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Maverick promoter gave many bands a break

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Stylish, knockabout Melbourne rock identity Laurie 'Loz' Richards, 59, has died in his Port Melbourne home. Late last year, while trying to climb in a window after locking himself out, Richards, in his own words, "did a Molly" - he had a bad fall. He broke his back and never fully recovered.

Richards was known for his risk-taking foresight in booking the post-blues "new music" into Melbourne venues he created and managed from the mid-1970s through the early '80s. He opened the small but licensed-to-raise Tiger Room (later Tiger Lounge) in '76, in Richmond footy club captain Francis Bourke's Royal Oak Hotel in Bridge Road.

Here and in his other venues he gave breakthrough gigs to "Carlton" acts like early Paul Kelly bands High Rise Bombers and the Dots, and Stephen Cummings' Pelaco Brothers (which Richards managed) and Sports. The effervescent Richards would be in his kitchen whipping up sandwiches for the likes

of Blondie's Debbie Harry, on the dance floor giving the thumbs up to AC/DC jumping onstage, or at the bar, grinning at the mates who got in free as he shouted them drinks.

Staying in the black remained a challenge for Richards; and for every 10 musos who'll swear they're in his debt for the early gigs he gave them, there might be one who reckons he still owes them 50 bucks.

(Richards, in turn, used to claim Michael Gudinski owed him the same amount, for spotting Skyhooks.)

Interstate tourists like Radio Birdman, Flowers, the Saints, INXS and Midnight Oil "broke" out of the many venues Richards masterminded as he gave the slip - mostly - to the stranglehold the dominant rock booking agencies tried to enforce.

Rick Grossman (later of Matt Finish, the Divinyls and Hoodoo Gurus) remembers arriving in Melbourne to join his first band, the Richards-managed Bleeding Hearts, and recording their LP *What Happened?* (1977) live at the Tiger Lounge.

In February '79 Richards developed the legendary punk palace the Crystal Ballroom, in the George Hotel, Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. Bands had already started playing on a small scale at the George a few months earlier, but a legendary reign began in the big ballroom under Richards' watch. Grossman was



Laurie Richards

broke, so "Laurie gave me a job painting the front of the venue purple-pink. Then we filled it up. He was so generous; I loved him."

The drama and sound experimentation shared by the Boys Next Door, Birthday Party and Models seemed to grow in sympathy with the venue. Overseas acts like Iggy Pop and XTC played there as well.

Richards was generous with his patrons, offering limited-edition singles manufactured by Keith and Helena Glass's Missing Link, printed gig zine *Newsheet* and pin-on buttons as tickets ("You can have your fun and keep it too") and allowing the thrown-together, experimental "little bands" in. "He was the perfect punk promoter," Keith Glass said.

Laurence John Richards was born in the Victorian town of Terang, eldest of six to Alwyn and Gwenda (nee Stonehouse) Richards. At 16 Richards booked Daddy Cool to play in Hamilton. Sister Jan, then 13, remembers collecting \$2 notes as 2000 wild-eyed kids streamed into the Town Hall.

Richards went on to manage more than 40 venues, clubs and restaurants, including the Kingston Hotel, Tropicana Lounge, Prince of Wales, Bananas (possibly Melbourne's first 3am licence), Jump Club and Kamikaze Cafe. He won *Juke* magazine's Best Australian Promoter award for 1976.

Later Richards was a valuable mentor to the Choir of Hard Knocks and became closely connected to the Collins St Baptist Church and its Urban Seed program, regularly volunteering at the nearby Credo Cafe.

He is survived by father Alwyn, daughter Tamara and son James, siblings Janice, Lee-Anne, Gary and Kellye, ex-partner

Maggie, extended family and friends. His brother Peter passed away in 2010; mother Gwen in 2002.