

DEATH OF THE BEAR

OC's legendary concert hall comes to an inglorious end

By Jim Washburn
The Register

The Golden Bear offered the last show in its 60-year history as an Orange County nightspot Wednesday night, and the event passed without a proper wake or even a farewell toast.

Though tears were streaming down at least one waitress's face at the show's end, the club's owners, Rick and Charles Babiracki, said Wednesday night they were still hopeful that negotiations and court action Thursday might save the club for an additional 30 days.

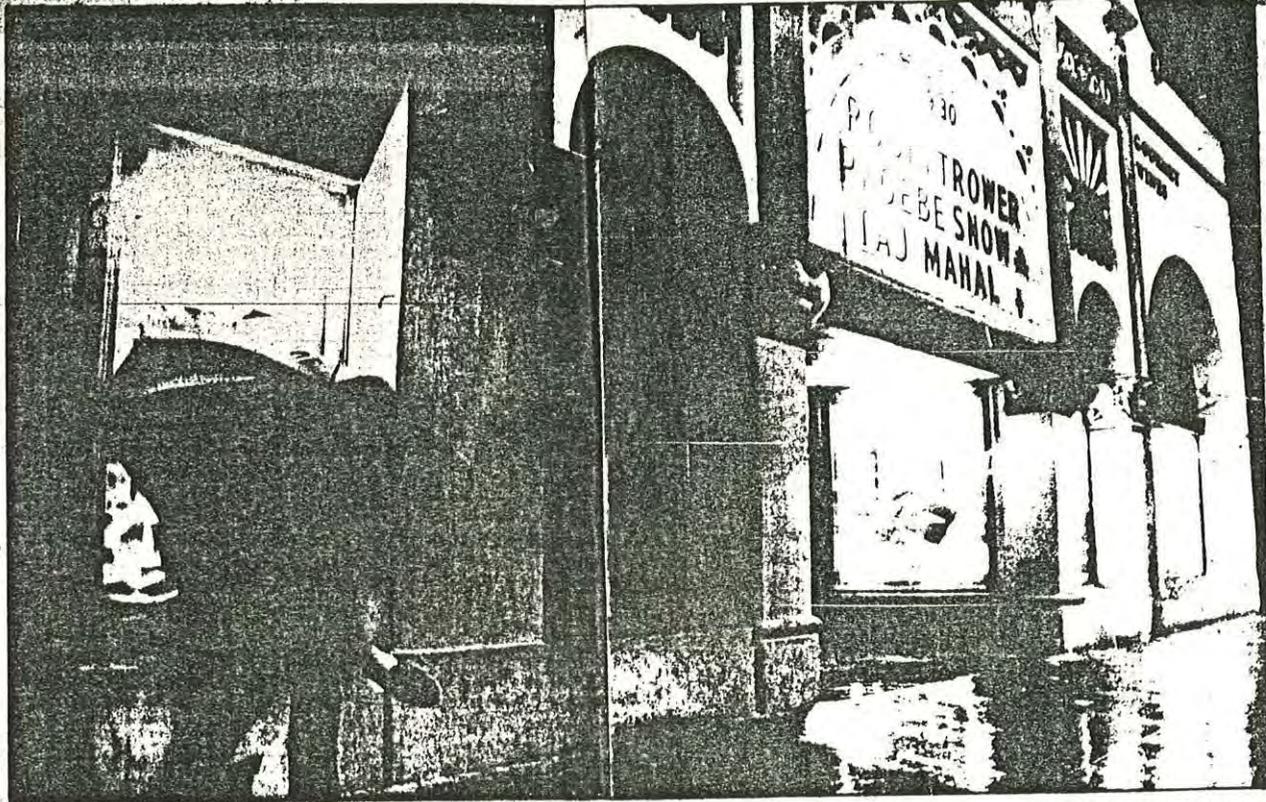
By Thursday night it was known that the Babirackis' efforts had failed. (The Babirackis say they weren't informed of a court order to vacate the club by Dec. 26 until Jan. 24. The owners of the property intend to demolish the club and erect a 12-story hotel on the site.)

At a news conference Wednesday afternoon, Rick Babiracki had said, "This building and its history and what it has meant to the music business give it an inherent dignity that deserves a better fate than what it's getting." He

said an additional 30 days would give them a chance to offer some of the "Bear's special friends" — among whom he counted B.B. King, David Lindley, Steve Martin, Huey Lewis and Linda Ronstadt — one final opportunity to play the club.

They didn't get those 30 days, so the final performer to rock the Bear was the one scheduled to appear that night: British guitarist Robin Trower. Given the number of performers to whom the Bear was practically a second home and whose careers are entwined with its 25 years as a music club, Trower's Jimi Hendrix-influenced guitar workouts may have been far from the most apt send-off. But ending that way did give an example of one of the Bear's stronger points: variety.

Unlike the lowest-common-denominator Top 40 cover bands that fester in many of the county's nightspots, the Golden Bear booked artists that didn't try to please everybody. The eclectic fare ran from blues to punk, metal to folk, western swing to jazz. I certainly got more than my share of memorable nights out of that mix, and the packed, shouting houseful there to see Trower



Paul E. Rodriguez/The Register

Robin Trower, listed at the top of the Golden Bear's marquee, performed the club's final concert on a rainy Wednesday evening. His Thursday show and scheduled appearances by Phoebe Snow and Taj Mahal were canceled.

apply a Strat to his songs deserved no less.

Near the end of the 90-minute set — during which his two Marshall amp stacks were nearly drowned out by the audience's wild response, a grinning Trower exclaimed, "This was the first gig of our tour, and we couldn't wish for a better place to play."

Few musicians have played the Bear without echoing that sentiment. Some would praise the acoustics or the atmosphere, others the club's staff or responsive audiences, the intimacy of the room. Whatever it was, there was something about the club that would inspire musicians to their best. There is an all-too-rarely reached point in music, a transcendent intensity,

that makes one realize how inadequate words are to describe it. And a lot of Bear shows could leave one at a loss for words.

Performers such as David Lindley or Los Lobos have at times been so caught up in playing that they continued long after the waitresses had to collect the drinks from the patrons. Muddy Waters — who usually took it easy on stage in the last couple of years before he died — wrenched jagged pieces of Delta fury from his guitar at the Bear. Other artists — ones who typically play only much larger halls — would develop new material at the club or use it as a kickoff spot for national tours because they trusted the club's audiences to

see the feeling behind the rough edges.

While there was even a thread of a hope the club might be saved, it seemed hard to imagine that magic could end, that the Bear wouldn't always be there. The hard reality became evident Thursday afternoon after the Babirackis' efforts to save the club failed.

"They're tearing down a church here," said Charles Babiracki, and that seemed to be the prevailing mood as staff and friends, nearly all of them in tears, hauled equipment, pianos, furniture, lights and the accumulated memories of the Babirackis' 12-year tenancy out of the Bear.

Thursday evening people were still showing up outside the club,

for Trower's second scheduled night or to buy tickets for upcoming shows. One, Scott Kinslow, said he had moved to Huntington Beach from Venice specifically because the Golden Bear was there. "Having this great venue here was the deciding factor. It's a great place."

"I feel really bad," said Ray Ellis of Midway City. "It was a real warm place. Magic, that's a good way to describe it, because that's the way things were in there."

Others continued to show up in front of the club. But the Bear's house lights had gone up for the last time at 10:30 the night before, and the county is a darker place for it.

O.C. Register

BUILDING
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'Peter' is great to look at, but lacks substance

