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A Bit of Stardust Drops Onto A Club in Southport

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YOU dream of opening your own nightclub. You finally find a place, fix it up and pray you can attract some customers. And then Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones comes in one night, ready to play the blues for free.

It goes without saying that this isn't the way things usually work in the bar business, something Kevin Kiekel, the owner of the BoxCar in Fairfield, certainly understands.

"That's every club owner in America's fantasy," Mr. Kiekel said. "It'd be like if someone told you that you just won the lotto."

On May 21, only six weeks after the BoxCar's grand opening, Mr. Kiekel's winning ticket slipped in through the back door. Mr. Richards, the rock legend who has a house in nearby Weston, paid a visit to the club and then took the stage for a few numbers with the 89-year-old bluesman David (Honeyboy) Edwards and Rocky Lawrence, a guitarist from West Haven.

"It was absolutely brilliant," Mr. Lawrence said. "He had a blast. It was totally impromptu. We were just making up words as we went."

The gig made news around the world and instantly turned the BoxCar, a blues and jazz club in the Southport section of Fairfield, into a hot destination. A cozy but high-tech fusion of English pub and New York jazz joint, with stone walls and three plasma-screen televisions that let customers stuck in the back see the action onstage, the little building, with its 99-customer capacity, frequently sells out.

"We are trying to provide the one thing the artist usually doesn't get: intimacy with the audience," said Mr. Kiekel, 40, whose brush cut and gum-cracking, no-nonsense demeanor suggest his Navy background. A guitarist who had long dreamed of opening a blues club that would cater to musicians, Mr. Kiekel and his partner, Lou Pagliuco, a bar owner in Fairfield, find the BoxCar picking up steam faster than they had imagined.

"They say the first six months are the toughest when you open a place," said Mr. Pagliuco, 36, who owns the Black Rock & Blue nightclub in Bridgeport. "So we're way ahead of schedule."

The appearance of Mr. Richards, who could not be reached for comment, also got the BoxCar noticed within the music industry.

"Having Keith Richards show up gives the club an immediate cachet," said Bruce Iglauer, the founder and president of the blues label Alligator Records in Chicago.

Mr. Iglauer drew a parallel to Buddy Guy's Legends nightclub in Chicago, where Mr. Guy, a guitarist, occasionally sits in unannounced. "Part of what they're selling is the possibility that the celebrity shows up," Mr. Iglauer said.

As Mr. Kiekel acknowledged, being known as the bar where a Rolling Stone might pop in doesn't exactly hurt business.

On a recent Friday evening, in fact, it was rumored that Mr. Richards was planning another visit to listen to Murali Coryell, the son of the jazz guitarist Larry Coryell. BoxCar employees hustled behind the scenes in anticipation. The soundman, Michael Littleton, tried to recall mixer settings from Mr. Richards's visit, while the staff readied a table for Mr. Richards by the grand piano and the bartender, Bryan Rud, put a couple of bottles of Dom Perignon on ice.

As it turned out, the night passed without Richards, and he, in fact, has not returned.

After the show, Mr. Coryell wasn't complaining. Mr. Coryell, a 35-year-old singer and guitarist, who lived in Fairfield County for a dozen years in the 1970's and 1980's, called the BoxCar one of the most musician-friendly sites he had played.

"That's the great thing about playing a space like this," he said. "You get to meet people, and you get an instant reaction."

For Billy Frenz, the leader of Billy and the Showmen, a Greenwich R&B band, the BoxCar is a throwback to the bars his group played in at the beginning of its 30-year career, before D.J.'s and karaoke.

"There's no other clubs like this now," Mr. Frenz said. "This is the real deal. When you walk in and just look at the place, as a musician, it welcomes you."

Mr. Kiekel said that feeling was no accident. Everything about the BoxCar was designed with a musician's needs first, from the acoustically engineered interior to the drum kit, amplifiers and instruments that stay onstage. The goal is to lure national artists traveling on Interstate 95, between New York City and Boston, by making it as easy as possible for them to play a set at the BoxCar.

"Literally, they just have to pull the tour bus off the highway," Mr. Kiekel said.

Thus far, the club's bookings have been less impromptu affairs, featuring national acts like Gil Parris and Bobby Rush, who are familiar to blues fans but not the general public. The BoxCar also has weekly appearances by the keyboardist Mark Naftalin, who is in the Blues Hall of Fame and played with the 1960's legends Michael Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield.

Because of the scarcity of blues clubs in the Northeast, "any club that's supporting blues these days is welcome," said Steve Hecht, the director of Piedmont Talent, a Charlotte, N.C., booking agency that represents about 35 artists.

Mr. Hecht just booked the guitarist Debbie Davies and the singer Reneé Austin for the BoxCar and plans to bring more blues artists to the club.

Bringing in the major performers that could help the BoxCar live up to its Keith Richards publicity will require plenty of luck, however.

"Getting marquee talent is very difficult, if not impossible, in a venue of that size," said Garry Buck, vice president of the Chicago/New York office of Monterey Peninsula, a booking agency. Mr. Buck regularly books some of the blues' biggest names, like Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor, Keb' Mo' and Jonny Lang.

"Even an artist like Keb' Mo', who does do some solo acoustic touring, I've got to be putting him in 750- to 1,000-seat theaters," Mr. Buck said. "Of course, if someone's passing through, has heard of this place and wants to just stop in, then that's a possibility."

The possibility has long fascinated Mr. Kiekel, an amateur guitarist since he was a teenager and a Fairfield native. After serving in the Navy, Mr. Kiekel said, he worked at a Federal Aviation Administration repair station. When his sister, who owns a dog grooming business in Southport, became ill, Mr. Kiekel quit his job to help her.

The bar next door to the groomers soon got his attention. Built in 1956, it changed hands several times before becoming an Irish pub. Mr. Kiekel became convinced that it could house the nightclub of his dreams and waited for its owner to sell.

It was Mr. Kiekel's wife, Lisa, however, who persuaded her husband to initiate the sale. "I told him, 'Stop spending money on guitars and put it towards something that's worth it,'" Ms. Kiekel said. "You just got a feeling that it couldn't fail."

Mr. Kiekel admitted that he didn't always share that feeling. After finally buying the bar last October, he and his business partner spent six months and their life savings gutting the interior and remaking it according to designs dreamed up by Mr. Pagliuco. That included laying the stone walls themselves, with guidance from a local mason.

Opening night was set for a Friday late in March, but the club's liquor permit was misplaced by state officials, Mr. Kiekel said. The next Friday, a tanker truck crashed on I-95 near Bridgeport, closing the highway and postponing the opening again.

"We started to think we were jinxed," Mr. Kiekel said with a laugh.

Then came Mr. Richards's visit, arranged through Mr. Lawrence and his business partner, Steve Einzig, a New York booking agent, who had worked with Mr. Richards in the past. Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Einzig booked and promoted Mr. Edwards's appearance at the BoxCar, and Mr. Einzig approached Mr. Richards about coming to the club that evening to see him.

He did, with Blondie Chaplin, a frequent Rolling Stones sideman, in tow. Mr. Einzig recalled betting an incredulous man who arrived during Mr. Richards's performance about the identity of the guitarist onstage. "It was the easiest \$10 I ever took," Mr. Einzig said, chuckling.

The BoxCar, which is open seven days a week and serves lunch and dinner, has since done brisk enough business that Mr. Kiekel has no plans to advertise. "We want people to stumble across the BoxCar and tell a friend, 'Oh my God, you got to check this place out,'" he said.

In the meantime, Mr. Kiekel will try to fulfill the other half of his long-term to-do list: getting Eric Clapton to come to the BoxCar stage.

"After that," he said with a smile, "I could die and go to heaven."