



Frank, barman of the 21 Club

His landmark ground zero dive is more like a Tenderloin community center

BY TOM CARTER

SATURDAY 9 P.M.

THE bar is warm, cozy with colored lights here and there and from the jukebox and glowing beer ads. Every stool is occupied. Each square inch of wall space is covered with advertising and knickknacks. A few people stand, including four young women in the corner en route to a Warfield show on Market Street a block away. They laugh raucously, competing with Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman" blasting from the jukebox positioned near the muted TV set featuring a swarm of college football players.

Frank the bartender — thinning hair under his signature snap-brim hat, mustache just a lip-shadow in the dim light — moves up and down the bar, hands finding jobs along the way, his untucked short-sleeved maroon shirt hiding a small potbelly. He calls customers by name, knows their drink and at least a bit of their history. He greets them with a sympathetic smile, as he has for 39 years.

The six women and 20 men here now would make the bar — scarcely the size of two SRO rooms — claustrophobic if not for the wide-open glass front door. Easy come, easy go.

The two quietest men in the bar are on my right, a big white guy sitting, and a big black guy standing. They're turned, facing each other, smiling and talking in sign language. Left to me is Scotty, close white hair, aging face, Susan seated just as the bar curves, in her 40s with tired eyes, and Jim Mack, tall, sport-

ing a dark ponytail, garrulous, looking younger than 40.

Scotty and Mack are in here every day, Susan "every chance I get." They've all been coming here for years. Frank says Mack, from San Mateo, was "just a kid" when he showed up 20 years ago.

The 21 Club is a Tenderloin landmark, but Frank says the majority of his customers don't live in the neighborhood. And some are out-of-towners working in the city.

I order a Sam Adams and Frank says he doesn't have it, just four beers he names off. I pick Stella Artois. What he sells most is Bud. I tell him as a neighborhood institution he's worth a story.

"I know," he says. "But maybe the neighborhood would be better off without me."

"Nobody in here's saying that," I say.

Frank's sensitive. His detractors say he pushes demon rum, adds to public drunkenness. The killings outside his door in recent years, some after his 2 a.m. closing time, give the 21 Club a black eye. The shootings across the street a couple of years ago outside the now-boarded-up Grand Liquors have only helped drag the Turk and Taylor intersection's bad nighttime rep through the gutter, too. This is ground zero for drugs and violence in the Tenderloin.

Esquire calls the 21 Club "the diviest bar in the Tenderloin." That reality can't be denied. But Frank's 21 Club is also a community center of sorts and an arts venue of some import.

Frank pours Ten High whiskey for Mack's bourbon and soda.

"This is the best bar in the goddam world," Mack says. "I've been all around the world and there's nothing more special than coming in here."

Susan corrects him: "Best in the universe." "Frank keeps a good jukebox," Scotty says. "And he's consistent."

"One of the nicest people in the world," Mack says. "Gives everybody a second chance, takes care of people who've had tough times, gives 'em a fair shake." Mack lowers his chin. "All of us here have massive scars."

"He's kind, level-headed and generous," says Susan, bleary-eyed but clear about that. "I love Frank. It's the most satisfying relationship I've ever had in my life."

Oldtimers remember twice-a-season tailgate parties at Candlestick that Frank used to throw at Giants games for his "regulars," grilling good steaks for them. Now he brings in a roast turkey on Thanksgiving and hosts monthly poetry reading nights, emceed by Ed Bowers, who writes the Tenderloin Art Beat for this newspaper. A good poem gets a free drink.

Frank is 68. He says patrons are nervous about when he's going to retire. He lives in Sonoma County, owns the business, but not the building, and keeps his last name close.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Frank, owner and charismatic barkeep of the popular watering hole, looks you in the eye like a man with nothing to hide but his last name, and that's just being street smart.

Frank says his job is hard on his wife who works during the day. He takes the handoff from his daytime barkeep at 6 p.m., shuts down at 2 a.m., cleans up and drives home. Six days a week. A few years ago it was seven days. But that became unbearable.

Over the years, a wide, steady stream flowed past the 21 Club, mostly at night. Actors, theatergoers, and SRO residents walking down Taylor Street, all liking a funky, edgy little bar, the stale smell, the motley characters, the closeness and loose talk and, of course, the barkeep who remembers everybody and knows the neighborhood. It's unforgettable.

"Frank is the soul of the Tenderloin, a great guy," Richard Livingston, manager of nearby EXIT Theatre, told me once. "And the 21 Club is a window on the world."

But big customer flow is past tense. Joe's burned and closed three years ago. Frank's tributary of foot traffic from it shriveled, the last vestige of what it was in the old days before crack cocaine became a sidewalk best-seller. They won't reappear while shifty drug dealers loiter outside. Every night there's a bunch.

Frank shakes his head. "My regulars keep me going," he says. "It's stupid to keep hanging on unless it gets better out there. Look at all the storefronts boarded up."

TUESDAY NIGHT

Four people are on stools at 6:15 p.m. A guy walks in briskly and Frank asks where he's

going. To the bathroom, he says, and Frank tells him it's for customers. "My dad works here," the guy says. "No he doesn't," Frank shoots back. The guy walks out.

Joe is seated to my right. Like Frank, he's from Sonoma, had to work overtime. He decided to avoid commuter traffic and kill time with a beer, something he's been doing here for 10 years. He knows Frank well enough to play golf with him. They fuss over a long pass Vernon Davis dropped in the end zone two days before.

"I come down here, and if I don't see Frank inside I won't come in," Joe says. "I think a lot of people feel that way."

Frank puts a Stella in front of me.

John, the older guy a seat down on my left, lives in a rent-controlled Nob Hill apartment and dislikes the bars in his neighborhood. He's a 21 Club regular. Why? He leans forward, "It's a dive," he says, and smiles. "You saw the Esquire mention? A great bar, but we don't want it popular." Luckily, Esquire magazine naming the 21 Club and three others in San Francisco among the "Best bars in America 2008" didn't open the floodgates, although Frank may not agree.

Frank can't get the dope dealers out of his head. Every night it's a migraine.

"They look like they're coming out of here," he says. "They're not. They're smoking and they're mean, rude and cruel."

The old order is history. "I have homeless friends, and they won't come down here," John says. "They're scared."

"I'm sorry Original Joe's burned out," Frank says. "But I hung on. I'm stupid. Nobody drank at Joe's. They drank here, all the help, then they went to Joe's. And the working girls came from Market Street, too, and Warfield employees."

"What's the attraction of Turk and Taylor?" Frank asks nobody, puzzled how his front yard went to hell.

"You need more cops," John says. When Golden Gate Theater has a show, cops are all over the place. "For the swells," he says. The street is clear. Then the show is over, the cops go away, and the dealers return. "The city thinks putting shops in here will clean it up. They've got it ass backwards. Clean up the streets first."

A squad car pulls up at the curb. A cop gets out. The gathering of eight probable dealers, men and women in dark clothes, head across the street. They linger next to the parking lot. The cop stays five minutes, climbs back in the prowler and pulls slowly away.

The dealers drift back and linger in front of the Club.

"They've got a warning code they send, 5-0, and that's not Hawaii," Frank says. "There, did you hear it?"

None of us heard anything, but the dealers amble across the street and look back at the club while a black and white cruises by. Soon as it's gone they return.

"Eighty percent of them are from Oakland and Richmond," Frank says. Tenderloin Capt. Joe Garrity puts neighborhood drug arrests of out-of-towners here nearer 90%.

"They've got to be seen here," Frank continues, then floats his haunting question again, "Why Turk and Taylor?"

FRIDAY NIGHT

The joint typically would be filled now, but only four of the stools are taken. Frank slides me a Stella. Poet Ed Bowers, who runs 21 Club's monthly poetry night, comes in. Ed doesn't drink now. Frank pours him a Coke. "Everybody is accepted here but thieves and people who would beat the crap out of Frank," Bowers declares, then remarks about the strangely slow night.

"Yeah," Frank says, "it sets the record. When it's busy out there," he nods toward Turk where outside a half-dozen black girls are hanging out, "it's dead in here. Jukebox isn't even going. But I kinda like that."

An oldtimer at the end of the bar blurts, "I had a bar in Martinez next to the mothball fleet. One day I did \$12."

Three days a week Frank takes a walk at Fort Mason, before work. His feet are on rubber floor slats all night and they hurt, but not when he's busy and moving.

Bowers tells Frank news about a half dozen people they know. Frank tilts his head slightly to hear something unusual, smiles at weirdness, then tells Bowers about a couple more customers. Frank is the 21 Club diaspora's repository of personal histories, the nexus of communication.

"Hi Frank!" a woman with a cane yells as she walks in and heads for a stool. "I hurt myself again!"

Behind the bar is an eclectic collection of gimcracks and odd items, many reflecting Frank's Pacific Islander heritage as well as sports memorabilia of the 49ers and Giants.



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Bowers leaves to go walk his ex-wife's great Dane.

A nice blonde in a long coat and high heels comes in, puts her elbows on the bar and asks Frank for a Jameson. He pours the double Irish whiskey. She drains it, leaves a fin. "Thanks, Frank," she says, adding over her shoulder as she walks out, "I'll drop by after work."

She's a Warfield staffer, Frank says, "about the only thing we've got going" for business from Market Street. "It's sad."

A disheveled man slides onto a stool by the door and starts in.

"Give me five dollars, Frank, please," he whines. "I need a drink, man." ■

Outside the 21 Club, at the corner of Turk and Taylor, street people gather day and night, which gives a menacing vibe to the surroundings, belying the community center atmosphere within the bar.



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