

San Francisco's first topless bar could become an official legacy business

[SAM WHITING](#)

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The Condor Club is seen along Columbus Avenue in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco, Calif. Wednesday, May 12, 2021. The Condor Club, San Francisco's first topless bar, is a staple of the city and North Beach's adult entertainment scene. It's coming back as one of the last clubs of its kind and a business that, during the pandemic, few have thought much about. Though almost all the other strip clubs in the city have opened up, or closed forever, the Condor has taken its time, and hosted a soft opening to the public at 25% capacity on Wednesday, May 12.

Jessica Christian, Staff / The Chronicle

The Condor, a legendary San Francisco strip joint said to have been the first topless bar in America, was recommended Wednesday for the Legacy Business Registry, an honorary roster that bestows prestige and financial rewards on city institutions that have withstood the test of time.

By a unanimous vote, the Historic Preservation Commission advanced the measure to the Small Business Commission for ratification later this month. The vote stipulated that the audio recording of the hearing also be forwarded in order to reflect concern that the Condor provide training and promotion of the women at the core of its business model. If the Small Business Commission also approves the Condor's application, it would then become the first adult entertainment venue on the bawdy North Beach strip to join the registry which celebrates businesses that serve its community.

The Legacy Business appellation offers a historic wall plaque in bronze, along with access to a rent stabilization grant and help with marketing. Anything will help the Condor because at 8 p.m. on Tuesday there were two people at the bar and one person at the pole.

“Think of it as Cheers in a strip club,” said assistant manager Joey Felder. “This is where it all began.”

To qualify, a business must be in continuous operation for 30 years, and be nominated by a district supervisor — in this case, Aaron Peskin. The last Broadway late-night joint to make the cut was Sam’s, which slings burgers. The Condor qualifies because it has been a survivor for 64 years. It has outlived the risque nightclub heyday of the 1960s in North Beach and it outlived its most famous performer, Carol Doda, who started as a go-go dancer on a piano that dropped from the ceiling.

When that got old she started doing it topless in a fashion she called the “monokini.” That brought the attention of the city and the nation to 540 Broadway. Doda died in 2015 at age 78, and received a Royal North Beach sendoff.

The club also outlived James “Jimmy the Beard” Ferrozzo, the assistant manager who decided one night after closing to engage in amorous activity atop the elevator piano that descended from the ceiling with Doda aboard to commence her act.

The baby grand was on the floor when Ferrozzo and his steady, a dancer at the club, were mid-stride until they inadvertently kick-activated the lift. Up it went until Ferrozzo was caught between the piano and the ceiling and suffocated. The girlfriend survived.

Not long after Doda started disrobing on a nightly basis, the Condor was raided by San Francisco police with backing by the California Department of Alcohol and Beverage Control. Doda was arrested for indecent exposure and owners Gino Del Prete and Pete Mattioli were charged with “running a disorderly house.”

All three were acquitted in May of 1965, in a trial dubbed “the People vs. the Condor.”

The decision “established that topless dancing in North Beach clubs did not violate obscenity laws,” said the staff report by the Planning Commission, which oversees the Historic Preservation Commission. “The case had important ramifications for censorship, freedom of expression, and entertainment in the United States.”

Doda eventually tired of her act at the Condor and moved on. But the club kept going. The blinking sign was moved inside. Also there is the infamous white baby grand piano. But it no longer goes up and down. It is on the floor and under Plexiglass to inspire the women who dance atop it.

Condor general manager Mark Calcagni said Tuesday night that being placed on the Legacy Business Registry will help bring business, particularly during the late afternoon hours.

“When people hit the city and look for historic spots, it will get us more foot traffic,” said Calcagni, who is eager to put up a historic marker, even if he has to pay for it. He expects that to be good for a bump in business, taking it from 80 to 100 customers nightly to between 120 and 150, where it was pre-pandemic.