

## The Ballroom (Crystal / Seaview)

### **Gillian Upton – The History of The George Hotel**

“Under the chandeliers in the foyer, punters could drink in the Birdcage or other bars, watch the action from the Ballroom in close-circuit TV in the back bar, or head upstairs past the window of St George skewering the dragon into the red-curtain-lined Ballroom where the main acts performed...It is reported that one crunched on broken glass and the ‘Smokers Please’ ashtrays may have overflowed with vomit. Glasses were replaced by plastic cups, but this didn’t improve the environment. By the end of the night the floor would be a crackling sea of smashed plastic.”

Various spaces at the Ballroom were also offered to artists to perform. In the Paradise Lounge downstairs, two women writers might perform a wordless bondage act, while upstairs in the ballroom, designers, hairdressers, and models put on candle-lit, fashion parades of edgy, postmodern clothes. In the foyer next to the Birdcage bar, records on the independent label Au-Go-Go were sold at the door. With three bars, several lounges and five or six bands a night, The Ballroom came to offer different nights for the various musical tribes of Oi, Ska, Mod, Mohican, neo-Rockabilly, neo-Psychedelic, neo-Surfy, New Romantic and Heavy Metal.

Though The Ballroom was a favourite venue for St Kilda locals, most visitors probably came from the suburbs. Laurie Richards’ mailing list for the Crystal Ballroom showed predominantly leafy middle-class postcodes. Ross Waterman’s experience is perhaps quintessential: “I was in the garage on Saturday afternoon (he lived in Mount Waverly with his parents) listening to the radio and Bohdan X from the band JAB advertised a gig that night at the Seaview Hotel.” Waterman smuggled out clothes that he thought a punk would wear (black stovepipe pants, red shirt, thin black tie) and went to the opening night of the Wintergarden. The experience of that night, the extremeness of the crowd and the benign tolerance he experienced ‘changed the direction of his life’.”

**Source: Upton, Gillian (2001). *The George: St Kilda Life and Times*, p.108: Venus Bay Books**

### **Dolores San Miguel – The Ballroom**

“In 1978, St. Kilda was tough, rough, and seedy but it had an edge – a promise of excitement. Bananas on the Upper Esplanade catered to a fairly mainstream crowd. The Venue was barn-like and lacked atmosphere, so St. Kilda was ripe and ready for a new venue - especially something avant-garde and alternative. The culture of the inhabitants was changing, and an artistic group was now moving into the beachside suburb alongside the junkies, prostitutes, and drunks. The Seaview Hotel, although decrepit, exuded grandeur. The stately white building in Fitzroy Street soon became a magnet for a generation of musicians, artists – behind its walls brewed a humming beehive of creativity...”

**Source - San Miguel, Dolores (2011). *The Ballroom*, p.52: Melbourne Books**

### **Dolores San Miguel – The Ballroom**

“The room was enormous. The large stage was flanked with magnificent red velvet curtains, a gigantic chandelier hung from the centre of the room, and enormous mirrors with fancy gilt frames lined the walls. The wooden floors were sprung for the dinner and ballroom dances in the very early years. The atmosphere was totally electric. The mirrors soon became a hazard. After a minor scuffle one of them had smashed. As the crowds became larger, punters would lean against the glass causing them to tilt. It wasn’t long before Graeme (Richmond) took the gilded mirrors down. I replaced them with giant blown-up photos taken by a very artistic young photographer, Tanya McIntyre. Tanya had brought out a homemade book of photographs featuring a variety of new wave/punk Melbourne bands. She had snapped a selection of photographs on our opening night, along with others taken on other nights, were the ones I chose. Unsurprisingly most of them walked!”

**Source: San Miguel, Dolores (2011). *The Ballroom*, p.53: Melbourne Books**

### **Dolores San Miguel – The Ballroom**

“What began as a whimsical hobby on my part soon became an epoch-making discovery for underground music, experimental theatre, fashion, and the arts. The Ballroom provided the backdrop for a magical movie or decadent novel. I was the producer - the characters and performers needed no director!”

**Source: 3RRRFM article**

### **Lisa Dethridge - Fashion at the Ballroom**

“The costumes are exquisite... Everyone is decked out in tribal insignia; scarves, neckerchiefs, lace, tassels, gloves, boots, specs, sunglasses - anything to add character, status, and fascination. Costumes and stockings are strategically ripped, and paint spattered. Jewellery is big and metallic; studs, rings, chains and safety pins in noses, ears and costumes.”

**Source: San Miguel, Dolores (2011). *The Ballroom*, p.8: Melbourne Books**

### **Rob Wellington**

“At the Ballroom you had two promoters who supported the musos. Graeme would run into the band room after you’d played and talk to you like a coach. Toddy would be throwing slabs in the back of a cop car, so they’d look the other way. The only prerequisite for getting a gig was that you were interesting. You’re on a bill with Nick Cave or Lisa Gerrard, so of course the bar was always getting raised. You’d dress up in black in tons of make-up. We laughed at the people who wore safety pins and tartan because that ‘was all prefab’.”

**Source: Rob Wellington on the Ballroom - Valentish, Jenny (2014) *The Battle for St Kilda: Time Out Melbourne***

### **Cherry Ripe - St Kilda**

“I lived in St Kilda, which at that time was a no-go zone. Nobody from ‘decent middle-class suburbia’ would have dreamt of living there. The place had such notoriety that TV crews from the so-called current affair shows would take camera crews down there and film the low life on Fitzroy Street. The place was full of junkies, prostitutes, old guys in boarding houses, Punks, other alternative life-stylers, a large component of the Jewish Diaspora, and ordinary working-class people who would have worked in factories, retail etc. I loved it! To me it was on the edge, bohemia of a high order.”

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Cherry Ripe – The Ballroom**

“This venue featured all the Punk and independent acts of the day. I vowed that as soon as I left home, I was going to go there (Dorothy finds Oz!) Anyway, as it turned out I eventually found a home in this environment. It was the first place I ever felt that I belonged. There I saw Punk bands that have become Australian independent legends: The Boys Next Door, The Editions, The Sick Things, The Boot Boys, Polit Buro, Depression, Corporate Body, The Mess, The Zorros...too many to remember. There were usually three bands on for four or five dollars. I would buy stubbies of Strongbow draught cider and chug away on them all night. I learnt early not to attempt to smuggle alcohol in. One time a bottle I had precariously hidden under my arm and inside a big jacket, slithered happily to the floor, rolled across the room, and then fizzed hysterically like a Molotov cocktail to the great amusement of the other patrons. Luckily Dolores San Miguel, who was the manager at the time, looked the other way while I scuttled along and picked the bottle up. She always was a kind woman! (Cherry Ripe on The Ballroom)

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Ashley Crawford - Artists at The Ballroom**

"A smattering of artists who would become substantial if not major figures in the Melbourne, national and, at times, even international art world made up a good percentage of the audience at The Ballroom. John Nixon, then dating Jenny Watson, would attempt to outdo Tony Clark in melancholy black. Clark would stand to the rear, arms crossed in regal bearing as though passing judgment over some Grecian legal ritual, a perpetual scowl imprinted on his visage. Howard Arkley, with spotted tie, would sport the only facial hair in the room."

**Source: Rowland S. Howard website**

### **Chris McAuliffe - Artists at The Ballroom**

"Artists who frequented the Crystal Ballroom included Howard Arkley, Greg Ades, Brett Colquhoun, Stephen Bush, Jon Campbell, Peter Walsh, Maria Kozic, Peter Tyndall, John Nixon, Geoff Lowe, John Matthews, Nick Seymour, Vivienne Shark Le Witt and Tony Clark along with playwright Tobsha Learner, photographer Polly Borland, writer Stephanie Holt and filmmakers to-be Richard Lowenstein and John Hillcoat; it was, in effect, a breeding ground for a new generation with many of these artists finding in the Punk energy a raw enthusiasm and disregard for convention."

**Source: McAuliffe, Chris (1997) *Let's Talk About Art: Art and Punk in Melbourne*. Art and Australia, Vol 34 No 4, pp. 502-512**

### **Roland & Crusader - The Ballroom**

"We were living in Fitzroy Street, and we had a system of copying pass outs for our friends. Someone would pay to get in and get the pass out and then people would come over and I would do the pass out drawing on their arms to get people in the door. And because we lived next door to the Crystal Ballroom, we found all the side and back entrances to get in. There was definitely tension there and people like Dolores were able to bridge some of those gaps by putting people together on the same bill and programme really widely. She didn't buy into any of that segmentation of people's interests."

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Sam Sejavka - The Ballroom and punk**

"We (*The Ears*) played more than 70 gigs at The Ballroom; one was the 'Battle of the Bands'. The other band that came 2<sup>nd</sup> was called the Serious Young Insects and they later became Boom Crash Opera. Everything moved so fast. The New Wave era was artier, but the Hardcore Punk scene brought violence and Mohawks... Even the early punk bands were arty and clever, they weren't mindless. Then there was ska bands and the Mod revival... The subcultures in Melbourne became a lot richer and more diverse later, but back in the beginning there was nothing like it."

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Ash Wednesday - The Ballroom**

"The Ballroom...the grand staircase was like a fashion showcase, and everyone looked great on that staircase - it was the place to be noticed, dress up and be trend setters. Pierre Voltaire and everyone else was scabbing - if you had a packet of cigs, you basically didn't have a packet of cigs. At 5 o'clock in the morning you would be drinking a drink with cigarette butts in it."

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Bruce Milne - The Ballroom**

"The Ballroom started having gigs upstairs in the actual Ballroom and it seemed like every week it got a bit bigger, and then they started having gigs downstairs. They expanded the downstairs area, so there were two different areas and they started having gigs in both of those, so you could see a band upstairs and then run down and catch another one. The Boys Next Door did a residency there on Tuesday nights - it got to the stage where they were getting about 400 people on a Tuesday night, which for a band that was fairly unknown and not very commercial was just incredible."

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Chane Chane - The Ballroom**

“The first time I went to The Ballroom it was freaky because I walked in there and it felt like a dream, like I was back in a Louis the 16<sup>th</sup> Ball. There was this beautiful building with stained glass windows and a big marble staircase, and I just thought wow this is beautiful, it’s full of freaks just like me and it’s great! Some were wearing fancy dress, ripped up clothes, over the top Punk fashion and it never changed. For a young guy – I was just 14 - it was just really good to go somewhere that felt like ‘home.’ That’s what people look for in conversation: people that feel like them and think like them. But to find a whole culture that was doing that, and it was new to the world...Punk was new to everybody back then and it was like we had invented Rock’ n’ roll again which is exactly how everyone else must have felt. Everyone accepted each other even though they looked individual. I knew these people would understand me and even if they didn’t, I knew they wouldn’t judge me. Everyone was looking at each other and feeling “hey we’re here”. Everyone was free forming, but we were all safe because we were together.”

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Paul Lindsay - The Ballroom**

“I shouldn’t have been going to pubs at the time because I was only 14 but my older brothers got me into gigs. The Ballroom would run Thursday, Friday or Saturday nights and you would get to see all of these bands and it was like ‘Wonderland’. I saw many of the early Melbourne bands there including The Zorros, Z-cars, Odious Comparison, and The Marching Girls. The Ballroom was amazing because not only they would put on shows, but they would also put out a little Deli tray with Bread and sliced meat.”

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Kev Lobotomi - The Ballroom**

“My first impression of The Ballroom was that I really enjoyed the scene, and everyone was doing different things. New Wave was in at the time and people would dress appropriately for it. The first time I saw a Mohawk was there.”

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Warwick Brown - The Ballroom**

“A friend told me “You gotta go The Seaview Ballroom it’s full of punks with Mohawks, leather jackets studs and they have got earrings” and I thought “bullshit, no fucking way you have got to be joking!” And it was so intimidating and scary and the bands... It was like “what the fuck is this?”

**Source: Punk Journey**

### **Fred Negro - The small dick competition and why the Ballroom was really shut down**

“My band I Spit on your Gravy had been packing the Prince of Wales on a weekly basis. We were breaking house records as well as everything else (we set fire to the curtains one night). We'd play the George too of course. Unfortunately, a show that evolved into a small dick competition went horribly sideways when representatives of the Liquor Licensing Commission walked in. I was going around with a ruler measuring and saying “too big get off” ...and all the punk chicks were up the front laughing and gawking. The show was stopped, and I never got my prize - the coveted Golden Ruler. It got a big headline in page 3 of the Herald Sun ‘Bands act Lewd and Depraved’, and the whole article was how I organised a small penis competition and how the George could lose their license. We were meant to play at the St Kilda Festival and go on just before Hunters & Collectors on the main beach stage and the Council cancelled us at the last minute. Me and Pog were walking down Fitzroy Street and cop came up and told us if they saw our band walking down the street, they could arrest us because we were banned from the festival!”

**Source: St Kilda Music Walking Tour and Punk Journey**

### **Strung out at the Crystal Ballroom: another romantic history by Vikki Riley**

"In 1979, still at a respectable Anglican girls' grammar school, I dyed my short, cropped hair blue/black and scouted opportunity shops for black clothes, very old, often shapeless and decrepit. I avoided sunlight and other healthy pursuits like sports, bushwalking, surfing and skateboarding, activities most teenagers in the suburbs seemed to be enjoying. I ignored CB radio, The Eagles, the Electric Light Orchestra and Rod Stewart; I stopped going to Friday night garage parties where the only game to play was waiting to be picked up by some tanned 'guy' with golden hair. I hated 'raging' and meeting people.

Then one lunchtime I saw The Boys Next Door play at the local boys' grammar school. After the gig, the singer, a pouting pretty boy with black eyeliner dressed in a torn pink shirt with piano keys printed down the side, offered some of the younger boys some sugar or salt wrapped up in plastic ... The kids ran a mile. Information circulated amongst my peers that the singer, when he had attended the same school, had at one time painted his whole hand red and on another occasion was seen carrying a handbag: an appealing enough myth, if not true. It was soon after this that I first went to the Crystal Ballroom.

After careful preening—stabbing lit cigarettes into black tights, cutting off hems of skirts to manufacture raw edges, continually reapplying black kohl around the eyes, white pancake makeup and blood red/purple lipstick — we would venture out into the night: a mad dash on public transport to the safety of the ballroom in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. The journey was a hazardous one, and one of us would carry sharp scissors for protection. Along the way groups of drunken males in desert boots and checked flannel shirts would jump at us like jesters, shouting and jeering 'Punks, Punks, Punks!' like a bizarre mantra. Walking past St Moritz Ice Skating Rink and disco/lounge was the scary bit. Big men with tattoos and transvestites hovered in the doorway.

The Crystal Ballroom functioned as an old hotel and residence that was used on the weekend as a venue. (It still had tenants who would sometimes pop in and out, trying hard to ignore what was going on.) Separate band rooms opened into each other like boudoirs in a brothel which you could wander between. Downstairs was a small room called the 'Star Club' where supper was served at 10pm and a strange quartet carved out neat little repetitive tunes. Next to this room was the Paradise Lounge where other bands played, sometimes simultaneously with the main act upstairs — acts like Eric Gradman's Man and Machine, Paul Kelly and the Dots, Two Way Garden, The Ears and The Models.

In the foyer was a large video screen which belted out new wave hits like XTC's 'Making Plans for Nigel'. The main action happened upstairs in the dim, chandeliered, disused ballroom. The way up was by a grand staircase with a giant mirror on the first landing where groups of people would gather, conversing intensely about 'art' and 'literature'.

The main ballroom complete with chandeliers was where *The Boys Next Door* scene congregated; they considered it their private domain as they played there on a weekly basis. The scene was frequented by prime examples of our manly ideal: effeminate, narcissistic, thin and wasted enough to suggest an introverted, bookish lifestyle or a mystical, nocturnal existence of drug-induced oblivion and artistic revelation. Looking like Bowie from the covers of 'Low and Heroes', these 'boys' stood around in groups or sat at the table-clothed tables waiting for something to happen. Some of their girlfriends looked like Wednesday from the Addams family, others inclined towards Theda Bara and Louise Brooks.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke as wasted and waif-like creatures promenaded against the backdrop of an imagined bohemia. Nobody, not even The Boys Next Door, looked like rock stars in the conventional sense that they stood out or dressed up different. Everyone assumed the pose of the egocentric art star, actors and poets, aloof and transfixed as if a million cameras were being trained on them. There was an overriding dynamic of voyeurism, a fantasy of living out a drama of 'art in the making'. There was even a person who called himself Pierre Voltaire, and some people carried around Dostoevsky and Kafka paperbacks as proof of the depth of their pose. As most of the individuals in the scene came from private school backgrounds, all this play acting, and the grasping of the mythical dimensions of art and literature movements seemed to have an uncanny naturalness about it."

**Source: Riley, Vikki (1992). An extract from *Death Rockers of the World Unite! Melbourne 1978-80 – Punk or no Punk rock! An essay from Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular music and Australian culture from the 1960s to the 1990s* (Edited by Philip Hayward): Allen & Unwin**

### **A Love Affair (Rekindled) by Tina Phillips**

“When I moved out of home at the age of 21 St Kilda was \*the\* place to live. A far cry from the suburban Vermont I was so eager to distance myself from, it was the centre of bohemian living in Melbourne, full of artists and musicians, prostitutes and junkies, the sometimes sane and the less sane. St Kilda’s grand old mansions, now tattered and decrepit were full of punks and new romantics, students, and painters, aspiring actors and struggling writers. Rent was cheap, as long as you didn’t mind stepping over the drunks asleep on your doorstep or sluicing a little blood off the pavement occasionally. The Thursday Crawl between the Seaview Ballroom and The Prince of Wales was a tradition only interrupted by the occasional venture into that bikers’ pub around the corner, The Espy. It was dangerous and exciting, enticing and fulfilling. It was full of people living on the edge, gathered together to create a delightfully functional dysfunctional community.

St Kilda and I grew up together. When I went overseas, I learned a new respect for history and my own culture. On my return I was more discerning and while I still loved seeing Nick Cave at The Venue, Souxsie at The Astor, Depression at The Helter Skelter Club, I was beginning to appreciate the quieter contemplation of Billy Bragg at The Palais, and the folksy fun of The Dubliners. Bands like Hoodoo Gurus or TISM who we’d been seeing for years in grungy 50 pax venues were now getting airtime, and not only on RRR but through commercial stations too. The squat of junkie Punks in Acland St was less appealing than hanging out with the cartoonist next door who drew the weekly flyers for local venues and ran his own graphics business. He lived with his then-partner who had a day job in the city. A novelty in our circles.

While I still loved the edgy life, I realised I wanted more mental stimulation. I wanted less anarchy not more. I appreciated my surroundings for more than merely their autonomy from suburban conventionality. As I swapped the band posters on my walls for Persian rugs and Waterhouse prints, the worn out hand-me-down modular lounge for something new, cheap but chosen, St Kilda was also regenerating. The rooming houses were removing their shabby 50’s cladding to reveal true grandeur underneath. The junkie Punks were moving out and young professionals with an artistic bent were moving in. The artists had a market, and that market was now living next door, working and willing to spend money on beautifying their surroundings.

When someone tore off the toilet seat at The Prince and used it to smash the mirrors, we no longer raised our fists in anarchistic defiant understanding of the constrictions of the bourgeoisie pigs and the capitalist bastards holding us down. Instead, we were tasked, thought how inconvenient, encouraged the punk concerned to take positive affirmative action, write a letter to parliament, organise a protest. We closed the cubicle door and squatted precariously over the bowl while completing our business as decorously as possible.

I wanted our venues to have clean toilets and proper glasses while still enjoying the music I also loved. And it wasn’t just the night life I was appreciating more. The view of the bay from the Upper Esplanade over a sandy beach, colourful sails on the water, sunbathers on the sand. The smell of salt on the air. The sea breeze... But St Kilda was on a knife edge. On one hand we rejoiced in the preservation of our architecture, yet we railed against the moneyed yuppies doing the renovating... We lost The Venue, then The Seaview Ballroom. All the independent clubs were closing down... There was still enough of our culture left that we could fight the corporate chains to retain some of St Kilda’s uniqueness, some of the charm and character that we had all moved in here for. But it was a struggle.

Part of me enjoyed this new challenge. It was as if all the struggling actors and artists had finally made it, they had financial success. They weren’t aspiring, struggling actors anymore – they were just actors. Now the struggle was to find them amidst all this other ‘stuff’. I loved walking past The George, as it was now called, looking down the laneway behind and knowing that the yuppies drinking imported beer in the front bar had no idea that there was an enclave of experimental artists right behind them who held the best New Year’s Eve parties ever. I enjoyed the smugness of being able to say I saw Spring Plains play at The Duke of Edinburgh Hotel before they became the Cosmic Psychos. I loved being able to eat at fancy restaurants before heading back to The Espy, knowing it now unlikely to have blood on the doorstep, nor would I be hassled by the Māori Bouncers. St Kilda held the best of both worlds for me.

I remember when The Seaview Ballroom reopened as a function space. Entering the foyer, dressed in my tailored jacket with a note pad and digital camera was a far cry from the studded leather jacket and Strongbow cider of my previous visits. Now the lift was working, it never had when Hunters & Collectors played here. For posterity I chose to take the stairs, remembering how you needed to carefully pick your way through the black velvet, leather and lace clad crowd who had been lucky enough to score one of those prime seating positions at a Birthday Party gig. The Ballroom itself seemed so much smaller than when it was filled to the rafters the night Dead Kennedys graced this stage. I don't think I had ever seen it in day light. The mottled walls, the peeling layers of olive, cream and golden paint from the intricate cornicing, the Corinthian columns, and gorgeous detailed architraves made a poignant and beautiful statement about the life of this room. The now beautifully polished floorboards that once bounced to the mosh pit of hundreds of bondage panted punks, their Mohawks slamming to Depression would now be graced with the footfalls of bridal couples dancing their way amidst the event styling I was to install in the space. We had come a long way together the Seaview Ballroom and I, St Kilda, and I..."

**Source: A Love Affair (Rekindled) by Tina Phillips – an extract from St Kilda Village Strip Fest (2013)**