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# Maxwell's Last Night: "a" Returns and Closes With a Bang

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Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for MTV Hive

*All photos by Rebecca Smeyne for Hive*

"I bet a lot of people will miss that place," said [Henry Rollins](#) — a man not known for waxing sentimental — when Maxwell's first announced their impending closing. "It was a great venue," said Rollins of the Hoboken, NJ indie-rock mecca. "They were honest with the bands and the audience was always cool. I did a lot of shows there

and saw a lot of shows there.” The former [Black Flag/Rollins Band](#) frontman’s fond memories of the club’s 35-year history echo those of countless other artists who helped cement the Maxwell’s legend over the years, from [R.E.M.](#), [The Replacements](#), and [Nirvana](#) to [Vampire Weekend](#), the [Hold Steady](#), and [Titus Andronicus](#).

By establishing a welcoming presence for both bands and patrons, the 200-capacity club became a key stop on cross-country tours, even for artists who were playing to far larger audiences elsewhere but still felt fealty to the place that helped foster the indie-rock scene before it was even *called* indie rock. “The original owner, Steve Fallon, was very open to embracing the new and had an uncanny ability to enable his patrons to build a special world of their own,” says Glenn Morrow, founder of Bar/None Records and former leader of the [Individuals](#), both of which made important contributions of their own to the Hoboken scene and beyond. “[R.E.M. guitarist] Peter Buck has said that when he first landed at Maxwell’s the band felt like they had found a home away from home,” says Morrow. “Everyone felt like Maxwell’s was their place, from punks and new wavers to grunge and garage rockers.”

Nevertheless, citing a problematic sociocultural sea change in now-gentrified Hoboken, Fallon’s successor, Todd Abramson, announced at the beginning of this summer that the club would close its doors following a blowout farewell show on July 31. The final weeks of Maxwell’s were filled with Hoboken scene heavyweights like [The Feelies](#) and [Yo La Tengo](#) taking the stage, but for the club’s grand finale, Abramson enlisted the talents of the artists who did the most to bring the Hoboken Sound (as it became known in the ‘80s) to a wider world.

In 1978, a pre-Individuals Morrow and future [Bongos](#) frontman Richard Barone were the singers/guitarists for a band called “a,” which never released a record, but ultimately achieved an almost mythic status for being to Maxwell’s what Television was to CBGB: a crucial catalyst. Maxwell’s was strictly a restaurant when Barone and Morrow approached Fallon about playing music there. “We set up and played in the front restaurant room,” remembers Barone, there was no back room at that point. The best thing to me was watching it grow. Within a matter of a year, [Joy Division](#) was booked to play, even though they didn’t because a night or two before the concert there was the loss of the lead singer [Ian Curtis]. The Bongos were scheduled to do a double bill with Joy Division there, and to do the tour with them, launching from Hoboken.”



Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for MTV Hive

Soon, however, TV news shows were doing special reports on the Hoboken Sound, and the scene earned space in national music magazines, with the equally ascendant Bongos as its fulcrum. “Within a very short time it exploded, and that was a thrill,” recalls Barone. “The venue was the star; it was sudden and it received a lot of attention. It was great to be not just a part of it, but an instigator. Six months after ‘a,’ the Bongos formed, and we made an effort to promote Maxwell’s and Hoboken all over the country on tour. We never hit the stage without saying ‘We’re the Bongos from Hoboken,’ that was just part of our name. It was so cool for us to have this music scene kind of explode nationally from that little town.”

On Wednesday, July 31, Maxwell’s went out the way it came in, with a set from the reunited “a,” appropriately bookended by reunion sets from the Individuals and the Bongos. After an early-evening Individuals performance that found the band reprising such early-’80s college-radio staples of their repertoire as “Piledrive” and “Dancing With My 80 Wives,” Morrow, Barone, and the Bongos rhythm section of bassist Rob Norris and drummer Frank Giannini hit the Maxwell’s stage as “a” for the first time in three-and-a-half decades. Most of the room was surely hearing the quartet’s urgent, angular sound for the first time; not surprisingly, it bore hints of both The Individuals’ quirky post-punk approach and The Bongos’ postmodern pop-art perspective.

More than anything, though, “a” came across like a sort of proto-[Guided By Voices](#) – the songs were full of absurdist lyrics, unexpected stops and starts, and a kind of Cubist deconstruction of pop and punk influences. Though every member of the

band got a turn at the microphone, Morrow took the lion's share of lead vocals. The band banged out tunes like "Death of a Surf Guitarist" (a "three-minute rock opera" suggestive of a post-punk attempt at encapsulating [The Who's](#) "Tommy" in a single song, replete with an interpolation of the classic '50s instrumental "Tequila"), the ode to the New Jersey/New York PATH train "Under the City," and "The Electricians," an apparent salute to, um, electricians. Throughout their set, Morrow maintained a running between-song joke of pretending it was still 1978, making offhand anachronistic observations about his \$65-a-month Hoboken rent, and the PATH train's 25-cent fare. In keeping with the band's Dadaist sensibilities, the lone stage prop was a huge orange-and-white traffic cone emblazoned with a lowercase "a," which wound up adorning Norris's head by the end of the set as the members linked arms at the front of the stage.



Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for MTV Hive

Considering their symbiotic relationship with the club and the scene it engendered, there could have been no band better suited to ring the final notes of Maxwell's history than the Bongos. After a quick break, Barone, Norris, and Giannini returned to the stage, this time with fourth Bongo Jim Mastro instead of Morrow, and proceeded to remind the audience (as if it were necessary for the assembled faithful) exactly why The Bongos became the Hoboken Sound's cornerstone.

After Barone duly announced, "We're The Bongos from Hoboken," the band opened with the frenzied "In the Congo." The Bongos came out with all guns ablaze, as Barone and Mastro's carefully coordinated twin-guitar attack added trenchant teeth to Giannini and Norris's almost tribal-sounding tattoo. On tunes like "The



Bulrushes” and “Zebra Club,” The Bongos struck their signature balance between hooky power-pop melodies and a darker, more mysterious emotional undercurrent hinting at multiple layers of meaning within Barone’s evocative, often-elliptical lyrics. On the dreamy ballad “Sweet Blue Cage,” Barone and Mastro both unleashed their e-bows (a device that gives a guitar a sustained, violin-like tone) for a spine-tingling duet that suddenly filled the room with sonic specters.



Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for MTV Hive

Though they spent the bulk of their set revisiting their classic catalog, The Bongos surprised even their hardcore hometown constituency by pulling out a couple of “new” songs. As it happens, a legendary “lost” Bongos album called *Phantom Train*, recorded in 1986 shortly before the band broke up but never released, will finally see the light of day on October 1 as the flagship release for the newly revived Jem Records. Ripping through a couple of these long-lost tracks, the band showed a slightly heavier side to their sound, undoubtedly creating bewitching clouds of what-ifs in their admirers’ minds.

By the time they hit the stage a second time for an extended encore set, The Bongos were in take-no-prisoners mode, barre ling through some of their most fervid tunes, like “Space Jungle” and “Barbarella,” as the ageless Barone leaped, yelped, and wailed like an uncaged wildcat. After a rough-hewn version of [Donovan](#)’s ‘60s psych-pop smash “Sunshine Superman,” Barone and company began upping the ante by bringing some special surprise guests onstage.



Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for MTV Hive

Things quickly developed into a Hoboken super session as Glenn Mercer and Ira Kaplan, frontmen for [The Feelies](#) and Yo La Tengo, respectively, stepped up with guitars in hand. Mercer led the ensemble through a feral take on [The Velvet Underground](#)'s "Rock & Roll," which climaxed with Mercer, Kaplan, Barone, and Mastro all taking simultaneous, blistering solos and creating a giddily transportive kind of electricity in the room. Both Maxwell's founder Steve Fallon and his successor, Todd Abramson, climbed onstage to sing along on an endearingly shambolic version of another '60s hit, [Paul Revere & The Raiders](#)' "Kicks," and the song's refrain of "Kicks just keep getting harder to find" gained extra resonance in the context of the club's closing. By the time the final song of the evening arrived, Yo La Tengo drummer Georgia Hubley had joined in as well, and after an emotional introduction from Barone that undoubtedly had some of the attendees teary-eyed, he took the lead on [Big Star](#)'s anthem of gratitude and fraternity, "Thank You Friends," with a palpable flow of love leaping back and forth between performers and audience. By the time the whole glorious mess came crashing to a conclusion, Wednesday had given way to Thursday, July had turned into August, and one of indie/alt rock's most beloved institutions had become a fond memory.

*More photos Maxwell's last night below courtesy of [Rebecca Smeyne](#):*











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