Text by Laurie Richards, 2000

My stewardship of the Crystal Ballroom commenced in September 1979. Graham Richmond at that time was the president of the Richmond Football Club and was in partnership with Francis Burke. Francis was the Captain of the Richmond Football Club and the Licensee of the Royal Oak Hotel which I had named and ran as "The Tiger Lounge" Graham had been hounding me for a over a year to come and have a look at the "Seaview Hotel" in fact as early as 1978 I had arranged a couple of Band residency's for the hotel in the room that now houses the George Art Gallery. It was after I closed the Tiger Lounge, that I promised to have a good look "to get him off my back".

I will always remember that day, I had never been in the place only driven by, at the time the hotel had the reputation as possible the worst in Australia. Firstly I noticed the grand entrance way and more importantly that this part of the hotel could be isolated from the rest of the Hotel, next thing that caught my eye was the marble staircase half way up on the first landing I noticed a large window bordered up, after prizing it open I found a 10ft lead glass of St.George slaying the dragon, now ^I was getting excited , finding the ballroom I noticed all the windows where papered over and after peeling back the wallpaper discovered etched in the glass by sandblasting St.George and the Dragon , climbing up to the giant chandeliers, yes They where real crystal, well that settled the name "Crystal Ballroom" I named it not realising any past names or the Hotels history. The deal with Graham Richmond was "yes I'll run this place but only if he will clean it up and renovated to my specifications", he later claimed that cost him 10,000 1979 $dollars I found out from his two man builder team he barterd the cost away by letting them help themselves to the marble fireplaces and classic cedar doors on the two derelict floors above, what a shame all these things have disappeared when the hotel became derelict although Donleavy made a valiant effort in tracking them down and attempting to buy them back, most who now posses them, wanted far to much , and unfortunately the statue of limitations on stolen goods was well over the 7 years limit.

Well the work was done, the Bands booked, the P.R. went out and on opening night Sat ....? 1500 kids lined up around the block. I was well aware of the next generation of music & art emerging on the world scene having already experimented at "The Tiger Lounge" by nominating an early in the week night to the new generation of bands such as the "Boys next Door" and early versions of the models "The teenage Radio Stars " etc. It was obvious to me that the new generation was about to sweep away the older, complacent bands of the previous era. But to me it was not only the music It was also the graphic artists such as Phil Brophy and Maria Kocic, the theatre, and Fanzines etc(we produced our own fanzine editored by Bruce Milne who probably started Australia's first . Bruce went on to start Au-Go-Go records and now is A&R for Virgin EMI) and the Emerging new technology especially Video. This was pre-domestic VHS, which did not exist yet, I had already been experimenting with Big screens, video camera's and 3/4 inch U-matic recording tape machines at the "Tiger Lounge" Af the Ballroom I had up to 2 camera on the stage and a video feed to other rooms with big screens and TV;s scattered around over two floors floors in 5 rooms as well as the foyer, I hired students from R.M.I.T film school to run the camera's many going on to become well known video clip makers e.g"The Rich Kids, we gave the overseas bands copies of there performance's (this lead to reciprocal gifts such as the rare video of the Sex Pistols "live" in Amsterdam given to me by Melbourne boy and then heads of Virgin Records in London Laurie Dunn). Bands such as The Cure, Wreckless Eric, U.K.Squeeze all said that they had just toured England,Europe & The States but had never seen anything in the World, Like or as good as the Crystal Ballroom". Needless to say it also caused much talk around the country as evident by the visit from promoters of major venues as far away as Perth,Sydney,Queensland and one from London, not to mention locals whom you would never expect to see in such a place, such as a certain Restaurantuer from Middle park and the rather corpulent promoter of the last laugh. Legends of the Ballroom abounded, one that comes to mind I naively created. It's Impact and obvious "credibility"promotional effect was relayed to me years later, at one stage I decided I needed to get fit and not liking conventional ways such as gyms or jogging I thought If I helped the crews lug out the gear at the end of the night that might improve my fitness, never realising for a moment the incredulous road crews and the effect, apparently word went around the country of the promoter of the then best live venue in Australia helping the crews load out. My vision, realised, was for far more than just a great music venue but an arts precinct, a community of artistic souls. yes many came just to see the audience. We created posters that where limited edition hand screen printed and together with Keith Glass then the owner of Missing Link

.Paradoxically for a hotel and area at the time with such a rough image I deliberately had women only run the door and the security(Although Paula was a pretty daunting white version of Grace Jones with a razor sharp tongue, probably the original archetype club door bitch) in the 12 to 18 months I was there I only remember two incidents, one I sorted out in 20 seconds(a domestic between girlfriend & boyfriend) and the other the audience "corrected" as the gentlemen who caused the "incident" was being carried out by his two" Model" girlfriends , one girlfriend was overheard to say to the doorgirl "that he deserved it" all which went to show the sense of family and community that existed there, Something that many promoters today who's only eye is on the bottom line could learn from. All this came to an end when one of the graphic Artists I used, came to me with bruising and black eyes and related how when being "Artistic" on one of the toilet walls (the practice I encouraged and Graham had to endure) he had been grabbed by one of Graham's big Maori bouncers, who should not have been in my side of the building anyway, we had agreed that his "Hells Kitchen" security would stay in there side of the building and never interfere in the Ballroom side , but graham could not resist "fully utilising staff" so whilst this gentlemen should only have been collecting glasses he manhandled John into the back of the bar where Graham proceeded to bash him senseless after which he was dumped unconscious in the back alley. On hearing this I was horrified and incensed, on making discreet inquiries I was even more dismayed to discover from his staff that this was a regular occurrence, the way Graham relieved his stress, even more so at this period as Richmond where into the Grand final, even a discreet enquiry through the wife of the then, secretary of the Liquor Control Commission, came back with the reply "yes we know about Graham and many such incidents but until he either seriously injures someone who will take him to court or kills someone our hands are tied" at this stage my discreet inquiries had got back to Mr. Richmond and after a very curt meeting I walked out of the Crystal Ballroom forever taking the name"crystal" with me, thereafter it was only legally allowed to be known as the "Ballroom". As one could imagine there was a queue of would be promoters waiting to take my place and fully exploit all that had been created.

Laurence J. Richards October 1st 2000.

p.s. I should also mention my partner at the time, Marie Collins," behind every"great" man is a great women"
she added a lot of the style, especially at the front door. Being a Toorak Hairdresser from Port Melbourne she possessed the right combination of tolerance and class.