

Supersized

“We work all night, and by the time the sun comes up, we’re putting together the last odds and ends,” says Lucas MGSA’84, the head scenic painter at Macy’s Parade Studio. Then the crew takes a bus downtown, arriving just in time to greet the first float at journey’s end. “Then we have to pack it up. It’s a long day.”

Well before Thanksgiving, Lucas knows the floats intimately: her paints and brushes help transform wood, metal, and styrene into giraffes, turtles, and cupcakes. In August, Lucas celebrated her 25th anniversary on the job, which she started soon after earning an M.F.A. in painting from Rutgers. Her Hoboken, New Jersey, workplace is a cavernous warehouse, where a staff of 24 creates five or six new floats each year. As a saw blade whines, 20-foot-high plywood ducks look on. Mementos of dismantled floats perch everywhere: a giant silver-wrapped Hershey’s Kiss, an ornate cuckoo clock, a fire-breathing dragon.



Lucas has painted with sponges, cardboard, even a mop, as she creates feathers, marble, or, once, a wood-grained Gibson guitar. “A lot of it I really learned on my own,” she says. “I taught myself my own tricks.”

Lucas—who has two teenage daughters with her husband, whom she met at the studio—finds little time for her own creative work painting decorative floor mats. But she counts herself lucky to have that rarest of treasures: full-time work as an artist, doing what she loves. Turns out, even those missed Thanksgivings have a silver lining: on Friday, Macy’s treats the parade staff and their families to dinner with all the trimmings.

— Deborah Yaffe

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK ROMANENKO

HOLDING COURT

For many years, the Court Tavern was the center of a constellation of New Brunswick nightclubs, showcasing indie rock ‘n’ roll bands and entertaining Rutgers students. But the music scene has changed, and the Court is vying for its viability.

Who can forget when the bass player blew up a urinal with an M-80? Or when Otis Blackwell, who wrote “Great Balls of Fire,” brought down the house with the Smithereens?

Or when the blueberry pie-and-sardine-eating contest that started in the nightclub spilled into the back of a pickup on Church Street?

Mention the Court Tavern in New Brunswick, New Jersey, to people who know it, and you get a smile and certainly a story. For three decades, “the Court” hosted eardrum-shattering indie-band music for Rutgers students and alumni, showcasing three decades of musicians on its basement stage, decorated with a hand-painted mural of the late Fred Kreiss, a.k.a. Stinky Sonobuoni, of the Mad Daddys, on one side and the club’s first owner, the late Vincent Roberts, on the other. “The mural depicts him with a finger in his ear because he never liked punk music—only the cash that came along with a successful night of it,” says son Bobby Albert, who joined his father in 1981. Through the years, the Court has been a launching pad for well-known bands such as Nirvana, the Spin Doctors, and the Gaslight Anthem.

Opened as a bar in 1961 on Church Street and moved across the street when a parking lot was built in 1981, the year it imported live music, the Court is struggling to survive. On April 30th, three bands—featuring musicians who frequently played there—raised \$36,000 at a benefit concert at the State Theatre in New Brunswick. Albert and his wife, Eileen, used the proceeds to pay back the people who saved the Court from closing at the end of 2009. “People who read about our problems lined up at the door to help us,” says Albert. “It showed us how important we are to a lot of folks.”

For many Rutgers students, sauntering down to Church Street for live music after a night of studying was a fitting nightcap. Rivaling the good music was the fact that the Court felt like home. “What I remember most is a sense of belonging,” says Missy Manning DC’89. Ed Wong ENG’89, SCILS’89, GSNB’93 considered the Court to be the perfect home-away-from-home hideaway. “That great bands were playing was just an extra topping on the Bar Pie,” he says. Beth O’Brien CC’83 went to the Court so that she could hang out with a boy she liked. They have been married for 21 years.





The late Fred Kreiss, a.k.a. Stinky Sonobuoni, of the Mad Daddys, cutting loose onstage at the Court Tavern, which has hosted hundreds of bands over nearly three decades of operation. Bobby Albert, right, who joined his father in the business in 1981, still presides over the Court, where the decor and props, such as this lone mannequin head that was part of an art exhibition years ago, have been droll counterpoints to the music.

Greeting you in the vestibule is a barber's chair, a donation from former George Street barber John Newman. Hanging from a clock behind the bar are underpants, a tribute to Stinky Sonobuoni's habit of removing clothing as he worked himself into a frenzy onstage. There is the large portrait of Louis Armstrong and the gold record from the Smithereens, who were regulars in the 1980s and recorded a live album here in 2008. Downstairs, small rooms lead to the bar and stage: ground zero for raucous nights of rock 'n' roll deliverance.

The reasons for the Court's financial woes are many, but the most telling explanation is the decline of live music in New Brunswick, borne in part by the change in the legal age for drinking from 18 to 21 and clubs having to close at 2 instead of 3 a.m. "There was the Roxy, Patrick's, the Melody Bar, and Bowl-o-Drome, and they created a vibrancy," says Albert. "Since the early 2000s, we've been the only option, and that has hurt because the scene doesn't generate the buzz like it did. We are the last man standing."

Lenny Kaye RC'67, the longtime guitarist for the benefit's headliner, the



Patti Smith Group, grew up in New Brunswick and sees the Court as crucial to the city's cultural legacy. He credits the venue with returning him to his musical roots, years after he graduated from Rutgers with a history degree. "Sometimes, the music business makes you forget why you got involved in music in the first place," says Kaye. "The Court is a place that encourages creativity and collaboration."

Bob White, a blues guitarist and a former professor at Rutgers–Newark, was the first of hundreds of acts hired by Albert. There were exceptional bands, such as Crossfire Choir, Frozen Concentrate, and the Mad Daddys, that just disappeared, Albert says. And there were acts that went places: Ween, the Flaming Lips, and Henry Rollins—bands that always brought the people out in droves.

The Court has been quite an experience for Albert, who, 30 years ago, thought he was just passing through. "After attending Marquette, I planned to teach in Appalachia, but I told my dad I could give him two years. Now it's 30 years later, and it feels like it's gone by in the blink of an eye." — Bill Glovin