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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

“This Must Be The Place”

BY MOLLY GARFINKEL

Some of the best words are untranslatable. In German, *fernweh* means the yearning for a place one has never been. Literally a “farsickness” or “aching for distance places,” it is the antonym of *heimweh*, “a great longing for the distant home or a loved one living there, with whom one felt secure.” We experience these seemingly opposing impulses sometimes separately, other times simultaneously; when overlapped, we are compelled to unplug and go far away, so that we can feel at home—in our own lives—once again.

By most accounts, this condition finds its cure at Sunny’s Bar in Red Hook. Crossing the threshold from Conover Street into the pub and realizing that you’ve reached the edge of the world, the seeker becomes still. After sipping a beer and soaking in strains of blues from the back room, the restless inevitably find repose. Wanderlust and homesickness take their cues to head back out the door into the waterfront winds that dance down the street toward the bay, their wake flicking daylight through the windows and off stainless steel coffee urns, beer bottles, and pint glasses. In the evening, the sunset splashes itself across the bar and pastel walls where the late Sunny Balzano’s abstract canvases hang with quiet confidence over contented customers who all want to stay a while, maybe forever. In German, this would be called *gemütlichkeit*; in Swedish it is *gemytlig*. The Dutch and Danes, respectively, recognize it as *gezelligheid* or *hyggelig*. Though they vary in precise meaning and context, these terms all convey something convivial, familiar. They also indicate something deeper—the intimacy of reuniting with a friend, time passed with loved ones, or the togetherness that gives people feelings of belonging.

Like well-crafted words, prized places are evocative, idiosyncratic, precise, and untranslatable. Sunny’s Bar is one of them. As seasoned musician and bartender Mara Kaye says, “You can’t fake this. You can’t

build a bar that smells like this. You can’t build a bar that feels like this. This is the pay off of time.” It’s true. And Sunny’s wouldn’t make sense anywhere but Red Hook. A longtime resident and patron insisted that the winds and waters around the peninsula provide Red Hook with a different atmosphere from the rest of New York City, in both literal and figurative senses. Cut off from convenient MTA connections, it has its own biorhythm. It takes a certain type to tolerate the area’s mischievous meteorology and remote location, but Red Hook isn’t just a laid-back coastal cul-de-sac. The raw immediacy of the coastline and the vastness of the sky offshore together yield a unique vitality. Red Hook, as a Caribbean proverb goes, “lives on an eyelash,” a fragile ecosystem entirely exposed to the elements. Here, a sense of community is key to surviving the tacit ceasefire with nature, and Sunny’s is a critical piece of that delicate peace. It is *the* stalwart watering hole, music venue, living room, studio, temple, confessional, and rallying point for community members near and far who value the bar and surrounding terrain for their common characteristics—scrappy and soulful, elemental and ever-evolving, textured and polished in the way that only comes from weathering many storms.

Sunny’s Bar and the building next door have been in Antonio “Sunny” Balzano’s family for over one hundred years. The now eponymous establishment was first opened in 1890 as John’s Bar and Restaurant, eventually becoming a go-to breakfast and beer spot for the sailors and stevedores who worked the local waterfront when Red Hook was a shipping hub. In 1934, Sunny was born in the tenement adjacent to the restaurant. He and his siblings were raised in that upstairs apartment, and Sunny lived there until he passed in 2016.

His father, Rafael, ran John’s Bar and Restaurant until falling ill in 1980. Sunny, who had been living as an artist in India,

returned home to pursue his painting while helping with the family business. He found John’s nearly unchanged, but the long-shoremen were long gone, containerization having shifted shipping to New Jersey. When industry left, the neighbors went, too. Sunny’s uncle ran the restaurant, but only opened the place during the day; patrons were hardly banging down the doors.

Soon the neighborhood’s ample and affordable industrial spaces drew artists and musicians to Red Hook. The newcomers started hanging out at John’s Bar and Restaurant, and Sunny, despite his uncle’s misgivings, eventually developed them into an occasional but popular nighttime bar crowd. Live theater and musical performances were part of the draw, much to his uncle’s chagrin.

Still focused on his painting, Sunny only took full command of business operations when his uncle died in 1994; two years later, the bar’s liquor license expired. Sunny saw a new opportunity. He eliminated the food menu and turned the bar into a music and gathering space that only opened on Friday nights. With no license, he offered alcohol in exchange for “donations.” The formula worked, and the speakeasy and its immensely likeable steward became the spiritual center of Red Hook. But the liquor board wasn’t charmed, and in 2001, Sunny and his wife, Tone Balzano Johansen, were forced to shutter the bar. The resulting, resounding disappointment of their patrons, friends, and neighbors made them realize that they had something worth fighting for. A year and what seemed like miles of red tape later, Sunny’s got a new liquor license. By May 2002, the bar officially reopened, but only on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and whenever the couple felt like it.

Its sporadic schedule notwithstanding, Sunny’s has become a venerable venue. Musicians, major and minor alike, continue to pack the back room to overflowing. Smokey Hormel is the regular Wednesday



Sunny's at sunset, 2017. Photo by the author.

It's a frickin' damned shame that CBGB shut down! All these places. Someone has to actually have the guts and the gumption to fight. And you don't have to be strong to do this. I've cried my way through it. I feel that we roll over and die a little too quickly these days, but we need to stick in there and fight for the stuff we believe in, and fight for the places that mean something.

After an intensive half-year social media effort and a series of fundraising events, including an art auction, a Kentucky Derby party, and a Mother's Day raffle, the community once again heeded the call. Money, glasses, and spirits were raised, and a year later, the significance of this all-too-rare real estate success story continues to resonate with New Yorkers across the five boroughs. This is especially meaningful given the recent arrival of the NYC ferry to Red Hook. Increasing traffic may mean big shifts for the neighborhood in the coming years. For now, the best part is that nothing about the bar has changed at all. They don't take credit cards, they don't have Wi-Fi, and a limited supply of chips and peanuts are the only menu items. Despite the anxieties of two recent and very close calls, Sunny's remains accountable to its community of supporters who seek a steadfast sanctuary and ever-unpretentious place to unwind. If ever there were a way to thank a community of regulars, this would surely be it. If there ever were a place you could reliably call home away from home, this would surely be it. ▼

Molly Garfinkel, director of the Place Matters program, researches community and public history, urban traditions, and perceptions of space and place.

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headliner; Saturdays are for showcasing the beloved bluegrass jam (headed by Tone on guitar); and Stevie from the band St. Lou plays a set every Friday. Around these esteemed acts, Sunny's musical roster is studied with blues, folk, and jazz outfits that more than hold their own. The stools, booths, back room, and yard are usually packed; the house is cash-only, and beer is the preferred poison. On nights when cash and shots are flowing, the bar has been known to nearly run out of everything but stories.

In the last five years, the community anchor has become vulnerable to rising sea levels and waves of gentrification washing down Brooklyn from points north. During October 2012's Hurricane Sandy, the bar was severely damaged and Tone nearly killed; three months later, Sunny's was still closed and losing income, but not heart. A message on their website read, "we are hurt but OK in the grand scheme of things, so please try to devote your attention to those who need it most." The message included a link to redhook.recovers.org.

Thanks to karma, Tone's can-do spirit, and massive outpouring of love from the neighbors and fan base, the bar raised

\$100,000 and rebuilt. Sunny passed away in March 2016, at the age of 81, and a year later, Tone found herself trying to fundraise \$65,000 to beef up a down payment on the building, which most joint shareholders in the extensive Balzano family hoped to sell.

A few short months before the hurricane, the late Anthony Bourdain paid a visit to Sunny's (with Sunny's younger brother, Ralph, a memorabilia collector who lives in the iconic bric-a-brac-covered house around the corner). Bourdain guessed that investors and developers must have been chomping at the bit to buy the property and turn it into a serious moneymaker. Sunny responded with a sigh, "Once a month they come in here. And it pisses me off when they do. Cause they have ideas to do things with this place that have nothing to do with what it's about... This [bar] is so much of what we're about that there's no money that could pay for this."

Sunny's sentiments aside, Tone had to be pragmatic to stay the course, and to also stay sane and sanguine. "You see, it is so important to me to get across that things like this *can* be done," she says, banging a fist on Sunny's favorite table in the bar:

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