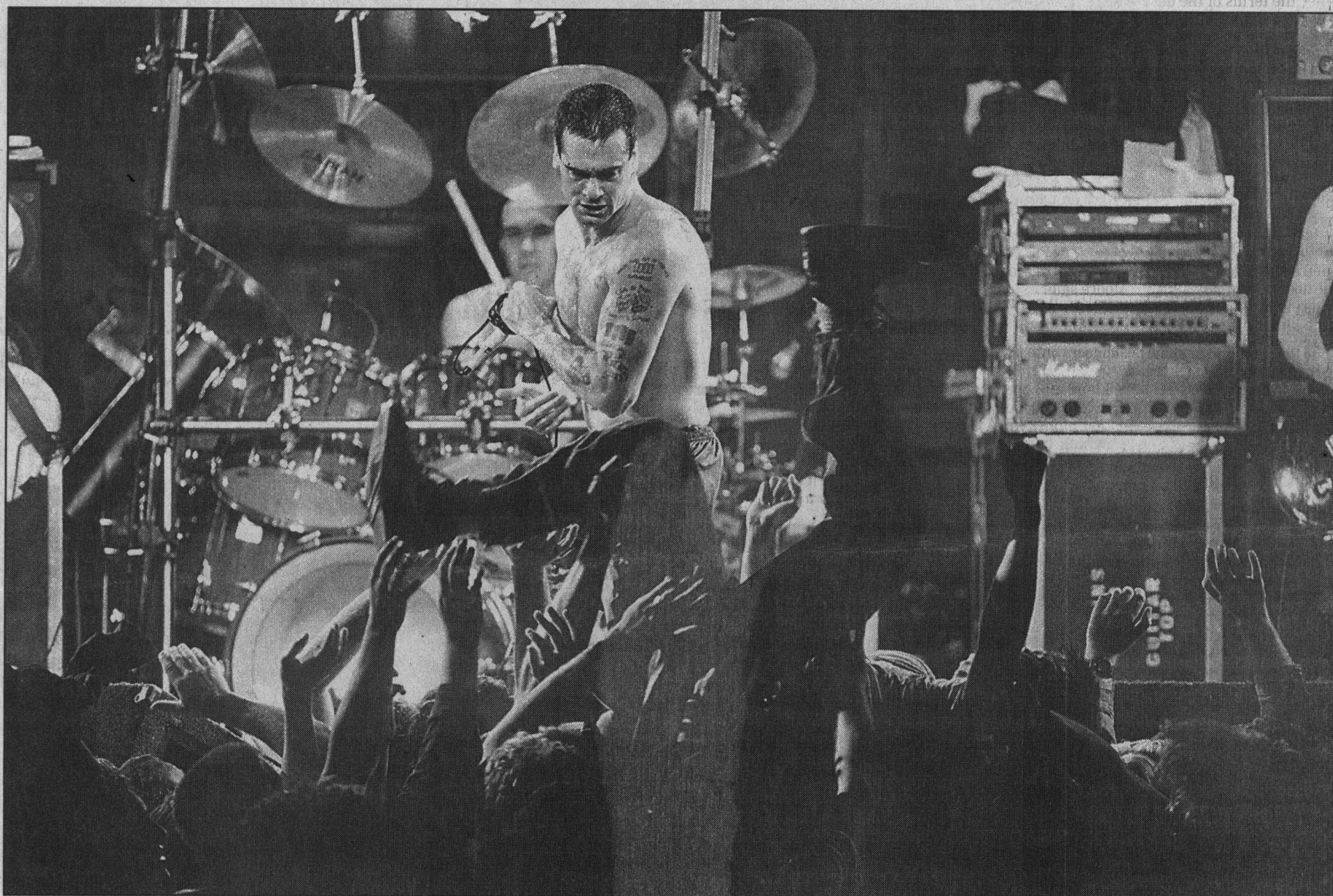
Rock

Catalyst has always been



On

the little club that can



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Henry Rollins brings out the best in crowd surfers during a Catalyst show in 1992. In the top photo, Van Morrison plays a tune in 1982.

By **STACEY VREEKEN**
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

Let me just list a few of the acts that I've caught over the past 15 years: Neil Young, Pearl Jam, King Sunny Ade, Ice T, Steel Pulse, Richard Thompson, Bob Marley, the Clash, English Beat, Todd Rundgren.

This isn't New York, mind you.

Also: Emmylou Harris, Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Tubes, Jimmy Cliff, Elvis Costello, Tina Turner, Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

The list goes on.

Like so many graduates of UC Santa Cruz, I stuck around to gorge myself on our town's rich cultural life, especially its music.

The music scene in Santa Cruz County thrives to a degree only found in big cities and other college towns. Musical acts from the world over play here.

The best of the blues is at Moes Alley. Top jazz acts at Kuumbwa. World music at Palookaville. Nostalgia at Cocanut Grove. And whatever they can hook currently blowing through the Bay Area at the Civic Auditorium.

But a favorite spot to hear music is at the Catalyst, which has a bit of all of the above.

The club offers plenty of room, groovy art, wild plants, a boat hanging from the ceiling, food, places to get up close to the stage and places for retreat.

But really, it all goes back to the music. You have to ask, "Why do these bands come here, time after time?"

It's about personality. Gary Tighe, who books the Catalyst and produces shows in the Bay Area, has far-flung working relationships with musicians and management companies. He says the Catalyst is one of

the top places to play in the Western United States, if not the country.

And he's not just blowing steam. This is the place where Neil Young decides to pop in for a night's jam. He's been there about 10 times.

As Tighe tells it, one time Young was talking about different dates, but none were confirmed. "They didn't say anything to me," Tighe said. "They just showed up on a Monday and loaded in."

"About five hours later they confirmed to play that night. It's unusual to load in

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before you confirm."

But Young lives in La Honda, the club is close for him, and musicians like the Catalyst's beefy sound system with its 40-channel board and separate monitor system.

Tighe has talked to Young, but "I like to leave the artists alone. I don't make them meet my wife and kids or anything. I rarely sit down and hang with them."

When he did, he had one of his more interesting "brushes with celebrity" with Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam.

Tighe stuck his head in the door to say a quick hello. Vedder, by himself, invited Tighe in for a chat, which turned into 45 minutes on the music biz.

"I told him I wouldn't mind being famous, but not as famous as he was," Tighe said. "He's sensitive to that. He was nice. I rarely do that."

At the time, Pearl Jam was on the cover of Time, Newsweek and Rolling Stone — the hottest band in the United States.

How did Tighe get Pearl Jam to play at the Catalyst? He knew the band's agents and had been quietly holding that date for six weeks.

"I kept that a secret nobody knew, not even the guy working with me," he said.

It speaks to the relationship Tighe has with the bands and their managers. He's a straight-shooter and has the reputation for being tough but fair.

While you may not want to play poker with him, if you're a new band you couldn't ask for a better introduction.

No Doubt first played the Cat on a dollar night as an unknown LA ska band. Nirvana's the same story.

But just because you're a great act doesn't mean automatic entrée.

"Because of the size of the place, it costs us a lot of money to do each show," Tighe said. "We have to make sure it draws."

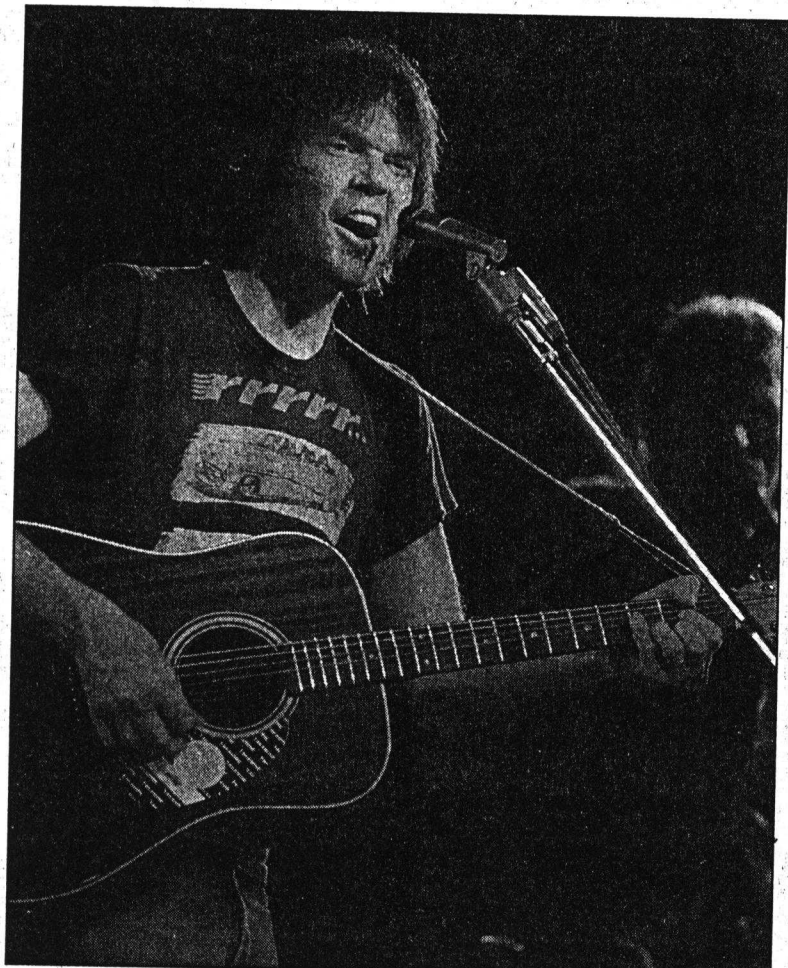
"You can see a tremendous act in Texas, but they don't mean anything here. You have to fit them in with someone else who will draw."

The showcase nights, dollar nights, is the place to bring in bands before they break."

Free shows in the Atrium in front attract a good crowd for new bands without draw.

"A couple hundred people come plowing in there, and it's happening," Tighe said.

The showcase nights offer more



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Neil Young occasionally tests material at the Cat, like here in 1982.

opportunity, with three bands and a low ticket price.

"Where else do you have local bands play that draw in 400 people on a Thursday night? People are into live music in this town. I mean unknown bands," he said.

That's the other part of the equation. "Santa Cruz audiences are open to new stuff, even opening acts," Tighe said. "It's rare that opening acts get an encore or applause. Lots of times in San Francisco, people have their backs turned to the band."

"Here people listen, applaud. It's a good vibe thing that happens between local audiences and bands. People appreciate the efforts by a support act."

For audiences, the Catalyst has good sound, you can see the band, and move around the club.

"Even at sold-out shows, you can go to the back and have room to hold out your arms and spin," Tighe said.

Spin?
"Let's just say there's a few arm spinners in Santa Cruz," he said. More and more major artists

find Santa Cruz a great place to start a tour. There's no big media scrutiny and the town's small, but big enough to be comfortable.

Alanis Morissette played a couple of nights at the Cat to start her tour, as did Smash Mouth (who also filmed a video in Santa Cruz) and Pearl Jam. All these artists were on top when they played here.

"It's good for them to come here first before touring the whole country. It's great for us," Tighe said.

Some of the best music happens when the big stars play with the locals. When guitarist Lindsey Buckingham jammed with Snail one night, a few Fleetwood Mac songs came out, including "Go Your Own Way."

"It was so good," Tighe said. "It was the best. That's the one that I've always pointed out as an amazing moment."

One in a string of amazing moments through the years. It's those moments that a music lover lives for and a Santa Cruz resident grows fat on.