

The Catalyst/

Two decades of beatnik-hippie-new wave eccentricity

By TOM LONG
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IT'S NOT YOUR usual restaurant, er... club, er... bar, er... pool hall, er...

Well, it's not your usual anything. Jesus Christ plays electric guitar above the entrance, framed by a neon halo.

A rowboat hangs over dining tables in the main room. Lazy carp swim about in a fern-adorned fountain beneath. A wooden box filled with troll-like creatures drinking beer and sharing merriment hangs on a wall by the bar.

Huge murals of camels and reindeer and some low-riding Santa Claus span the wall space behind the deli counter, while in the back room, naked Indian women dance and de-evolve across the walls.

A Heineken windmill sits on the back bar wearing a straw sombrero. Nearby, a mobile of red stars drifts down from a skylight.

It is, of course, the Catalyst and this month it is celebrating its 10th anniversary at its current location.

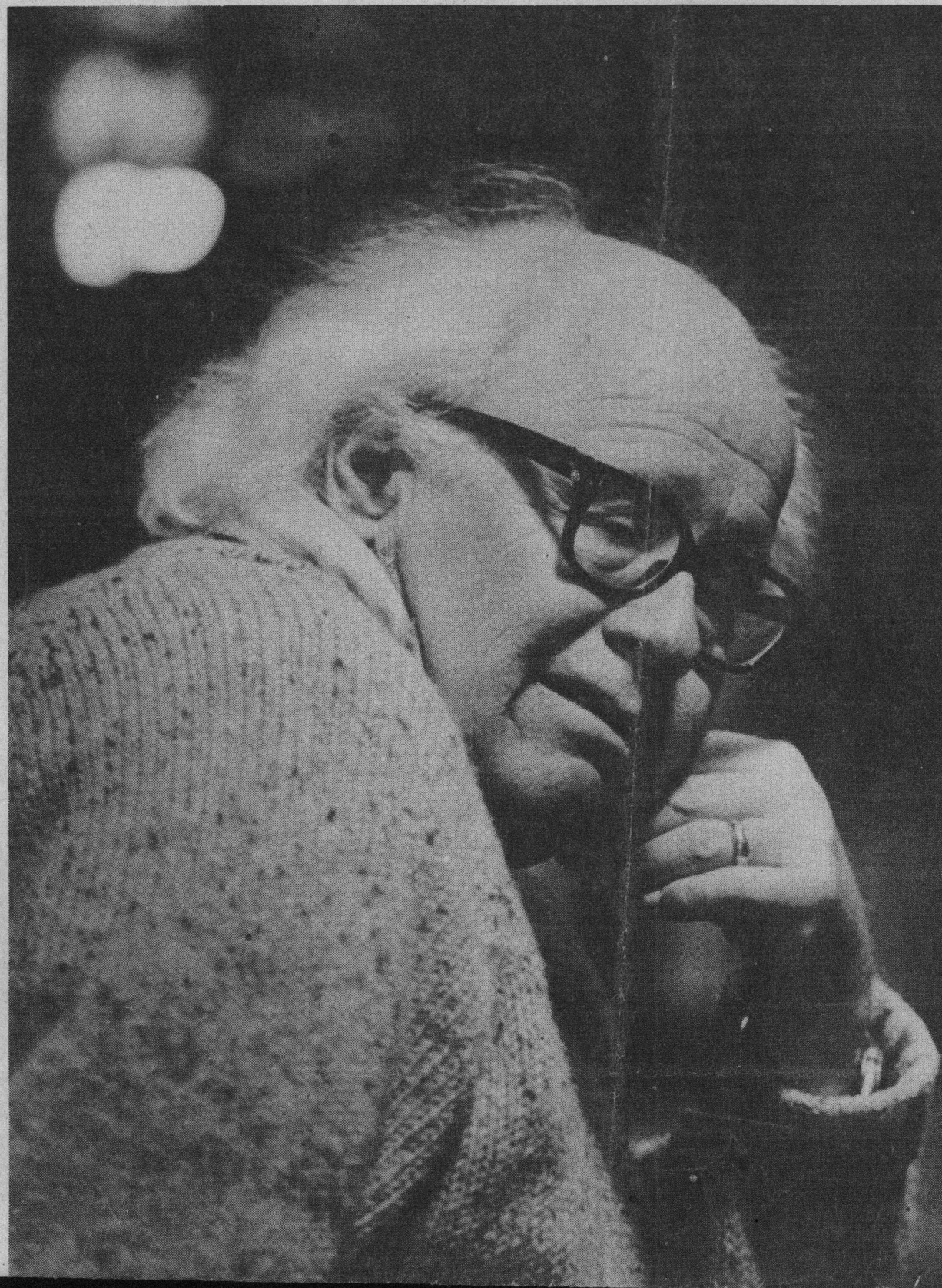
ITHINK architecture is a greatly exaggerated art. Actually, I think a lot of architects should be taken out and shot," says Randall Kane, owner of the Catalyst.

As a consequence (and possibly to avoid criminal charges) Kane is not only the owner and manager of the Catalyst, but its designer as well.

After it became obvious that he would have to move the club from its original site beneath and behind the St. George Hotel, where a restaurant called Gatsby's now dwells, Kane set off in search of a new location more than a decade ago. He found it in a bowling alley at the beach end of Pacific Avenue.

"I was limited with the building; it looked exactly like a shoebox," says Kane. "Basically, I was trying to de-uglify it."

The road to the current Catalyst stretches further back than that move, however. Kane was a regular patron of the original Catalyst, which was a small coffee house founded in 1966 and operated by a co-op in hopes of being a — you guessed it — a catalyst of sorts for mingling between the then-new university types and the good folk of Santa Cruz.



the bar is packed and the front room is near-full with overflow.

Upstairs, the game room is crackling and its bar is packed. Pool tables are filled, quarters are laying in wait. Racks are broken, the electronic zings of video games shoot through the air, and all the while a jukebox pumps out raunch and roll.

If somebody could harness the Catalyst's volume and turn it into energy, OPEC would be out of business forever.

Randall Kane's racket is still alive and well.

IT'S NOT run in a business-like way. It sort of runs itself," says Kane. "I think management is an exaggerated skill."

"I'm not very greedy," he says. "As long as the bills get paid and the troops get their money, things are fine."

And things are fine around the Catalyst. Many of the employees have turned what started out as busboy jobs into long-term careers. And after so many years together, the crew itself has turned into something of a family.

"It's definitely a family type of situation," says security head Dino Defendis. "It's like a home. People leave but they always seem to come back."

"A lot of the time people will work here for a couple of years, go do something else for a while, and then come back," says talent buyer Bo Tighe.

"In a lot of places people go home and don't want to see the people they work with," adds Tighe. "But around here people will wind up at somebody else's house quite often after a show."

"You would think that everybody would be dead tired of one another, yet..."

Still, the club isn't run quite as loosely as it used to be.

"It's a lot more structured now," says Kane. "There's a much greater accent on entertainment now. It's drifted off in a Bill Graham direction."

But the Catalyst's concept of structure isn't quite as restrictive as most businesses. In fact, the place is in a state of perpetual flux.

"It's my canvas," says Kane. "I'm still screwing around with it."

"My taste is — maybe I don't have



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Club's neon Jesus

Kane shrugs. "Sometimes people don't know what to make of the place, but..."

WHAT TO MAKE of this place. And why make anything of it?

Mainly because the Catalyst could only have happened in Santa Cruz. This crazy-quilt pastiche of beatnik-hippie-new wave eccentricity, California Cool and capitalistic indulgence would not be a possibility in Anaheim. The citizens of Duluth would faint dead away.

Anyone suggesting such a place in the Soviet Union would probably be taken out and shot.

"There probably isn't another place like this in the world," says Kane, and he attributes a lot of its magic to Santa Cruz as well. "This is a great place to live. I know I can't imagine living anywhere else."

In many ways, the Catalyst is an ongoing work of functional art reflecting the changes Santa Cruz has experienced during the past 20 years. When you come right down to it, it's a pretty nutty place, but... welcome to Santa Cruz.

"I'm a philosopher," says Kane. "Your life is a trajectory from birth to the grave. You try to have some

For a while it served the purpose admirably, but as so often happens with co-op coffee houses, the profits did not match the vision. When the co-op realized they would have to either sell the place or close it down they approached Kane, who had moved to the area after years spent working in everything from newspapers to education and real estate.

He decided to buy it and transformed it from a coffee house to a nightclub-deli-bar-hangout that soon became famous throughout California among the hip as *the* place to visit when you came through Santa Cruz.

Unfortunately, *the* place to visit was falling apart, from the plumbing to the electricity. There also were constant complaints from the residents of the hotel above it.

"The old crocks up there wanted to die in peace," says Kane. "Personally, I'd rather die someplace where there was a lot of racket."

So Kane, even though he wasn't planning on dying anytime soon, set out to build a place where he could make a lot of racket.

He succeeded.

IT'S FRIDAY night and the Catalyst is still the Catalyst. Many of the faces have changed — although a surprising

number are the same — and the haircuts are shorter, the pants are tighter and the plaid shirts are nowhere to be seen.

But back behind the gate separating the Catalyst's front restaurant area from its back nightclub area, the crowd still mingles furiously. The mix of voices is so loud it completely drowns out the sound of a television hanging in a corner, offering MTV images. Old friends are being run into, new friends are being made, singles on the prowl are making moves, being spurned or rewarded.

Fifteen years ago, it might have been the fabled Oganookie inspiring the stomping with their hot country-

rock bounce. Some 300 people would be backed up from the one, and only, stage in the room to the long glass deli case. Half the folks would be freaking out, half would be surveying the scene.

Tonight it's Eddie and the Tide, locals who've actually managed a record contract after years of pushing their way into the music biz, belting out their polished new wave-Springsteen-pop tunes. All that's left of Oganookie is a carved wood nameplate that hangs next to the coat-check room.

But the game is the same. I'm sitting on a table towards the back of the stuffed room, taking notes, when a young inebriate approaches and

says, "If you're writing something about this place, be sure and write about that."

He points to the derriere of a young lady who is bent over another table, wiggling back and forth to the music.

Behind the bar, 10 bartenders are pouring like crazy, under seige. Most have been with the Catalyst for some time, a few are actually veterans of the original site. They rap the bar with their knuckles to signal their appreciation of tips.

The conversation is easily at Lear Jet level and the louder the din gets, the louder people yell back and forth to one another, which makes the din louder yet. The dance floor is crowded, the balconies are crowded,

any taste, so I call it eclectic," he says.

"Sometimes I don't like a piece but an artist will badger me until it gets done. Sometimes it's fun to just put things up even if I don't like them."

to the grave. You try to have some fun and satisfaction along the way.

"I own the place and get a few laughs out of it. What more can you expect out of life?" he asks.

"I've had a good time here." So have a lot of people.

Owner Randall Kane brings his own eclectic taste to the Catalyst pastiche.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

There's always a dull roar around the bar

Through a beer haze, it mirrored the times

By RICK CHATENEVER
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YOU COULD always tell the hour of the day by what was going on behind the glass-paned windows. The activities in the cavernous hall were so regular, you could set your watch by them ... except no one wore a watch in those days. Time was something you could choose to believe in, or not.

But nonetheless, you could tell it was mid-morning if everyone was hidden behind a Chronicle, with classical music on the stereo and the coffee flowing in nerve-jangling gallons.

At noon, the lawyers would arrive, picking up their pastrami sandwiches at the deli case then taking their places next to the fountain where the goldfish lived, fat and lazy.

During the the long hours of dusky afternoon, the bright sunlight kept at bay through the windows, the place was a magnet for every wayward flowerchild hitchhiking Highway 1 from San Francisco to LA. They would sit in their faded jeans with peace sign patches, their backpacks too bulky to be pushed under the tables. With dilated irises and eyes staring nowhere, their mouths would silently sing along with Bob Dylan, forming the Zombie Tabernacle Choir to accompany Don McLean: "Bye, bye, Miss American Pie ... singin' this'll be the day that I die."

Once a week, Friday afternoon around 4, came happy hour. With a honky tonk pianist, beer and pretzels in pitchers, the whole place was so packed with mountain

men in plaid flannel shirts and earth mamas in flower-print dresses, that you were lucky if you could find a place to stand next to the deli case. The barracuda cruised contentedly in its aquarium over the bar. The bartenders were poetry in motion, moving in double time.

There was a break then, giving the real regulars a chance to wander up the street, maybe to the United Bar for a burger. They'd need the energy for what was to come — night time, prime time, *live boogie time*.

Night time was the time to dance to music by Oganookie or Django, to drink more beer, to play some darts, to go out with friends for a smoke across the street in the County Bank parking lot, and, if you were lucky, to find romance. Well, maybe not romance, but something that could pass for it until the sun came up tomorrow morning.

And that's what it was like, day in, day out, for a few strange years in time long ago and now, seemingly, very far away.

WE'RE TALKING about the Catalyst here, the old Catalyst, the one on Front Street — the real one.

It began, like another well-known tale, in a stable. The spacious environs had been designated for that purpose when they were built as part of the St. George Hotel. But it hadn't been used as a stable for quite awhile, there not being nearly as many horses in town as there used to be, when the newest campus of the University of California arrived in 1965.

Ready or not, Santa Cruz was a college town and what every college town needed — especially then, with Berkeley just up the road and the beatniks of the '50s still in vogue — was a coffee house.

That's how the Catalyst came to life, as a co-op, in the close quarters of the room that would eventually become the kitchen. Al DiLudivico, a bear-like giant who claimed the title of the town's "first beard," was the manager, along with his blond, smiling wife, Patti.

It was a place you could go and drink coffee and solve the world's problems and listen to poetry readings, or maybe *prose* readings by young would-be writers like Peter Beagle or Jim Houston.

The old Catalyst never stood still for very long. The place expanded into the big room. They scraped the paint off the skylight above the fountain and a white-haired newcomer who looked a little like a demented Benjamin Franklin and was reported to be an independently wealthy, former art professor, bought it. His name was Randall Kane.

The smoky air and mirrors around the Garden Room were a perfect hothouse for the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Kane filled the beer case with as many exotic labels as he could find, getting a liquor license and serving Guinness on tap.

In those years, the late '60s and early '70s before it moved to its present quarters, the Catalyst embodied all the contrasts of the era — the peacenik panhandlers rubbing shoulders with chain-wielding bikers. Hipness was precariously close to being totally out of it; being

cool was one step away from being dangerous. Peace and love provided the slogans; but the center couldn't hold for very long. Was it a coincidence that the Catalyst crew provided the tip that led to the arrest in Santa Cruz' first mass murder case? No matter — the beginning of the end of the counterculture was in sight well before the Catalyst made its move.

In its brief moment of history, you were liable to see old Wobblie saw-player Tom Scribner as a permanent fixture in the old Catalyst; Eddie McShane was another member of the pantheon, the bouncer with the heart of gold.

There were lots of legends, lots of regulars, lots of stories — the Catalyst was the times, scuzzy around the edges, proclaiming hipness and righteous ideals — but content to settle for a blurry beer haze in place of any more meaningful change.

In the last days before the Catalyst moved, Randall Kane went on record, colorfully outrageous as he dismissed many of his regulars as "yahoos." He had been heard to stride into the place during the morning, look around at the scraggly beards, the unwashed clothes and the vacant stares of the freaks and burn-outs who had nowhere else to go, and mutter under his breath, "line up for mail call."

But a friend of mine was with him the night they closed the old Catalyst down. She and Kane went around the room, taking down the relics and artifacts, the big nude painting from the barroom, the carved Oganookie sign from behind the stage. She swears he had tears in his eyes.