

Crashing at The Crystal Ballroom

24. Aug, 2011 by Jenn Winterbine

Once upon a time there was a magical rock 'n' roll world far removed from the sanitised Hi-Fi Bars of today. For those who were around to experience it, St. Kilda's Crystal Ballroom is a badge of honour, a commonality shared by the vanguard of Melbourne punks and their ilk (as the Facebook group 'I Got Drunk at the Crystal Ballroom' attests).

For those younger souls unfortunate enough to have missed out, this fabled venue evokes imagination as Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds blasts through our iPods. As the 3A tram winds itself down Fitzroy Street both young and old hold a personal vigil in memory of the place, a spectre of a faded era that haunts St. Kilda to this day.

The Crystal Ballroom — also known as The Seaview Ballroom or simply The Ballroom — was the metropolis of punk rock in Melbourne from 1978-1987. Run by promoter Dolores San Miguel then later Laurie Richards, it was a revolving door for alternative bands big and small. Australia's iconic rockers The Birthday Party, Hunters and Collectors, INXS, and the Go-Betweens all graced its stage amidst a sea of hairspray, animal print and metal spikes.

Local legends The Ears, The Models and Little Murders all electrified the crowds that devotedly followed them. International acts including The Cure, Magazine, XTC and Dead Kennedys all dazzled fans as they stood on the dilapidated stage, frantically strumming their groundbreaking tunes.

This was a new and exciting era where disenfranchised youth were seeking answers. The punk movement and its many off shoots (new wave, hardcore, post-punk...) was a primal expression of the sense of directionless and anger that consumed many young people in the wake of the 1970s recession. Fast-paced distortion, hand-drawn show flyers and thrift-shop rags all characterised a dramatic rejection of disco and the polished 'arena rock' that dominated mainstream music at the time.

The Crystal Ballroom was a bastion not only of underground music, but also a social hub for social misfits looking for a place to fit in. The wide-eyed, impoverished and downright wild all gravitated towards this musical Mecca looking for a place to crash for the night.

As writer Ashley Crawford recalls 'The Ballroom was a broken-down rock venue struggling for life. Entrance was via a gamut of passed out drunks, semi-conscious junkies, syringes piercing skin, a slick swamp of vomit and a littering of Victoria Bitter cans. This was the St. Kilda of the damned, long before polished floorboards and café latte.'

Melbourne's punk experience is immortalised in the documentary *We're Livin' on Dog Food*, made by *Dogs in Space* director Richard Lowenstein. In this doco, matriarch Dolores San Miguel, along with Rowland S. Howard, Ollie Olsen, Bruce Milne and many others relive the glory of the punk era and reflect on the role the Crystal Ballroom played in bringing underground music to Melbourne.

The much-loved venue closed down in 1987, yet the heritage-listed George Hotel of which it was a part of is still in operation. The collective memory of torn wallpaper, musty air and broken bottles is held dear to the artists and dreamers who sat on the decaying stairs, bumming cigarettes off each other and frantically trying to warm their frozen hands.

The opulence of the upstairs ballroom distracted the waves of low-income earners from their lives, when, for a few hours, they could escape into a world of pure magic, made possible by the glorious wail of a screeching guitar. This is the essence of Melbourne's punk legacy, a legacy crystallised inside the sticky walls of the magnificent Ballroom, a ballroom now reduced to a solemn ghost that lingers in the air of St. Kilda.

The Crystal Ballroom was never "full"... you just had to push harder to get in

First published on 12 Jun 2013. Updated on 21 Jun 2013.

In history and in myth the Crystal Ballroom is where Melbourne's independent scene of the late-'70s began to breathe and procreate, evolve and dominate the inner-city music landscape. And the idea of independent labels and records was a new one.

The Ballroom – or Seaview depending on the year you attended and the promoter in charge – loomed over all of St Kilda. Entrance was via a wide decorous, almost theatrical frontage on Fitzroy St -already a burgeoning hive of drugs, art, sleaze and rock bohemianism.

The venue opened for rock'n'roll in mid-1978 just as punk began to morph into something more ambitious and original. The first headline band to play at the Seaview version of the Ballroom, in August '78, was Nick Cave and Rowland S Howard's Boys Next Door; the perfect musical launch for the massive building which was built as the George Hotel in 1856.

With its four storeys, turret and flagpole, the ballroom stared stylishly out at Port Phillip Bay but inside, it was sweat, noise and mayhem in two band rooms, the most regal reserved for acts like the Cure and Iggy Pop. Local hopefuls competed too for energy, outlandish behaviour, extremes. There was a kind of madness for the possibilities of the new music.

A naïve kid from the country, I saw the early Beasts of Bourbon there in 1984 and spent much of the gig being lifted and carried side to side by the sheer pressure of the seething crowd. But everyone looked after each other.

The venue finally closed in 1987, allegedly due to police concerns about drunks, drug traffickers, prostitutes and under-age drinkers frequenting the hotel, as well as and people peeing on front lawns and vomiting on people.

Those were the days