

NEIGHBORHOODS

# Sites Unscene

by ROBIN ROTHMAN

September 21, 1999



Passing by the ‘Building for Sale’ sign at 15 St. Marks, where Coney Island High used to be, is like a slap in the face. There’s no more gruff doorman, no more musicians unloading gear, no more freaks congregating on the sidewalk, no more sweaty crowds packed wall to wall. Yeah, clubs come and go. But when they go, it doesn’t just mean locking up physical space— it’s the end of an institution, an atmosphere, a sense of community. Reopening in a new location misses the point. “It’s a shame when the music scene in NYC loses any club,” Continental talent buyer Marc Yevlove told the *Voice* recently. But losing several in a row is more than a shame— it’s a problem. Is the New York live music scene strong enough to survive skyrocketing real estate, extreme Quality of Life enforcement, and neighborhood anti- nightlife sentiment?

This summer alone, we’ve seen the closing of Coney Island High and Upper East Side blues joint Manny’s Car Wash. Lower East Side lesbian hot spot Meow Mix has, at least temporarily, lost use of its basement due to fire code violations. Union Square’s Irving Plaza has been practicing damage control over what they refer to as a “one-man strike.”

And now, Tramps. After a two-night stand by Son Volt Wednesday and Thursday, a private party will mark the end of this popular Chelsea club, which, thanks to brilliant booking, has consistently brought audiences the city’s most eclectic range of music. Tramps has been a one-of-a-kind haven for musical multipersonalities who could dig anything: hip-hop, funk, punk, country, ska, zydeco. With such an inconsistent clientele, a move might work— a “plan to reopen” is rumored. Given Tramps’s history, it’d hardly be a surprise.

Though the club has been in operation for 25 years, the current location hasn’t always been home. In fall 1988, drastic rent increases around Tramps’s original 15th Street address prompted a move. In 1992, when owner Terry Dunne renewed the lease for the club’s current 21st Street location, a clause banning noise before 6 p.m. was accidentally left intact. “It was an oversight,” says Steve Weitzman, Tramps’s talent buyer for the past 10 years. “Even so, it wasn’t enforced until recently.” The situation made preparing for shows, particularly multiple-act bills, difficult. “Who wants to play an important gig with a rushed sound check, or *no* sound check?” Weitzman asks. “Maybe the landlord was looking for an out. My impression is that when we moved into the area, it wasn’t as desirable.” He notes that more profitable businesses like Barnes & Noble and Bed Bath & Beyond have since opened shop, as well as other pricey restaurants like Puffy Combs’s Justin’s. Now an upscale restaurant-lounge is due to slide into Tramps’s space. It all adds up to more green for the landlord.

In June, landlord issues also took out Manny’s Car Wash. Posting their farewell on the club’s Web site, owners Brad and Mike Winters blame a nonnegotiable rent hike for the club’s demise: “Our rent was way above market rent and our landlord wouldn’t even talk to us about a reduction.”

Clubs located in the hippest neighborhoods have it hardest, but with Manhattan’s real estate rates exploding, the distinction is fading. Though the hippie haven Wetlands Preserve is in no danger of closing, high rent in Tribeca is a concern. “We’re open every night of the week because we need to pay the rent,” says owner Peter Shapiro. “But our rent is crazy.”

In the final days of Coney Island High’s existence, co-owner Jesse Malin and partners Dean Richards and Lindsey Anderson found themselves in tremendous financial debt and padlocked out of their own venue. Their inability to make rent, they claimed, was a result of city policy, including the shutdown of their weekly Green Door DJ parties. “In order to make very high rent, you need to have a place where people can shake their booty,” says Malin. “And we were doing great until we started getting cracked down on for cabaret laws. We had to get rid of the major dance parties, the premise we half-started the club on, and reinvent ourselves as just a live venue. And when they raid you on a Saturday,” he added, “and scare your customers, it really hurts you, too.”

Police raids are all too familiar to New York venue owners. Between 1993 and 1998, Brian Sapadin owned and ran Crossroads, an Upper East Side rock club that featured Wetlands-style up-and-coming jam bands. “There was one real bad experience,” Sapadin recalls. “It was late ’97, early ’98. They had about 40 officers come in a citywide raid, representing the police department, the fire department, the health department, the vice squad, the consumer affairs department, and a legal team. You’d think they were making a Mafia bust. No crime had been committed. Not even a violation had been committed.” He continues: “But they make you shut the music off, turn the lights up. If you were a customer, would you stay?”

All the city found during the raid was an ice scoop illegally touching an ice cube and an obstructed window view (“an unrepealed prohibition-era law”). The window, he explains, was merely obstructed by a good neighbor policy sign and a photograph of the Upper East Side rapist. Charges were dropped, but the stress was too much.

While Hilly Kristal, owner of the legendary Bowery punk club CBGB for over two decades, is more laid-back about the current club climate (quick to defend the need for inspection even), the city’s recent methods still rile him. “They have these inspections on Saturday nights where 20, 30 people from every department come and literally shut you down. For many years you’d have the fire department come and the health department and all the agencies, but one branch at a time. In 26 years, I’ve never had the problem before, not that I didn’t get a citation here and there, but now they’re ridiculous.”

Shapiro feels the opposite is true: that the climate used to be bad, but has recently improved. In Wetlands’s case, this is due largely to efforts they’ve made to reach out to the community. “About three years ago, the social task force was more active and we were very cognizant of that; we had more police presence around us. But the police attention comes if community attention comes. So we’ve tried to really be responsible neighbors. I worked my ass off meeting with the community people, and we do benefits for local public schools; we removed the graffiti . . . We took a very proactive approach to being an asset instead of a problem for the community.”

Michael Winsch, co-owner of one of New York’s youngest live venues, the Bowery Ballroom, concurs: “Basically we’re just trying to keep our neighbors happy.” But that’s not enough. Experience Winsch and his partners Brian and Michael Swier have gained running the Mercury Lounge has helped them navigate legal and political minefields that have hurt other owners, sometimes irreparably. Choosing a prime location (Bowery and Delancy) and avoiding unnecessary attention (like big articles in local press) hasn’t hurt, either. Finally, they snagged a professional talent buyer: Theresa Chambers, formerly of national promotions company Delsner/Slater Enterprises.

“They’re lucky to have Theresa,” says Weitzman. “She knows her shit.” And in his opinion, that’s what running a successful club comes down to: “Each club is only as good as its booker.” If eclecticism is what distinguishes Tramps, then a love of music is what characterizes Weitzman, who exudes total respect, awe, and understanding of what makes a band worth booking. But even having New York’s best talent buyer couldn’t save one of its most popular clubs from closing. “We never had a raid. The community and the police loved us. Rudy’s wife even came to Tramps to see her favorite artists (e.g., Trisha Yearwood). We went to community board meetings and they always considered us the least problematic club in the area. At the end of the night we would make it look exactly like it did when we started. We’d take down the posters and peel the stickers, we’d sweep the street. If you don’t do that, you’re not doing your job— you’re not being responsible.”

In the end, though, it didn’t matter. But while Weitzman regrets that the club was forced to close, he’s looking to the future and intends to keep Tramps’s variety vibe alive at venues around the city. Other clubs hint that they have surprises in store as well. So no, it won’t be the same, but one bum summer, city harassment, and outrageous rents can’t kill the live music scene; it can only scramble it for a while.

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