

A Conservative Impulse in

BY JAMES WOLCOTT

Arabian swelter, and with the air-conditioning broken, CBGB resembled some abattoir of a kitchen in which a bucket of ice is placed in front of a fan to cool the room off. To no avail of course, and the heat had perspiration glistening down the curve of one's back, yeah, and the cruel heat also burned away any sense of glamour. After all, CBGB's Bowery and Bleecker location is not the garden spot of lower Manhattan, and the bar itself is an uneasy oasis. On the left, where the couples are, tables; on the right, where the stragglers, drinkers, and love-seekers are, a long bar; between the two, a high double-backed ladder, which, when the room is really crowded, offers the best view. If your bladder sends a distress signal, write home to mother, for you must make a perilous journey down the aisle between seating area and bar, not knock over any miki stands as you slide by the tiny stage, squeeze through the piles of amplifiers, duck the elbow thrust of a pool player leaning over to make a shot . . . and then you end up in an illustrated bathroom which looks like a page that didn't make "The Faith of Graffiti".

Now consider the assembly-line presentation of bands with resonant names like Movies, Tuff Darts, Blondie, Stagger Lee, the Heartbreakers, Mink de Ville, Dancer, the Shirts, Bananas, Talking Heads, Johnny's Dance Band, and Television; consider that some nights as many as six bands perform, and it is hard to comprehend someone declining to sit through a long evening. When the air gets thick with noise and smoke, even the most committed of us long to slake our thirst in front of a Johnny Carson monologue, the quintessential experience of bourgeois cool.

So those who stayed away are not to be chastised, except for a lack of adventurousness. And yet they missed perhaps the most important event in New York rock since the Velvet Underground played the Balloon Farm: CBGB's three-week festival of the best underground (i.e., unrecorded) bands. The very unpretentiousness of the bands' style of musical attack represented a counterthrust to the prevailing baroque theatricality of rock. In opposition to that theatricality, this was a music which suggested a resurgence of communal faith.

So this was an event of importance but not of flash. Hardly any groupies or bopperettes showed up, nor did platoons of rock writers with their sensibilities tuned into Radio Free Zeitgeist brave the near satanic humidity. When the room was packed, as it often was, it was packed with musicians and their girlfriends, couples on dates, friends and relatives of band members, and CBGB regulars, all dressed in denims and loose-fitting shirts—sartorial-style courtesy of Canal Jeans. The scenemakers and chic-obsessed were elsewhere. Where? "At Ashley's," sneered one band member.

Understandable. Rock simply isn't the brightest light in the pleasure dome any longer (my guess is that dance is), and Don Kirschner's "Rock Awards" only verifies the obvious: rock is getting as arthritic, or at least, as phlegmatic, as a rich old whore. It isn't only that the enthusiasm over the Stones tour seemed strained and synthetic, or that the Beach Boys can't seem able to release new material until Brian Wilson conquers his weight problem, or that the album of the year is a collection of basement tapes made in 1967. "The real truth as I see it," said the Who's Peter Dinklage recently, "is that rock music as it was is not really contemporary to these times. It's really the

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The Ramones guard the door.

music of yesteryear."

He's right and yet wrong. What's changed is the nature of the impulse to create rock. No longer is the impulse revolutionary—i.e., the transformation of oneself and society—but conservative: to carry on the rock tradition. To borrow from Eliot, a rocker now needs an historical sense; he performs "not merely with his own generation in his bones" but with the knowledge that all of pop culture forms a "simultaneous order." The landscape is no longer virginal—markers and tracks have been left by, among others, Elvis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and the Beatles—and it exists not to be transformed but cultivated.

No, I'm not saying that everyone down at CBGB's is a farmer. Must you take me so literally? But there is original vision there, and what the place itself is doing is quite extraordinary: putting on bands as if the stage were a cable television station. Public access rock. Of course not every band which auditions gets to play, but the proprietor, Hilly, must have a wide latitude of taste

since the variety and quality of talent ranges from the great to the God-condemned. As with cable TV, what you get is not high-gloss professionalism but talent still working at the basics; the excitement (which borders on comedy) is watching a band with a unique approach try to articulate its vision and still remember the chords.

Television was once such a band; the first time I saw them everything was wrong—the vocals were too raw, the guitar work was relentlessly bad, the drummer wouldn't leave his cymbals alone. They were lousy all right but their lousiness had a forceful dissonance reminiscent of the Stones' "Exile on Main Street," and clearly Tom Verlaine was a presence to be reckoned with.

He has frequently been compared to Lou Reed in the Velvet days, but he most reminds me of Keith Richards. The blood-drained bone-weary Keith on stage at Madison Square Garden is the perfect symbol for Rock '75, not playing at his best, sometimes not even playing competently, but rocking swaying back and forth as if the night might

be his last and it's better to stand than fall. Though Jagger is dangerously close to becoming Maria Callas, Keith, with his lanky grace and obsidian-eyed menace, is the perpetual outsider, I don't know any rock lover who doesn't love Keith; he's the star who's always at the edge and yet occupies the center.

Tom Verlaine occupies the same dreamy realm, like Keith, he's pale and aloof. He seems lost in a forest of silence and he says about performing that "if I'm thinking up there, I'm not having a good night." Only recently has the band's technique been up to Verlaine's reveries and their set at the CBGB festival was the best I've ever seen: dramatic, tense, tender ("Hard on Love"), athletic ("Kingdom Come"), with Verlaine in solid voice and the band playing as a band and not as four individuals with instruments. Verlaine once told me that one of the best things about the Beatles was the way they could shout out harmonies and make them sound intimate, and that's what Television had that night: loud intimacy.

When Tom graduated from high school back in Delaware he was voted "most unknown" by his senior class. As if in revenge, he chose the name Verlaine, much as Patti Smith often invokes the name Rimbaud. He came to New York, spent seven years writing fiction, formed a group called Neon Boys, then Television. The name suggests an aesthetic of accessibility and choice. It also suggests Tom's adapted initials: T.V.

"I left Delaware because no one wanted to form a band there," he says. "Then I came to New York and no one wanted to form a band here either." Verlaine came to New York for the same reason every street-smart artist comes to New York—because it's the big league—even though he realizes "New York is not a great rock and roll town."

Still, they continue to arrive: Martina Weymouth, bassist, born in California; Chris Frantz, drummer, in Kentucky; David Byrne, singer and guitarist, Scotland. All attended the Rhode Island School of Design, and according to their bio, "now launching career in New York"—a sonorous announcement, yes?

These people call themselves Talking Heads. Seeing them for the first time is transfixing: Frantz is so far back on drums that it sounds as if he's playing in the next room; Weymouth, who could pass as Suzi Quatro's sorority sister, stands rooted to the floor, her head doing an oscillating-fan swivel; the object of her swivel is David Byrne, who has a little-boy-lost-at-the-zoo voice and the demeanor of someone who's spent the last half hour whirling around in a spin dryer. When his eyes start Ping-Ponging in his head, he looks like a cartoon of a chipmunk from Mars. The song titles aren't tethered to conventionality either: "Psycho Killer" (which goes "Psycho Killer, que'st-ce c'est? Fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa"), "The Girls Want to Be With the Girls," "Love Is Like a Building on Fire," plus a cover version of that schlock classic by ? and the Mysterians, "96 Tears."

Love at first sight it isn't. But repeated viewings (precise word) reveal Talking Heads to be one of the most intriguingly off-the-wall bands in New York. Musically, they're minimalists: Byrne's guitar playing is like a charcoal pencil scratching a scene on a note pad. The songs are spined by Weymouth's bass playing which, in contrast to the glottal buzz of most rock bass work, is hard and articulate—the bass lines provide hook as well as bottom. Visually, the

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band is perfect for the table-TV format at CBGB; they present a clean, flat image, devoid of fine shading and color. They are consciously antimythical in stance. A line from their bio: "The image we present along with our songs is what we are really like."

Talking to them, it becomes apparent that though they deny antecedents—"We would rather achieve a 'new' sound rather than be compared to bands of the past"—they are children of the communal rock ethic. They live together, melting the distinction between art and life, and went into rock because "as art it is more 'accessible.' They have an astute sense of aesthetic consumerism, yet they're not entirely under the Warholian sway for as one of them told me, "We don't want to be famous for the sake of being famous." Of all the groups I've seen at CBGB, Talking Heads is the closest to a neo-Velvet band, and they represent a distillation of that sensibility, what John Cale once called "controlled distortion." When the Velvets made their reputation at the Balloon Farm they were navigating through a storm of multimedia effects: mirrors, blinking lights, strobes, projected film images. Talking Heads works without paraphernalia in a cavernous room projecting light like a television located at the end of a long dark hall. The difference between the Velvets and Talking Heads is the difference between phosphorescence and cold gray TV light. These people understand that an entire generation has grown up on the nourishment of television's accessible banality. What they're doing is presenting a banal facade under which run ripples of violence and squalls of frustration—the id of the vid.

David Byrne sings tonelessly but its effect is all the more ominous. This uneasy alliance between composure and breakdown—between outward acceptance and inward coming-apart—is what makes Talking Heads such a central 70s band. A quote from ex-Velvet John Cale: "What we try to get here (at the Balloon Farm) is a sense of total involvement." Nineteen sixty-six. But what bands like Television and Talking Heads are doing is ameliorating the post-'60s hangover by giving us a sense of detachment. We've passed through the Dionysian storm and now it's time to nurse private wounds. Says Tina Weymouth, quite simply: "Rock isn't a noble cause."

More than 30 bands played at the CBGB festival. There seemed to be a lot of women in these groups, and none of them were backup singers. I asked Tina (who once introduced herself as a "bassperson") whether it was difficult to work with men in a band, and she gave me a look which said, "Don't you have any better questions to ask?" Albeit, here are some additional notes on the musicianpersons I saw performing during the three weeks:

The Shirts. Annie Golden, lead singer of this Park Slope septet, is a self-proclaimed "street punk." Her hard-skiing voice is the chief attraction in this technically proficient and equipment-abundant group (on stage they refer to themselves as the Average Cramped Band). They share an artistic commune in Brooklyn and the salient virtue of the band is that the sense of companionship comes through in the texture of the music. The very chords seem bonds of friendship.

The Heartbreakers. Totally different problem here. This band has rockers who have made names for themselves—Jerry Nolan and Johnny Thunders formerly of the

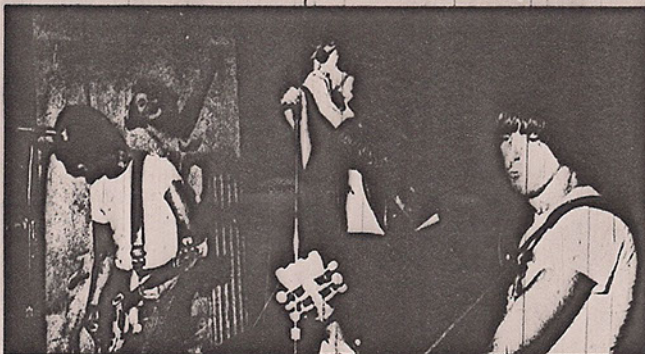
'The excitement (which borders on comedy) is watching a band with a unique approach try to articulate its vision and still remember the chords.'



Ruby of Ruby and the Rednecks



Tom Verlaine in performance



The Ramones, left to right, Dee Dee, Joey, and Johnny



David Byrne's eyes are Ping-Pong wizards. Tina Weymouth looks on.

New York Dolls, Richard Hell formerly of Television—and the place was crowded with other band members curious about how they would/wouldn't resemble the Dolls. By the

third song, when it was clear they weren't the Dolls redux, people began streaming out. Actually, they weren't that bad, certainly better than the advance reports. They've

managed to give their don't-give-a-fuck crumminess a certain coherence, and they know how to draw the groupies (no small consideration for a beginning outfit). In rock, talent is only half of it. Sometimes not even that much.

Ruby and the Rednecks. Ruby threw out an oversized teddy bear, shrieked, stomped on the bear, kicked it, clawed at the audience, while her claqué (from Interview Magazine I was told) roared back their delight. Meanwhile, Michael Goldstein, of the Soho Weekly News, was telling Tina Weymouth, Trixie A. Balm, and myself that Ruby was going to make it big because she has what it takes. To quote Chico Marx, she can keep it.

Bananas. They're very melodic, I said. That's because they're British, said a correspondent from Melody Maker. Actually, they're Irish. Which doesn't make them any less good.

Blondie. Someone ought to tell the guitarist that the way to sing harmony is to sing into the microphone.

The Ramones. The Ramones recently opened at a Johnny Winter concert and had to dodge flying bottles. During one of their CBGB sets, they had equipment screw-ups and Dee Dee Ramone stopped singing and gripped his head as if he were going to explode and Tommy Ramone smashed the cymbal shouting, "What the FUCK's wrong?" They went offstage steaming, then came back and ripped into "Judy Is a Punk." A killer band.

"Playing with a band is the greatest way of feeling alive," says Tom Verlaine. But the pressures in New York against such an effort—few places to play, media indifference, the compulsively upward pace of city life—are awesome. Moreover, the travails of a rock band are rooted in a deeper problem: the difficulty of collaborative art. Rock bands flourished in the '60s when there was a genuine faith in the efficacious beauty of communal activity, when the belief was that togetherness meant strength. It was more than a matter of "belonging"; it meant that one could create art with friends. Playing with a band meant art with sacrifice, but without suffering: Romantic intensity without Romantic solitude.

What CBGB is trying to do is nothing less than to restore that spirit as a force in rock and roll. One is left speculating about success: Will any of the bands who play there ever amount to anything more than a cheap evening of rock and roll? Is public access merely an attitude to be discarded once stardom seems possible, or will it sustain itself beyond the first recording contract? I don't know, and in the deepest sense, don't care. These bands don't have to be the vanguard in order to satisfy. In a cheering Velvets song, Lou Reed sings: "A little wine in the morning, and some breakfast at night. Well, I'm beginning to see the light." And that's what rock gives: small unconventional pleasures which lead to moments of perception.

Flashes like: the way Johnny Ramone slouches behind his guitar, Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye singing "Don't Fuck With Love," on the sidewalk in front of CBGB's, the Shirts shouting in unison in their finale number, Tina Weymouth's tough sliding bass on "Tentative Decisions," the way Tom Verlaine says "just the facts" in "Prove It." One's affection goes out to Lou Reed, for such moments are like wine, in the morning. Shared wine. □