

The Westerly Sun 01/26/2007, Page 1

## *The Knick: At the center of it all*

By Ellyn Moran Santiago

*The Sun Staff*

WESTERLY – If Ocean State blues was born in Westerly, it was certainly conceived in the Cascade Room and Candlelight Lounge at the Knickerbocker Café.

Homespun talent was all the aficionados desired – the club was packed to the rafters every Sunday night for two decades – but a heaping handful of music legends made their way to the bar on Railroad Avenue. Stevie Ray Vaughan and his band Double Trouble came to the Knick on Thanksgiving night in 1979 –live from the Cascade Room – and during the gig, recorded a 16-song album called, appropriately, ‘Thanksgiving Night.’ But eight years before, on a night in 1971, Roomful of Blues played their first of what would be hundreds of nights at the Knickerbocker. Al Copley, a band founder recalled the scene: “ ...To our surprise, the place was full of dancers,” he recalled. “The next week we raised the price to \$2 and it was fuller. Those were the days.”

Sugar Ray Norcia has clear memories as well.

“All through the 1970s and 80s, fans from all the surrounding towns would congregate at the Knickerbocker to hear blues music performed by local artists such as Johnny Nicholas, myself, and Roomful of Blues.

Roomful held court at the Knick on Sunday nights for many years playing to packed houses with crazed swing dancers crowding the wooden dance floor. It was a real scene,” Norcia said.

And locals remember those days. Well.

“Every Sunday night we’d go and dance. It was the club. On Thanksgiving, the lines were up and down the street. I remember seeing some famous blues (musicians) like Eddie “Clearhead” Vinson, Big Joe Turner and of course our Johnny Nicholas,” said William Nardone, now a prominent local attorney, then a kid that loved to dance to ‘jump blues,’ Westerly-style.

“We’ve been very fortunate that the blues guys haven’t forgotten their roots,” Nardone said. “And what was kind of nice for me was toward the end of the Knickerbocker era, I’d go in and see the children of my contemporaries there ...dancing like we did back then.”

Former Town Council President and the founder of the now wildly popular Blues on the Beach series, Nicholas Castagna, recalled his days at the house of blues.

“I grew up at the Knick.

And my memories of those days were part of the motivation for (Blues on the Beach),” he said.

Castagna said that he was initially “worried” that the summer concert series might not end up being a success.

“And now we just try and figure out how to control it, it’s so big.” And the

Knickerbocker Café and its artists were the inspiration.

“I mean half the people around here went to the Knick. Everyone was there and everyone danced the Knickerbocker swing, a freestyle unique to us here in Westerly,” he said. “(The Blues on the Beach originators — the Town Council’ s) early philosophy was we wanted to have a venue for our homegrown blues musicians to come back home and perform. We thought it was really important to remember our blues roots and promote our local artists and local talent.”

Dennis Algieri, now state senator, recalled coming home from college in the early 1980s and “meeting up” at the club.

“Thanksgiving night we’d go and have a ball, meet up with old friends, dance, listen to those (jump) blues.

Oh yes, I remember those days,” he said.

As Nardone reminisced, he said a similar venue might do well, or even better, bring back the Knickerbocker Café of old.

“It would be welcomed if it ever came back and that’s evidenced by Blues on the Beach. Look what’s happened with that,” he said.

And it just may.

Sources have told The Sun that a group of potential investors are exploring a possible purchase of the Knick “to return it to its glory days.”

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