

Bruce Bennett, "A Party So Nice They're Throwing It Twice." The Wall Street Journal (April 13, 2011)

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Edit Deak, guitarist Pat Place of Bush Tetras, and an unidentified woman at the Kitchen's 'Aluminum Nights' party in 1981. The venue will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the party this weekend. (Photo Paula Court)

"It was really a lot of damn music," author, historian, songwriter and guitarist Ned Sublette said recently. He was not speaking about the cultural evolution of Cuba or New Orleans, two musical epicenters on which he is a published authority. Instead, the Guggenheim Fellow was conjuring his own performing past, namely at the Kitchen's "Aluminum Nights" concert series held at Bond's International Casino in Times Square on June 14 and June 15 of 1981. "It was two very long nights that went to 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and I was there for every minute of it," Mr. Sublette said. "I forget how many groups I performed in."

The "Aluminum Nights" show, which was billed at the time as "10 years of new video, dance, and music," was staged to commemorate the aluminum anniversary of the Kitchen art and performance space. In its first decade after opening in 1971, the Kitchen's eclectic music programs, under the direction of avant-garde musician Rhys Chatham, had earned a critical and popular primacy in the thriving lower Manhattan arts scene. The space itself had also evolved from the actual kitchen of the Mercer Arts Center in the Broadway Central Hotel—which collapsed on Aug. 3, 1973, killing four—to a new headquarters on Broom and Wooster streets.

This weekend, the Kitchen will revisit the "Aluminum Nights" party and fund-raiser with a two-night condensed bill at its current 19th Street headquarters, which it has occupied since 1987. The program—either the event's 30th anniversary of its 10th birthday or its actual 40th birthday, depending on how one parses it—will feature many alumni of the original 1981 Times Square marathon, including Peter Gordon's Love of Life Orchestra, solo percussionist Z'EV, electronic-music composer George E. Lewis, and funk-punk band Bush Tetras.

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Bush Tetras drummer Dee Pop will return to the Kitchen to perform. (Daniella Zalzman for The Wall Street Journal)

"This is, 30 years later, a commemoration of a 10-year anniversary," said Mr. Sublette, who will perform with Love of Life Orchestra. "It's kind of meta."

According to Mr. Gordon, the Kitchen's 1981 music menu was defined by its indefinability. "It's not like it was ever a completely homogeneous scene," he said. "You had things ranging from improvisatory music to electronic music to extremely structured and composed music. Some people were working with media and some were referring more to rock music and that energy. Others referred to jazz and others more to the classical and experimental tradition."

Indeed, so much fresh creative ground had been broken during the Kitchen's first decade that a comprehensive survey would have been far too big to present at its original, intimate SoHo venue. So the "Aluminum Nights" shows were instead staged at Bond's International Casino, a 2000-seat theater at Broadway and 45th Street named for both a 1930s nightclub and a clothing store it housed in different decades.

The two evenings were a resounding success, stretching well past the 2 a.m. curfew. "I just remember it being gigantic and sold out," said Love of Life's Randy Gun. "A real extravaganza." The curatorial bill of fare was appropriately varied, featuring modern composers who had played Carnegie Hall, hip-hop pioneer Fab Five Freddy, and rock 'n' roll bands more likely to be seen at Max's Kansas City or the Mudd Club. "They had Philip Glass and Meredith Monk," Mr. Sublette said. "Then they had Lydia Lunch, Bush Tetras and the Feelies. There were very different streams coming together."

The Bond's crowd was, according to those in attendance, eclectic. "Of course the big story was that Mick Jagger was backstage," said Mr. Gun. "That's the one thing everybody remembers." Mr. Gun recalled his own encounter with the stalwart Stone's entourage as a moment of rock 'n' roll quid pro quo. "I was in the dressing room huddled over a garbage pail filled with beers and ice," he said, "and they asked if they could nick some beer. I said, 'Yeah, sure. You're Mick Jagger, you can take a few beers from us.'"

Dee Pop, the drummer for Bush Tetras, which disbanded in 1983 and briefly reunited for a 1996 comeback album, said this weekend's visit back to "Aluminum Nights" is no more about the band's past than the 1981 show was about its future. "This gig," he said, "shows a considerable span in our lives—from the very beginning, where we didn't know what the hell we were doing and were trying things out, to now, when we've gone through like a million gigs and all the different ways you can play shows. It never really was about what we were going to do next and making plans. We had a great time that night, and we'll have a great time this weekend."