

The Westerly Sun  
February 2, 2009

## **Nicholas recreating Knick at night**

The Knickerbocker's grand reopening is set for this month, with Greg Piccolo handling bookings.

*By Gloria Russell*

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Johnny Nicholas, the proverbial hometown boy who made good in the music world both here and abroad, is reveling in the discovery of artifacts he has found at the Knickerbocker Café on Railroad Avenue – a popular nightclub he is recreating for music lovers of all ages.

The years took their toll on the Knickerbocker, and the last vestiges of a business that had enjoyed a flamboyant past had been reduced to the Tap Room (or Men's Bar, as it is locally known), a small kitchen, and a big empty room that for decades rocked with live bands and swing dancing.

But while renovating the local venue, Nicholas was delighted to find a basement full of treasures from the past: a still-operating water fountain from the Cascade Room, colored neon tubing that once brightened the room, old neon signs still waiting to be re-hung in the windows, the original café tables, and numerous music contracts, photos and tickets to old shows.

Out of that conglomeration, Nicholas said, "we saved everything we could."

The Knickerbocker is scheduled for a full opening later this month. Nicholas, responsible for renovations to the 80-year-old "Knick", recalls that the old café was a place for people to meet, dance and enjoy the music of the day, and he wants to see a new café do it all over again.

Aggie and Paul Viteritto Sr., former owners of the Knick, had helped Nicholas, Roomful of Blues, Sugar Ray Norcia and many other local musicians get a start. Their sons, Sal and Paul Jr., now employed at the café, have provided valuable advice during the restoration process while continuing day-to-day operations, Nicholas said.

The new Knick has an art deco feel from touches such as the hidden neon tubing, the reproduction of the original molding by Stonington boat builder and musician Bill "Foxy" Mills, and the new entrance, cloak room and horseshoe bar created by local general contractor David Gabrielle.

Photographs and recollections have dictated the restoration of the dance floor and redesign of the stage in its original spot.

Greg Piccolo is managing the musical bookings and Sally (Trefes) Sorenson will conduct operations.

The Knickerbocker legacy began in a building housing a little ice cream store, which morphed into a neighborhood bar in 1929, weathering prohibition and the Great Depression. By 1939, a large addition to the smaller structure became a staple for those who enjoying dining and dancing.

The romance of the era was evident in the names of the rooms assigned by the Viteritto family. There was the Cascade Room with its lighted fountain, the Starlight Ballroom and the Rose Room bar. Live swing music, provided by local and national bands, swelled from the small stage and dancers crowded the floor, "dancing in a distinct Westerly style that is alive and well in the two-state region," adds Nicholas.

Through the war years and beyond, the Knick catered to the crowd who gathered week after week, but little by little, as times changed, so did the demand for what the Knickerbocker offered. After its heyday, which lasted well into the 80's – a pared-down kitchen served loyal patrons in the bar, with occasional fish and chips on Fridays in Lent in the old dining room.

It wasn't until recently that the old waxy sparked the interest of a group of local investors, who shared their love of the Knick with a man who has lived most of his adult life in Texas.

Born and schooled in Stonington, Nicholas started down the road to his future at 14, when he and his brother Bill made a guitar out of an old cigar box. The squeaks and squawks from that attempt would probably have dissuaded most would-be musicians, but his first job at a market near his home on South Broad Street in Pawtucket and the 85 cent an hour paycheck afforded him his first real Stella guitar.

"I played for anyone who would listen," Nicholas said. "I always had a band," the first of which was called The Vikings. He worked with Larry Peduzzi, Paul (Archie) Koulbanis, Buzzy Goodwin, and Howie Sebastian.

Nicholas continued performing professionally while he attended Franklin and Marshall College, and went on the road, backing artists from Detroit to Chicago, playing every night of the week. He founded a string of musical groups, including the Black Cat Blues Band, with Duke Robillard (who started Roomful of Blues and later revived it with Greg Piccolo), Fran Christina, and Steve Nardella.

Nicholas and Nardella worked together as the Boogie Brothers, accepting an invitation to the San Francisco Bay Area from Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen.

Back in Chicago, Nicholas collaborated with blues legend Big Walter Horton, and he cut a few records under his own name before heading East and forming the Rhythm Rockers. He moved to Texas permanently in 1978 when he joined Asleep at the Wheel, and was with the group when they won a Grammy Award.

In Texas, he and his bride, Brenda Schaudt, bought an abandoned gas station and turned it into the successful Hill Top Café, which they've operated for 27 years while raising three sons.

Meanwhile, Nicholas continued to entertain at the restaurant as well as perform throughout Texas and Louisiana and on world tours. He expanded his interests by raising funds for youth music and theater programs in Fredericksville, Texas, and instilling in aspiring young musicians an appreciation and love of traditional music.

These days, Nicholas is eager to turn his attention to Westerly, and he has already begun contacting directors of area jazz bands to offer the Knickerbocker as a venue for showcasing talent.

"We'll be sticking to 'roots' music," Nicholas explained. "It won't be heavy metal or loud or hip-hip or rap. Not here at the Knickerbocker."