

Scenes From the Staircase: A Look Back at The Crystal Ballroom by Miles Brown

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From 1978 to 1987 The Crystal Ballroom (also known as The Seaview) was the epicenter of the Melbourne post punk scene. Situated in the seedy suburb of St. Kilda, the venue was a place where punks, artists, musicians, drug dealers, sex workers and audiences partied together. The Ballroom also provided a vital performance space for Melbourne's experimental art and rock communities, allowing them to mix, coagulate and spew forth such seminal acts as The Moodists, Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party, Whirlywird, Primitive Calculators, and Hunters and Collectors.

INXS, The Laughing Clowns and The Go-Betweens played there, as did international acts such as Iggy Pop, Simple Minds, Dead Kennedys, XTC, Magazine, The Fall, Dead Can Dance, and The Cure. This weekend five legendary acts that evolved from the Ballroom community will return to St. Kilda for a special celebration of the venue's unique legacy. We caught up with some of the performers and asked them about their memories of the Ballroom and the massive impact it had on the development of Australian music history.

Ash Wednesday (JAB, Models, The Metronomes, Einstürzende Neubauten)

I remember the Seaview Ballroom to be a focal point for the post-punk culture that had emerged in Melbourne from 1977/78 and onwards into the early eighties, fuelled largely by a new generation of bored and discontented youth. The spiral staircase leading from the Fitzroy Street underworld to the actual ballroom itself provided a convenient arena to be seen - dressed in everything from leather, studs and safety pins to garbage bags and skintight plastic garments, ballroom gowns and cocktail dresses, exploding coloured hair, 60s retro, white shirts and skinny ties, that zombie office look with showcase pallid tan, and so on. It definitely provided an often-packed concert environment for many makeshift or confrontational music bands that couldn't / wouldn't get a gig anywhere else. In theory anybody could be in a band now, and just about everybody was. The iconic venue was the symbol for a number of new artists, endeavouring to break free from convention, by releasing independent records, fanzines and other artefacts. The venue also attracted many individuals who were passionately creative and innovative in a variety of fields, later to receive recognition when the outside world was to catch up.

I attended most of the early monthly editions of the Seaview Ballroom. Most of the groups and faces I knew from other venues and the never-ending stream of nightly parties. Boys Next Door, Negatives, Piano Piano, Ears, Marching Girls, Microfilm, Fiction, Permanent Press, The Moodists, The Editions spring to mind from that time. I was there at the launch of the James Freud's Ego (or perhaps James Freud's Berlin) when Nick Cave and Tracey Pew burst into the room mid-song, carrying a slimy looking plastic bag, and tossed dog faeces all over James' immaculate, skintight pink jumpsuit and newly blonde-coiffured, Bowiesque persona. They then ran from the room, guffawing like a couple of shellshot hillbillies. That was memorable. Also there were acts such as International Exiles, The Reels, Wild Dog Rodeo (whose vocalist Lachelle told me that she envisioned the Ballroom environment being like the climax of Carnival of Souls), Hugo Clang (a bald headed, blue singleted Ollie Olsen, vocalising to a reel to reel tape recorder) - and later still Sacred Cowboys, The Residents (great) and The Primitive Calculators, who impressed me immensely.

Clare Moore (The Moodists / Dave Graney n the Coral Snakes / Lurid Yellow Mist / Harry Howard and the NDE)

The Seaview/Crystal ballroom was our lounge room for a few years. We were there at least three times a week. It was always a huge night when The Birthday Party came back to town with a new album - their shows were amazing. The place was run by Graham Richmond who was always very generous towards us. He let us rehearse there during the day and also allowed us to have our dole cheques sent there. It was really the only place we could all play at that stage. There were usually four bands on a night, sometimes both upstairs and downstairs. Beasts of Bourbon, The Reels, and The Go-Betweens...all played there.

Harry Howard (These Immortal Souls / Crime & the City Solution / Pink Stainless Tail / Harry Howard and the NDE)

The bands were the central feature of the place, but the audiences were an attraction in themselves - either to hate or tease or to be inspired by. You know those indoor play centres, where parents drop their kids for birthday parties, full of stuff you climb and crawl through and slide down? The Seaview Hotel (as I knew it) was like that for young adults. It was a place of some adventure. It was quite central to the development of the local music scene, somewhere you could catch new bands, but also a regular gig and great proper stage that allowed bands to develop. St. Kilda was a bit of an adventure playground in itself. The basement bar of the Seaview had a Maori transvestite night going on quite often. It sounds like I dreamt that one up. But yes, the place was surrounded by a thriving black economy of sex, drugs, late night takeaways and cruising cars. Just what you want as a developing and interest-seeking fledgling.

Ollie Olsen (Whirlywird / Max Q / Taipan Tiger Girls)

The venue was very important to the development of the music of the time. My best memory was the last time Whirlywird played, it was New Years Eve 1979 and John Murphy and I flew out to London the next day, so it was Whirlywird's final gig. International and interstate bands went down very well as a rule with the crowd; the crowd was always hungry for something different.

Dave Graney (The Moodists / Dave Graney and the Coral Snakes / Lurid Yellow Mist / Harry Howard and the NDE / King of Pop)

St Kilda was quite an experience because so many older people lived there. Postwar Euro types. Rooming house people. St Kilda was actually full of dilapidated mansions that were split up into rooming houses -quite spectacular with lovely high ceilings. The Seaview itself had people living in it. While gigs were going on the residents were coming in and using the old lift. In the day you'd walk to the corner and big Maoris would be upstairs on the balconies reading the paper with their feet up.

Across the road was a service station which was closed at night, and people who drove cars there just parked all over it. St Kilda people mostly lived a village life - no car needed really. The tiny houses that extend all the way down the road, between the light rail and Canterbury Road, were built in the Kennett era, I think. People in the "olden days" wouldn't have contemplated living in such a cramped space. The train to St Kilda was still its own line and had a red rattler train. I was on it one day and a guy kept telling me "That Nick Cave - he's a Jew!" I didn't know either Nick or this fellow at the time.

He must've made me for a bohemian type. I didn't know what it meant either way for him to be Jewish either.

I liked seeing the Birthday Party there - many times - but also saw Iggy Pop there. It was before Bowie covered his songs so he could stop touring and get healthy. His band and show seemed quite heavy and dark. Not real uplifting, just mean pros. I was still amazed to be seeing him. One gig that sticks in my mind is opening for The Fall in 1982. They seemed to have been here for about a month or so. They also played at the Mt Erica on High Street, Prahran. We were opening for them, and this band called Spring Plains just turned up with their gear and wanted to play too. Real hayseeds - just like us! They later became the Cosmic Psychos. The Hunters and Collectors rehearsed for months in the Ballroom with their own PA, and then when they did their debut - to about 400 people I guess - in the same room - they sounded amazing. Dead Can Dance seemed to do one gig there and then left the country for 25 years. We saw them in 1982 and then again in 2014, across the road in the Palais.