

CBGB Closes Its Doors

By Amy E. Wong



October 15, 2006 marked one of punk rock's greatest losses. The structure located at 315 Bowery hosted its last show, closing its doors—with a BANG! Sure, New York's CBGB may look like a seedy, rundown building, but it's a seminal landmark of punk rock history whose reputation was paved by the likes of The Ramones, Blondie, Television, and Talking Heads.

After a year-long legal dispute, CBGB's founder and owner, Hilly Kristal, is finally being evicted from the premises. Last year, the Bowery Residents' Committee's executive director, Muzzy Rosenblatt, asserted that Kristal owed \$91,000 in outstanding back rent. Kristal argued that he would've paid the rent but was unaware of the rent increases.

Judge Joan M. Kenney, a Manhattan civil court judge, ruled in favor of Kristal in August 2005, writing in her decision, "It would be unconscionable for this court to allow [the BRC] to proceed with its intent to evict CBGB [...] because it failed to notice that monies were outstanding for approximately four years."

CBGB was told it could stay at 315 Bowery, but for a high price. In the new lease agreement, Rosenblatt wanted to triple Kristal's rent to more than \$50,000 per month—an expense that would have driven the venue into debt. In response, Kristal suggested a 15-percent rent increase, a third-party guarantor for future rent payments, and annual benefit concert generating proceeds to fund BRC's mission to help homeless men and women.

Rosenblatt firmly stated, "If there is no new lease, their obligation as tenants would be to vacate the premises once the lease expires." Because the two couldn't reach a new lease agreement, Kristal now must vacate 315 Bowery, fondly called the "Home of Underground Rock," by October 31. The rest is history.

Middle-aged punks, reporters, cameramen, and a string of celebs, including indie-hipsters like Chloë Sevigny, Elijah Wood, and Ed Burns, packed the tiny club on Sunday night. They rocked; they swayed; they bobbed with each other as Patti Smith, punk's reigning poet laureate, and friends tore through two visceral 90-minute sets.

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Swigging beer, jumping on tabletops, and donning bomber jackets and skinny pants aside, the whole punk movement has fascinated me—not only as fashion, culture, and music—but as an earnest frame of mind. According to Allmusic.com, quintessential punk-band The Ramones “celebrated kitschy pop culture with stylized stupidity.” I concur. In their celebration of “kitschy pop culture,” The Ramones exercised a social consciousness through a punk aesthetic.

Smith’s set, in my opinion, was spot on in catching that spirit. Besides singing classics like “Piss Factory,” a cover of Blondie’s “The Tide is High,” and The Velvet Underground’s “Pale Blue Eyes,” Smith belted hits such as The Rolling Stones’ “*Gimme Shelter*” and The Who’s “My Generation” -both songs that paid tribute to CBGB.

In between songs, Smith went off on a few political rants, begging her audience to change the world by being proactive about protecting the environment and raising awareness about the U.S. prisons at Guantánamo Bay.

I think Smith encapsulated the mood surrounding CBGB’s closing with her rendition of “Gloria,” in which she substituted the “G-L-O-R-I-A!” chorus with shouts of “Hey! Ho! Let’s go!” Although 315 Bowery will be a lot quieter without those four familiar power chords and 16th beats jauntily rolling out of its graffiti-covered double doors, this punk venue is far from dead.

Smith said, “CBGB is a state of mind. And what’s going to happen is young kids all over the world are going to have their own f—ing clubs, and they won’t care about CBGB because they’re going to have the new places, and the new places are always the most important.”

Even though CBGB rocked like hell before I was born, I can’t help but feel nostalgic. Yes, CBGB will relocate to Las Vegas after vacating its premises on October 31, but it’s going to be different. A lot different.