

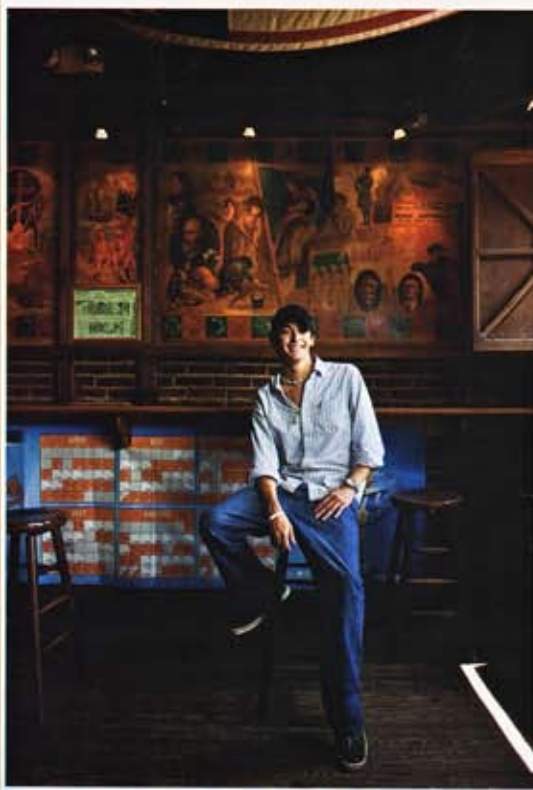
**74 Night Life** At just 25 years old, Tony Cushing has taken over the bar his father made an institution.

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND

# Baltimore

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## night life



the camera. "I was probably saying, 'Tony, you shouldn't be doing that,'" she recalls. "And he has this determined look on his face like, 'Oh, yes, I will.'"

Nearly two decades later, Tony Cushing is right back where he began and as determined as ever. When his father, Tony, passed away unexpectedly in February 2008 at age 62, "Little Tony" stepped in to run the day-to-day operations. At just 25 years of age, Cushing is the youngest bar owner in Fells Point by at least 10 years. But age is the least of his worries. As the new top dog at Cat's Eye, he is taking over the management of a Baltimore institution, a bar with a history that's older than he is, and a place that has meant the world to generations of Baltimore rock, blues, jazz, and rockabilly musicians. For more than 30 years, Cat's Eye has offered live music every day of the year and several times a day on weekends.

"My dad had the vision to have a place for people to experience different kinds of music," Cushing says. "If this were a bar with no music, I would never do this. The music makes it more than just a bar. It's an experience."

THE CAT'S EYE STORY BEGAN BEFORE CUSHING was born, when the elder Tony was a schoolteacher in Washington, D.C. Through school, he met student Kenny Orye, 15 years his junior, who came to him with the idea of opening a bar in Fells Point. Cat's Eye opened in 1975—Orye wasn't even 21 and his mother had to cosign the lease. After five years, Tony and his wife, Ana Marie, moved to Florida and left operations to Orye.

"Kenny is probably the reason we have live music," recalls Ana Marie. "He was a natural musician—he could play anything you put in his hands."

By all accounts, Orye was a bit of a character. He ran Cat's Eye as a rough-and-tumble hiker bar. When he died of a heart attack at age 33, the Cushings returned to Baltimore for good, and the elder Tony started running operations while Ana Marie did the bookkeeping and band booking (a practice which, as co-owner, she continues today).

The elder Tony is remembered by everyone as a charmer. He was the kind of man who would give a regular a free beer, and would help someone out when they were down. He had an eye for hiring the best bartenders (many of whom work there to this day) and an ear for good music.

Cat's Eye is not a glamorous place, which is part of its appeal. "People in Baltimore love us because we're a throwback to the old Greenwich Village days or Georgetown in the '70s," says Ana Marie. "We're unconventional, eclectic. We're not a bar-in-a-box."

Its little stage has hosted Mayor O'Malley's band and a cadre of up-and-coming local and regional acts. There were rumors that even Bruce Willis played a few sets when he was in town. The bar doesn't need to look for talent—talent comes to it. Ana Marie says that she receives at least five press kits a day from aspiring bands.

"If you want to play creative music, you don't really have a huge pick of venues to work in," says Phil Cunniff, 56, a jazz drummer and the leader of the Phil Cunniff New Quartet. "If you go into a bar in Ocean City or just about anywhere and say, 'I have a band with unconventional instrumentation and we want to play original music,' not a lot of people are going to be interested in that. [The elder] Tony wasn't interested in whether your music was commercial or not. He was interested in whether or not it was good."

When Cunniff started playing acoustic jazz at the bar in 1988, Cat's Eye still retained a bit of its hiker reputation and he knew bringing in his brand of music would be tough. "It was a challenge, but I also thought it was a place to test the power of the music," he says. He now has arguably one of the longest running gigs in Fells Point, having played at Cat's Eye every Monday night since 1992.

More than five years ago, when the elder Tony was thinking of easing back his schedule, Little Tony returned from the University of South Florida just shy of graduation (and barely 21) to learn the ropes. According to Cunniff, the old guard met Cushing with skepticism. "He still had a lot of the college kid in him," says Cunniff. "But I saw a profound change in him when Tony died. I think it hit Little Tony that, 'I have to grow up right now, and that's kinda what he did.'"

According to Ana Marie, Cushing "wanted this his whole life. When he graduated from Cathedral grade school, in the yearbook under 'What Will Tony Be?' it said 'a bar owner.'"

Cushing is reverent when he speaks about his father. "I'm keeping his dream alive," he says. "When he passed away, instead of letting it be so hard on me, I decided that the longer I keep this bar here, the longer he lives on forever. He meant the world to me. Instead of putting a picture of Michael Jordan on my wall, I get to meet my hero here everyday."

Julie Frantz, 42, has been a happy-hour customer at Cat's Eye for more than 20 years. "There's a group of regulars who go in after work, catch up on our day, have a beer, maybe two, and when you leave, the weight of your day is off you," she says. "It's a mix of people, all ages, guys and girls, musicians, working class people. We're like a family."

Getting into the bar, at least for bands, can be tough. But once you get in at Cat's Eye, you are family. Many bands, like Steve Kraemer and the Bluesicians, have played regular gigs there for more than 25 years. For Nate Myers and the Aces, a roots and blues band, playing in the heart of Baltimore's funky arts scene is integral to building a following on the East Coast. Myers, 38, says they were lucky to get on stage two years ago when another band cancelled and a friend who knew Ana Marie slipped her their name.

"The place has a great reputation for live music, especially for the roots stuff we do," Myers says. "It's a funky little bar with a lot of character and a longstanding reputation for music. There's nothing else like it."

"We went down there with a press kit and begged and pleaded forever to get, like, a fill-in spot for a Sunday night, because that pub is a place a lot of bands are trying to get into," says Adam Scott-Wakefield, 27, a member of Old Man Brown, a roots and funk band Cushing liked. Despite being a "hole in the wall," Scott-Wakefield says Cat's Eye is one of the last vestiges of original live music. "This is the only bar that has legit music in terms of bands that can actually play and musicians who have actually gone to music school."

Bringing in younger bands like Old Man Brown are indicators that Cushing is putting his stamp on Cat's Eye, but he is committed to leaving the bar, especially its eclectic collection of flags and memorabilia, exactly as it has always been. Someone who drank in Cat's Eye 25 years ago would find it largely the same today. In many ways, Cat's Eye is a bit like an aging rock star itself: a little older, a little more sedate, a tad tawdry. The whole bar could use a good dusting, but that's part of its charm. The crowd has a bit of a grizzled vibe, as well.

"At most of the places in Fells Point, the point is to get drunk and try and get laid by a pretty girl," says Scott-Wakefield. "If I'm trying to get laid, Cat's Eye is the last bar I'm going to go to. I go there to listen to really good music."

Yet there is evidence of change afoot. Myers has seen the crowds getting younger and heavier on the nights he plays. Frantz sees it in the happy-hour crowd, too.

"Tony's drawing a younger crowd in the evening and it may be a little more raucous than I'm used to, but 20 years ago, that was us," Frantz says. "He's bringing in the next generation. People kind of said he was so lucky, he had everything handed to him on a silver platter, but what he's done with it is the true test."

And he has done a lot. Full of energy and talking a mile-a-minute, Cushing explains how he re-surfaced the bar, painted the building's exterior, tripled the size of the leg system, and opened the back patio. His long-term ambition is to open the second floor. "I need to earn my stripes," he says. "Right now, if I don't work harder than everyone here, I don't deserve for people to listen to me. Leading by example is key."

Bar Haffer, a bartender for about 13 years, says Cushing has his father's energy. "He puts his heart and soul into [Cat's Eye]. I didn't think anyone that age had that kind of passion, but he's a hell of a guy. Half the time, I want to nail the back of his shirt to the bar."

Cat's Eye never aspired to be a cookie-cutter bar and anyone who expected Cushing to homogenize the place to fit the stereotype of his generation will be disappointed. At Cat's Eye you will never find Chevy Chase's Nights, identical touchscreen bar games, apathetic service, or, least likely of all, a mediocre band on stage.

"The reason I love that bar so much is it's the last place where real working-class musicians are making music because they enjoy it and because it fulfills them spiritually," says Scott-Wakefield. "Nobody looks cool in that bar, that's not what that bar is about. It's about holding onto the music that actually comes from the seeds of the American culture." ■

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## New Cat in Town

At just 25 years old, Tony Cushing has taken over the bar his father made an institution.

By Christianna McCausland

Ana Marie Cushing has a photo of her son, Tony, that never fails to amuse her. He's perhaps just four years old, behind the bar at the Cat's Eye Pub in Fells Point—the bar and live music venue that the Cushing family has owned for 34 years—waving a soda dispenser at

