

TL landmark McDonald's Bookstore evicted by TNDC

BY TOM CARTER

LEGENDARY McDonald's Bookstore, king of the overstuffed, moldering used book emporiums, was evicted from 48 Turk St. in December by TNDC for not paying rent, thus ending its 80-year run.

Owner Itzhak Volansky, 58, says he may reopen a block away. But if his track record is an indication, it won't be soon. Organizing the store's jumbled sea of publications, some of it predating the 1920s, would be monumental. And Volansky would face similar dismal business conditions that led to his downfall.

A notice posted on the door in late November from the Sheriff's Department said he and his material had to be out by Dec. 3, 6:01 a.m. But TNDC generously gave him more time.

In late January, Volansky was still removing the bulk of more than a million books and magazines, by his estimate. There was no end in sight. He was sending the collection by U-Haul to a two-story building at 116-118 Turk St. that he inherited 30 years ago from his father. It houses Youth Hostel Central and has vast storage space.

"We could open there," said Volansky, whose comments vacillate between fact and stabs at humor. "And maybe I should thank TNDC. I can concentrate on music now, not dusty books. It could be a blessing in disguise."

Book and magazine competition on the Internet, the chaos of his own business for the last three years and the milieu on possibly the Tenderloin's roughest block killed his business, he says.

"A first edition Stephen King novel used to go for \$250," he said. "Now it's \$1."

Hired neighborhood regulars ankle-deep in trash packed books into cardboard boxes one day in December as Volansky spoke. They call him "Isaac" and know him as a kind man who's good for a handout. His hand-written A-frame board, usually outside, stood forlornly nearby. Its now-deflated parody reads, "A dirty, poorly-lit place for books."

"It's sad," said TNDC Executive Director Don Falk. "But we gave him many, many chances and his rent was unbelievably inex-

pensive. For several years he was unable to function as a business."

TNDC's mission is to provide low-cost housing for the neighborhood, and that includes storefront retail and nonprofit businesses to enhance the community. Falk said because McDonald's occupies a commercial space, housing isn't a consideration and TNDC has no plans for it and hasn't tried to market it.

"Ideally, we'd find a community-serving retail use for the space," Falk said. "But I don't know if we can find anyone willing to operate a business there, given the street activity. I think a nonprofit office use is a possibility."

Volansky said he owed \$12,000 in back rent.

"It's maybe double that," said Bailey Williams of Ventura Properties, who handles TNDC's rentals. "I've been trying to work with him for five years. To have a business, you have to stay open and pay rent. He couldn't do either. He's closed for days, weeks on end. It's been a downward spiral for a long time."

Two years ago, Williams said, he met with Volansky and his wife and drew up an agreement.

"He was to pay rent on the first of the month," Williams said. "But he hasn't paid anything since last February. And his lease expired six months ago. He had all sorts of excuses."

HOLLYWOOD PUT ON HOLD

Volansky had won a song-writing contest in 1979 and was on his way to collect his prize in Hollywood and start a career when his father died and left him and his sister McDonald's Bookstore. "And I don't really like books," he says.

His father had bought the store in 1954 from Jock McDonald, who had opened it in 1926. Both men had added voluminously to the material, from 1913 National Geographics to high school yearbooks to 1950s porn to scholarly books in Hebrew and Yiddish and much more.

McDonald's attracted thousands of young and old, rich and poor, famous and homeless. Breathing in the aromatic mustiness, they meandered upstairs and downstairs through the dimly lit 4,000-square-foot acreage, trolling for buried treasures.



In defunct McDonald's, owner Itzhak Volansky holds an item once popular before life changed.

PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Chris Isaak came for surfer magazines, Larry McMurtry for adventure, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola staffers looked for book and magazine movie props, and Michael Jackson — after being driven up in a limousine and asking Volansky to close for him — bought \$250 worth of kids' books.

"I only do it for the people — they love it," Volansky said.

But he and his sister fought continuously. To avoid each other, they alternated days at the store.

"The customers appreciated it," he said. They went to court. He bought her out.

The store nearly closed in the 1990s, but he said a story in the Chronicle helped him launch a successful sale that revived his finances.

Until six years ago, McDonald's stayed profitable. Old pom, he said, was the top seller. A hot item was the magazine called Chicks with Dicks. He was selling on eBay and doing okay.

BEGINNING OF THE END

But TNDC wanted to seismically retrofit and renovate the then-97-year-old building that also houses the Dalt Hotel and Edwards Tailor Shop & Cleaners. The nonprofit, which owns or manages 24 properties, hired Delancy Street Movers to remove the entire McDonald's inventory and put it in storage. For two weeks, 11 movers, who Volansky refers to as "Curly, Moe, Larry and friends," worked full days shoving everything into 800 boxes that were

remained packed in boxes. Worse, Volansky said, the inventory stored in the next block wasn't returned.

"This is the first I've heard of it," Falk said. "And where would he put them, anyway?"

When McDonald's reopened, buttressed with giant diagonal steel girders, it was a poor shadow of its former hodgepodge. Compounding Volansky's woes was a leaky ceiling under the Dalt. In December, two puddles on the floor in back and curled covers in one of his National Geographic sections were mute evidence.

"They promised a waterproof ceiling with the retrofit," Volansky said, "and I was happy to hear it because books and water don't mix. I went to see the Dalt manager about it many

times. No, I forgot his name."

Falk hadn't heard about this complaint either. "It's likely it did leak," Falk said. "We have 80,000 square feet and those things happen. Our operations people would handle it."

CHAOS INSIDE, VIOLENCE OUTSIDE

Clearly, McDonald's was fading away before the sheriff's eviction notice arrived. Volansky says sometimes he was too depressed for days or weeks to come to work.

One customer, a baseball fan who discovered the store in the 1970s and often bought old copies of Sports Illustrated, in a review on the store's Website said that it was "even more impossible" since the retrofit to find things, even "hazardous with all the boxes and stacks in the aisles."

Sloppy, foul-mouthed drunks outside offended another reviewer. But he said that with help from the congenial owner, who gave him a student price break, he reveled in finding Life magazines from the 1930s for an art project.

The Turk Street scene is intolerable for any business, Volansky said. Dope dealers and sprawling drunks cluster in front of the string of hotels on the north side. The Dalt, Aranda Residence, the Dahlia Hotel and Hotel Winston Arms fail to control their sidewalks, he said, and debris bins are parked outside for many days at a time.

The block is among the most violent in the city. Murders have been committed outside the 21 Club at the Turk-Taylor corner. Stabbings and fistfights are common in front of the Aranda. And the Dalt still carries the stigma of June 28, 2003, when John Bravard, described by residents as "a ticking time bomb," fatally shot three men in the lobby, then killed himself in his fourth-floor room.

"The police bring their cleaning to Edwards but do nothing about the crowd," Volansky said. "They walk right by it. The potential good foot traffic from Market Street takes one look at the street and doesn't want to come here."

In the end, nothing was left to redeem the city's prized junkyard bookstore. Volansky's sign on the door says "moved to 120 Turk." According to the assessor's office, there is no such address. ■

How Dizzy Balloon carries 'My Parachute' to 5 minutes of fame

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Itzhak Volansky is shown in the aerial dive from his My Parachute DVD.



His story actually began in 1979 when he wrote "My Parachute." The lyrics are about a busted love affair and the woes that arise from a sloppy job of packing the parachute as the jilted man falls toward earth from a plane, counting, in feet, his diminishing space.

It's not very musical and not quite droll. But he entered it in a Hollywood song-writing contest and it won. Volansky set off for LaLa Land to collect the prize and ignite his career. But his father, who owned McDonald's, died right then and left him the store (see sidebar).

The career, and his pursuit of it, dissolved. Time passed. Lots of it.

Volansky didn't have the chops of Tiny Tim or the garulous rhyming of Nervous Norvus (of "Transfusion" and "Ape Call" fame). But in his spare time he still plunked away on his guitar and dreamed of what might have been. He let his skewed humor work its wonders, spoofs being his delight. "I Shot the Lawyer, but I Did Not Shoot the Secretary" was one. "Imagine There's No Yoko" was another.

He puts them right down there with "Fifty Ways to Bomb Sadaam" and "The Weight Watchers Theme Song (Every Bite You Take)." One cute title after another.

But "My Parachute" had legs. So he made a video of himself singing it, using as background some aerial footage from an East Bay sky-diving company. The result shows him singing and strumming his guitar, then

suddenly in a freefall past fluffy white clouds as he sings hollowly of his breakup and the malfunctioning chute.

In 2005, SF Weekly declared it Video of the Year. On Oct. 20, Volansky closed McDonald's early, dressed up in his olive drab jumpsuit, put on the parachute harness and chute pack he got in 1979 for \$100, and walked over one block to the Warfield Theater to accept the award on stage.

Six months ago he put the video on YouTube. For the first few months, it received maybe 100 hits, Volansky guesses. Then opportunity popped up.

In November, the CBS-owned FM station Live 105 announced a contest to find an opening band for its annual Not So Silent Night, six-band concert at Oracle Arena on Dec. 11.

Volansky had nothing to lose by throwing "My Parachute" out into the mix; perhaps his talent would be rediscovered and fate would smile again.

His demo was among 116 that Live 105 received. The station selected 25 to put online. "My Parachute" wasn't among them, although its sheer quirkiness had raised the eyebrows of station music director Aaron Axelsen. He and other insiders considered it one of the five worst entries. And for Axelsen, it was way too bad to pass up.

Over one week, Live 105 fans voted for their top five bands to compete Dec. 8 at Cafe du Nord and be judged by a panel. Among the finalists was Dizzy Balloon. The lads had cooked together at Piedmont High School and now as college sophomores they were shucking a year of school to give performing a full

shot. The group prides itself on writing most of its songs, and it's working for them. They had 15 gigs lined up from Chico to San Diego in January.

But before the Cafe du Nord showdown, Axelsen wrote to A.P. Petros, a guitarist and singer with Dizzy Balloon.

"He suggested we cover 'My Parachute Won't Open,'" Petros told The Extra. "I'd never heard of it (the song). But the station has done us some favors and we owed them so I said, sure. And then I heard it and said, 'Oh my god, we have to cover that?' I wouldn't have believed a year ago that we'd be covering a YouTube song."

Petros and band member Jonny Flannes spent five hours crafting Dizzy Balloon's rendition. They recorded it and sent it to Axelsen, not sure what he had in mind.

Later, at the Cafe du Nord contest, Dizzy Balloon swayed the industry judges and won the playoff. They played five songs, including the energetic "Raise A Glass," the group's tour de force and top vote-getter among the fans. They didn't play "My Parachute" and the song wasn't in their plans.

But the next day, "The Woody Show" — Live 105's popular 5:30 to 10 a.m. rock program — played Dizzy Balloon's cover. A video on the program's Website shows the staff whooping it up and keeping time with waving hands as Dizzy Balloon plays. So catchy and Beatles-like, it's a silk purse.

The day after, Volansky was a guest on "The Woody Show" and was invited to play the piece himself on stage at the Not So Silent Night show.

PHOTOS BY HEIDI SWILLINGER