



Villager photo by Clayton Patterson

Glory Days: Bad Brains' singer HR at CBGB's last hardcore show.

The Wednesday the music died

By Todd Simmons

With all of the concern about Bad Brains singer HR's current state of mental health, and the speculation over whether he'd show up at CBGB wearing a motorcycle helmet or bullet-proof vest, walk off the stage early or fail to appear at all, you could almost forget for a minute what the week was really about. It was the end of a three-night stand from the legendary D.C. group that Beastie Boy Adam Yauch calls "the greatest hardcore band of all time", on the final Wednesday EVER at CBGB. The Bad Brains' faithful may debate the quality of the shows, but ultimately the band was a sideshow to the club itself.

I hadn't seen the place that packed since a CMJ performance by The Dandy Warhols last year when word of the eviction had first leaked. On Wednesday night, fighting your way from the bar to the infamously grungy bathrooms in the basement was almost impossible during the set without taking a boot to the head. The mosh pit was alive and kicking with a nostalgic fervor. It was the last hardcore show this dank old cave would see and the crowd seemed determined to commemorate the occasion with a suitable level of chaos.

On the DVD "Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982," you can see the ferocity in which these Rasta-punks ripped it up on stage, inciting a frenzy that resulted in copious stage dives and who knows how many damaged ear-drums and concussions. HR's hyperkinetic delivery was electrifying, careening between dub reggae and punk at breakneck speeds.

Nearly 25 years later it would be foolish to expect such a performance out of a band whose average age is now fifty, and yet musically, they were in tight form. The rhythm section of Darryl Jenifer and Earl Hudson thundered along with their usual precision. Doctor Know scraped lightning from his guitar in shredding bursts. Unfortunately, HR spent the show with his head in the clouds, a blissfully subdued grin on his face, like an aging Rasta shaman. There was none of the furious, bloodthirsty defiance of his youth, only a tranquilized sort of complacency. The crowd cared little though, and like myself were elated to have one more go round in that “shit-hole; our shit-hole” as Handsome Dick Manitoba put it a couple of nights later on stage with The Dictators. HR didn’t walk off this time until they’d banged out an encore of “Destroy Babylon” and disappeared.

In the hour-long delay before the set began, I took the time to take a good, hard look at the place. I walked from the main space, out the back door, and into the alley behind the club and tried to imagine what had gone down out there over the years. Even with the new construction in the area and the gentrification, it’s still creepy. Not quite as creepy as the basement bathrooms, however. On Saturday night, during the Blondie acoustic set, I was trying to figure which bathroom it was that Joey Ramone allegedly walked in to discover Debbie Harry and Chris Stein in a compromising position. Lord help them if it was the men’s room.

It’s easy to think of the three decades that Hilly Kristal and his club have held down the fort at 315 Bowery as an eternity, but in the context of this city’s history, it’s a blip. Before CBGB, there was an SRO hotel here, and before that, it was the Methusalem Whiskey Co. Like it or not, change in this town is inevitable and constant. The rock and roll moment has drifted out to Brooklyn to make way for more Starbucks. And yet the impulse still exists to preserve this notorious outpost of New York City indulgence.

Much has been made of the grimy sticker, graffiti, and poster-scarred walls of CBGB. After 32 years and 50,000 sets, they are truly something to behold, like the peeling bark of strange industrial trees. If there were any justice, Kristal would put the whole club on the back of a truck, haul it down to Bad Brains territory, and dump it at The Smithsonian.