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LAVA House destroyed by blaze

BY STEPHEN GEORGE

When I called artist Aron Conaway Tuesday afternoon to ask him about his beloved LAVA House, he was standing amid the ashes, sifting through weird, charred remains to find something worth keeping. He came upon some noodles that must've been sitting in a pot when the place burned. He was looking for a bell he hoped to find before anyone else might.

The prize at that moment, however, was a box of melted 78s owned by Bill Christie, the 65-year-old woodworker who lived in a trailer inside the LAVA House, underneath the massive American flag anyone who's been inside will surely remember.

A three-alarm fire leveled the conjoined apartment and warehouse Saturday night. Though he was pulled heroically from the burning building, Christie was badly burned and died in the hospital shortly after. The fire also left three people homeless and a number of artists — there were at least 12 working there of late — without supplies, their work or a studio.

The building was the home of the Louisville Assembly of Vanguard Artists, a collective that had used the space since 2001 — for everything from rock shows and parties to studios for Louisville artists like Conaway and his wife, Hallie Jones.

"It's been pretty overwhelming, and just strange," Conaway said.

Glen Herre and his wife bought the property in the late 1990s, and shortly after, Christie moved in. In 2001, Conaway and Herre's son, Bart, moved in and began working, establishing LAVA around the same time. There were broad red letters spelling out the name on the façade. People — artists, punk rockers, whomever — started streaming in and out, and suddenly shows — big indie rock shows — were happening there. Tucked behind the (in)famous turnabout just off Oak Street, near Shelby Parkway, it was difficult to find. Once you did, it was an easy place to get lost wandering.

Its demise as a show venue would come too early. In the summer of 2004, LAVA organizers put together a benefit rock show for then-Democratic Congressional candidate Tony Miller. The fire marshal arrived, found violations, and, well, no more shows. However, it remained a studio space. At the time of the fire, there were four residents — Christie, Bart Herre, Hannah Cameron and Seed.

Conaway and Jones have put together a website for those wondering what to do now: www.thelavahouse.org. There you'll find biographical info about LAVA and its house, as well as ways you can help the three artists who are now without homes, possessions and equipment. There will be benefit shows in the coming weeks as well. If you're interested in participating, contact LAVA through that site. ■

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