

# The Day

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[KAIKA, Stephen L.](#)

## Reducers' band member loses battle with cancer

By Rick Koster Day Arts Writer



Bassist Steve Kaika rehearses with The Reducers in their New London rehearsal space in August 2008. Kaika died early this morning after a battle with cancer.

**New London** - Every Friday night for years, the four members of the New London rock band The Reducers adjourned to their rehearsal room on State Street to observe their rituals. An extremely close-knit group, there were no members before these four, and there will be no members after.

Now, that delicate alchemy has been shattered. Bassist/vocalist Steve Kaika died in his sleep early Tuesday morning after battling cancer.

It's a staggering blow to a world-class band that consciously chose to avoid seeking stardom to stay home and evolve as a civic commodity. Along with Kaika, drummer Tom Trombley and guitarists/vocalists Peter Detmold and Hugh Birdsall had a musical chemistry and fraternal love for one another that was completely organic. They forged hometown hero status and an international following through an accidental but hard-earned magic — a buoyant blend of Bo Diddley-meets-The-Clash pub rock and genuine-good-guy personas.

Kaika's death came just three days before a Friday benefit in New London's Hygienic Art Park. The event — and several post-show follow-ups — will still take place since the goal is to help Kaika's wife, Charlene, and family deal with significant medical expenses that have piled up since his diagnosis last fall.

It will be, then, a very different Friday night gathering for a band that looked forward to their usual meetings with the sort of boyish enthusiasm you'd expect from a Cub Scout troop on an overnight campout.

By definition, the State Street rendezvous were called "rehearsals" And, indeed, they did play music. Over the course of a career that included several albums, national tours and a whirlwind junket of Japan, they practiced set lists and worked on new material. But, as part of the evenings, they also reveled in the simple pleasure of each other's company, reliving old road stories, drinking lots of Budweiser (except for Birdsall), sharing anecdotes about their respective family lives and the mellow but accelerating passage of time - and generally just having a complete blast together.

"I've always said, some guys play golf or have poker nights," Detmold said last week. "For us, The Reducers is our club. It just happened that the four of us found each other and it worked."

"We all became aware about 25 years ago that we had become each other's family, for better or worse," Birdsall said over the weekend. "Like any family, we've had our share of ups and downs, and we've been dysfunctional at times, but I've never laughed harder or longer in anyone else's company. And in times of crisis we all pull together. That is certainly the case right now."

Detmold will emcee Friday's benefit, which features performances by Dogbite (with Birdsall), Ken Atkins & the Honky Tonk Kind (with Trombley), The Rivergods, the Original Sinners and special guests. There will be a raffle and band merchandise, and food and drink will also be available for purchase from Captain Scott's Lobster Dock, with 100 percent of chowder sales going to the cause.

"Response so far to the idea of the benefit has been just huge. Steve's really touched; we're all kind of blown away by all the affection," said Detmold. "The thing is, the bills never stop. Steve and Charlene have way too much on their plate and a lot of worries that far transcend money."

Following the Hygienic presentation, subsequent benefits are also taking place at the Oasis Pub on Bank Street and 33 and the El 'n' Gee Club, both on Golden Street. All of those events, Detmold said, are indicative of the overwhelming support Kaika and the band have received since news of the bassist's illness was made public.

"Rich Martin immediately offered use of the Art Park, and Eddie Shea (the sound man handling audio for the benefit) just said, 'Whatever I can do,'" Detmold said. "It's almost embarrassing because so many have wanted to help, and we had to figure out a way to make it work. Jeff Mullen at the Bank Street Cafe offered his room, several New London bands as well as groups from New Haven and New York volunteered. In the end, we tried to simplify it and just hope everyone realizes what their efforts and good wishes mean to us."

The Hygienic benefit has the potential to be one of the biggest New London music events ever.

Such is the power and enduring popularity of the group. After their single "Let's Go" made a big chart impact in 1986, the word began to spread. National press and labels came calling, and they shared stages with acts like the Ramones and the Replacements.

Then an amazing, glorious thing happened. The Reducers made the unanimous and conscious decision to stay home in New London and eschew the major label deals rather than take the chance that the demands and perks of stardom could erode or shatter the special qualities that define the band.

They've stayed creatively fresh - their 2010 album, "Guitars, Bass & Drums," is arguably their best - and their appeal has extended to each new generation that hears and sees them. If, over time, the gigs calendar and travel demands have been intentionally slowed, fans continued to relish such seasonal signposts as Reducers shows at Sailfest, the summer's end performance at Ocean Beach, and the annual Thanksgiving weekend concert.

"I would never say people take us for granted, because that's not true," Detmold said. "But what has happened is that people have grown to expect that there will always be a Reducers and there will always be another show. Hey, that's how the four of us have always looked at it, too. Steve's illness has been a huge shock to us."

One aspect of the situation is that Kaika had such a strong personality.

"Steve's a really funny guy," said Trombley on Monday. His musical relationship with Kaika dated back to a jam session in Montville before they knew Detmold and Birdsall. "He has that Johnny Carson charisma and timing where he can just walk into a room or a party and take control."

"That quality comes in handy in a band situation," Trombley said. "We all take it seriously, but it's about having fun, too, and Steve reminds us of that. At the same time, if I start a song too fast, I know I'm going to get a look from Steve that's like, 'Hey, you going to a fire?'"

As The Reducers' rhythm section, Kaika and Trombley provided an underpinning that's as tight as a snapping bear trap. At the same time, Kaika's creative fills had the sort of flair that recall the "lead bass" runs of The Who's John Entwistle, The Stranglers' J.J. Burnel, or even jazz wizard Jaco Pastorius.

"He's not only a stellar player, but he also at various times serves as taskmaster, arranger and group conscience," Birdsall said. "Steve has such a great ear for the dynamics of a song and makes us all work harder until we've found something he finds pleasing. The phrase 'Hey, Stevie likes it!' has often been a mantra that signals a song's completion."

The Reducers had held out hope Kaika might be well enough to attend the benefit.

"We always assumed there'd be another Sailfest gig, another Labor Day at Ocean Beach," Detmold said last Friday. "I hope it still happens. I've always felt lucky to play with these guys, and I've known that one of us can't be replaced. We've been inseparable, and we'll always be inseparable. It's just us."