

<http://www.tali.tv/interviews/Gaffeyinterview.html>



Interview with Tom Gaffey, manager of the Phoenix Theater in Petaluma. We grabbed him for a few moments between sets.

Tali.tv: Are you busy tonite?

Tom: Tonite's taking care of itself.

Tali.tv: This is a real experience being at the Phoenix, there's so much going on here. Skate ramps, lots of kids hanging out.

Tom: I grew up here. I used to hang out as a kid myself.

Tali.tv: So you went to shows?

Tom: It was a movie theater when I was a kid. It kind of picked me up off the streets and I learned how to run the projectors and manage the place and all that when I was a little guy.

Tali.tv: Do you own the place?

Tom: I lease it for as long as I can hold on. I came back in 1983 and I was supposed to put the project together so it could be as a movie theater. Around 1983, California determined that you can't sell a building that hasn't been earthquaked. It's an old unreinforced brick building so that made it pretty much unsellable for a long time. So I decided just to run it as long as I could and that was 18 years ago.

Tali.tv: You're like a local celebrity, especially with the kids.

Tom: Yeah, you know it happens in a town like Petaluma. If you grow up and continue to live here you can't help but know everybody and everybody knows you. Especially if you're on the same corner you've always been on. I actually left when I was 18. I went in search of Mayberry. I wanted to find the perfect Small Town USA. I came back after about 3 years on the road wandering through town saying hey to everybody, checking out Floyd the barber realizing *Oh my God!*, this is it!

Tali.tv: What you were looking for was already here.

Tom: Yes, so I'm back.

Tali.tv: A lot of kids seem to be helping you.

Tom: I love everyone. I'm so proud of all of them. This crew is really incredible. So it's just the way it was when I was a kid, when generations were hanging here 10, 15 years ago.

Tali.tv: Has it turned into a safe gathering place for kids?

Tom: Yes, that's the object. We're trying to make it that way. It depends on who you talk to. There are a lot of people that would *never* let their kids set foot in this place. With the rock and roll we make a lot of noise. You can wander around, there's not a lot of drugs or alcohol around here, but there's some people you'll never convince of that. They're sure we're selling the women into slavery and eating ecstasy in great amounts. We're not.

Tali.tv: It's almost a necessity to have something like this in every town.

Tom: Every town should have one.

Tali.tv: They don't.



Tom: No. You know this is kind of an organic thing. It just kind of grew up and did it's own thing. I would have been quite happy running it as a movie theater really, but we got put out of business by a multiplex and actually they just went out of business. So the deal was to keep the building alive somehow, I didn't want to leave it. We just moved to what was the quickest and easiest thing and that was rock and roll. It was built in 1904. Houdini performed here. Caruso sang here. It's got an illustrious history. Lily Langtry sang here. So it's been performing for a long time.

Tali.tv: And a lot of bands have come to play here?

Tom: The Chili Peppers in their early days, Green Day, Lars here has played and will play again. And of course we're always doing Gwar. We did Metallica, Slayer and all that stuff. Cowboy Junkies, that was a great night. Los Lobos has been through, Jimmy Vaughn.

Tali.tv: Do you cater to a lot of younger bands?

Tom: We do. The object is to try to do local Petaluma as well as Sonoma and Marin county bands. Strangely enough that's the stuff I prefer doing for a number of reasons. One is it's not as much work. Looking at Gwar next week I know it's not going to be fun. It's going to be a great show, it's just I'm not going to have a great time with it. It gets messy. The pre-work, the contracts, the deli trays, all that stuff.

Tali.tv: Do you do it all?

Tom: Yes, this is kind of a one man operation. If the show is big enough, we can afford to have a crew. The kids will help me put the plastic up. I don't like dealing with New York or L.A. We do better with the small stuff.

Tali.tv: Does it support the theater?

Tom: It does. Rent is fairly cheap and I've got my overhead down to pretty much zilch. The kids help me out with everything we need in here.

Tali.tv: What happens during the day?

Tom: They skate. If your band needs a place to practice, they can do that. We've got a drum set always set up down in the basement. In March we will open a clinic here. Tuesdays and Thursdays we'll have a doctor and a nurse. We are turning one of our side rooms into a doctors office. So we'll have a free clinic. And actually the deal with the building is if you need it and can figure out how to use it, it's yours. We've had the Wrist Wrestling Championship of the world. That was a huge honor. Bill Soberanes has been writing for the Argus-Courier for as long as I've been alive. My first memory of downtown Petaluma was standing in front of the pet shop downtown. Bill, my dad and I were looking at the pets. My dad introduces me to Bill and I end up in the Argus-Courier



the next day. I was probably about 4 or 5. He was the one who started the wristwrestling championship and he wanted to do it at the Phoenix.

Tali.tv: So it feels close enough to Mayberry for you?

Tom: Yes, it does. Well tonite a friend of mine's cafe is having a party for their new bathroom. They painted and arted it up and they're having a grand opening for it. So you go down and Lars and his friends were all drumming in front of it while some other kids were doing a fire dance in the street. Then another friend of mine is having a CD release party down at the Mystic Theater. So it's down to the coffee shop, back to the Phoenix, down to the Mystic. There's a lot of places you're welcome.

Tali.tv: We've heard some haunted stories about the place.

Tom: It has it's reputation but uh,..I'm not going to get into that.

Tali.tv: That's the locked door, right?

Tom: That's the door!

Tali.tv: Do you see yourself doing this for a long time?

Tom: I don't know. I'm here as long as it works for me and it works for everybody else. You know we've always got one foot in the grave here. It's been an interesting ride. What has happened is some other friends of mine came in and bought the place. We were in danger of being sold and turned into an office building. Some very cool people who sold their business to Cisco for a huge sum came in and snatched this place from the jaws of death. Now we've decided to turn it into a foundation. We'll be looking at grant and charity money to get the earthquake work done. There's a 4 million dollar price tag on it and it has to be done in the next couple of years. I'll stay around for as long as it's comfortable and if they're happy with what I'm doing.

Tali.tv: Any other changes in store?

Tom: It always is a changing thing. It was an opera house first. Then it was a silent movie theater before it went to talkies. Then it did a combination of movies and plays then to rock and roll. Then it went back to movies and now we're back to rock and roll.

Tali.tv: And skateboarding.

Tom: Skateboarding! That's an incredible change. Three o'clock till seven everyday after school you can come in and use the ramps for free. Monday nights we have narcotics anonymous meetings. Tuesday night there is a Christian Youth group that has a rock and roll worship service. I wasn't sure how that would be, but they get 150 people in here and the band is tight. So they skate, worship, play rock and roll and serve free food.



Tali.tv: That's amazing.

Tom: Yes there should be more places like this.

Tali.tv: It's a role model for other towns.

Tom: It'd be nice if every town had a place where it'd be cool just to come in and hang. You don't have to have an activity here, you can just come in and hang out. That's important.

Tali.tv: OK, well thanks.

Tom: I have a feeling we'll be here for a while. You guys are welcome anytime. Just give me a call.

