

# Life in an SRO: Residents' stories to take center stage

BY ED BOWERS

I'M in the foyer of the office of Poor Magazine's classroom at 2940 16th St. a block from Mission. Next to me on the couch in the foyer is a gentleman with movie star looks, if the movie happens to be

"Reservoir Dogs" or "Blue Velvet." His name is Nightmare Joey.

Mr. Joey has been in and out of the prison system since 1967. He's 59, one year younger than me. His last bit was 14 years for stabbing a man. But he said he didn't do it.

Now poetry and music is the way Mr. Joey survives. Amen. He plays harp, not the kind found in heaven, but the kind that blues musicians throughout the history of the devil's music have played. They are traditionally called harmonicas.

A harmonica isn't easy to play. Nightmare Joey played his for me and he was really professional. He plays subtle, gentle, beautiful blues. He plays almost every night in Golden Gate Park. Check him out.

Nightmare Joey and about 15 other people are here to participate in a writing project Tiny Gray-Garcia of Poor Magazine is starting in collaboration with Jeff Buckley of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic and Tony Robles of Bindlestiff Studio.

This project is to train SRO residents to be writers, directors, and stage hands and then to create a play about what it's like to live in an SRO.

This is particularly interesting to me because I live inside an SRO. I've survived two fires, a bedbug outbreak and several psychotic attacks on my person. Good for me. Let's turn this into art.

At the meeting there was a cornucopia of vital, fascinating people, from the 60-year-old woman who said she had a 27-year-old mind, to the man who came from a corporate family and was forced into the operation but really wanted to be an artist so he turned to narcotics until he ended up on the streets, to a man who worked as a geek in a carnival for three years.

These people are typical of the diversity

this endeavor has inspired, and it is truly an inspiration to me.

If I were to write in detail about the lives of all the people in that room, I would have to quit my job, sit on a desert island, eat coconuts, and get back to the reader in 20 years.

For a long time I've wanted artists in San Francisco to collaborate with each other. Poets and artists in this expensive city are an endangered species. Soon only trust-fund children will be artists, not carnival geeks or harmonica players, and San Francisco's legendary artistic culture will go down the tubes in mediocrity.

The organizers of this project are theater professionals like Robles who have been in the game for quite a while; they're willing to teach participants how to write, direct and become stage assistants. A course like this in college would cost.

But this is free.

Yesterday I was informed by Tiny Gray-Garcia that the project has a full house. In poker, that's a winning hand.

Dozens such projects should be started on a grassroots level by artists all over the city, particularly in the Tenderloin.

I have wanted to get various factions of the underground art community to merge into a collective that could truly make an impact in San Francisco. But there are so many big egos in small ponds in this scene that I'd pretty much given up on that idea.

However, Poor Magazine seems to have succeeded where I've failed, and I suggest that any Tenderloin poet, playwright, musician, journalist or whatever check out Poor Magazine.

Plus, those participating in this project get a sliding-scale stipend for their work. In San Francisco, where only the elite get paid, I find this refreshing. ■

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