



THE RAMONES

By DR. DONNA GAINES

IN THE DARK AGES THAT PRECEDED THE RAMONES, fans were shut out, reduced to the role of passive spectator. In the early 1970s, boredom inherited the earth: The airwaves were ruled by crotchety old dinosaurs; rock & roll had become an alienated labor – rock, detached from its roots. Gone were the sounds of youthful angst, exuberance, sexuality and misrule. The spirit of rock & roll was beaten back, the glorious legacy handed down to us in doo-wop, Chuck Berry, the British Invasion and surf music lost. If you were an average American kid hanging out in your room playing guitar, hoping to start a band, how could you possibly compete with elaborate guitar solos, expensive equipment and million-dollar stage shows? It all seemed out of reach. And then, in 1974, a uniformed militia burst forth from Forest Hills, Queens, firing a shot heard round the world.

The Ramones' raw style resurrected the unholy spirit of rock & roll, renewing old-school aesthetics, paying tribute to the Fifties greasers, the bikers, the garage Mods. With their *Tiger Beat* boy names, ripped jeans, T-shirts,

black leather motorcycle jackets and Keds (American-made sneakers only), the Ramones incited a sneering cultural insurrection. In 1976 they recorded their eponymous first album in seventeen days for \$6,400. At a time when superstars were demanding upwards of half a million, the Ramones democratized rock & roll – you didn't need a fat contract, great looks, expensive clothes or the skills of Clapton. You just had to follow Joey's credo: "Do it from the heart and follow your instincts." More than twenty-five years later – after the band officially broke up – from Old Hanoi to East Berlin, kids in full Ramones regalia incorporate the commando spirit of DIY, do it yourself.

According to Joey, the chorus in "Blitzkrieg Bop" – "Hey ho, let's go" – was "the battle cry that sounded the revolution, a call to arms for punks to do their own thing." That message spread outward from the bowels of New York City to the U.K. and California, across Asia, into Latin America and Europe, instigating ten thousand new bands along the way. Lean, mean, clean, the Ramones had ush-

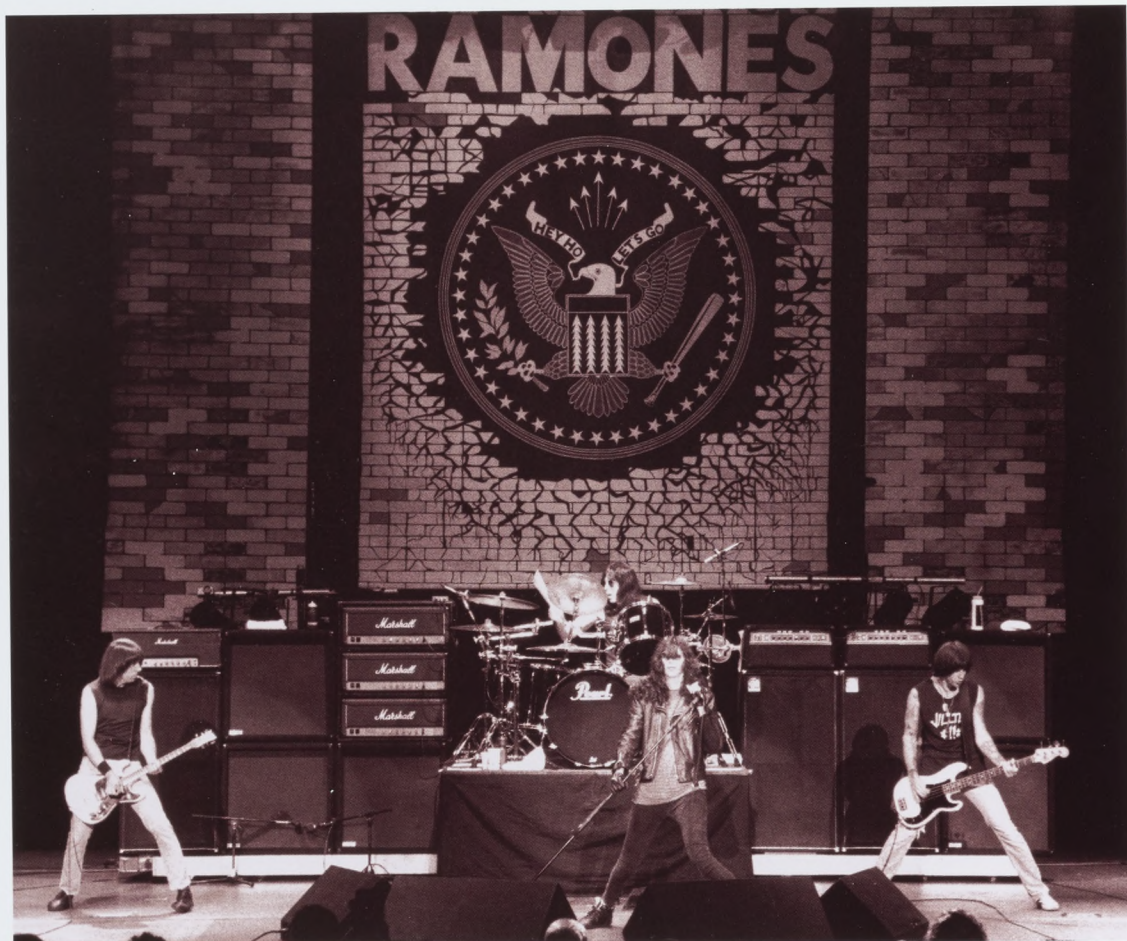
**The pride of Queens, New York:
The Ramones, (from left) Johnny,
Joey, Tommy, Dee Dee, ca. 1975**

ered in a glorious new age. The critics called it punk rock after the garage bands of the early 1960s. History was rewritten; bands like T. Rex, the Velvets and Dolls were reclassified as "prepunk." New sights, sounds, dress codes, art, attitudes and gender relations followed – girls could do it, too! Fans in the audience today became bands onstage tomorrow. Authenticity replaced virtuoso mastery as the central tenet of punk musicianship. The Ramones set the standard for a rising generation of alternative bands learning to balance cult credibility with mass appeal, from CBGB to Sleater-Kinney, Rancid and Green Day. Stripped down, with a streetwise antilook, speed-pop raw aggression and darkly funny lyrics, the Ramones influenced genres from new wave to hardcore, speed metal and thrash and infused the sensibilities of grunge, riot grrrl, foxcore and queercore.

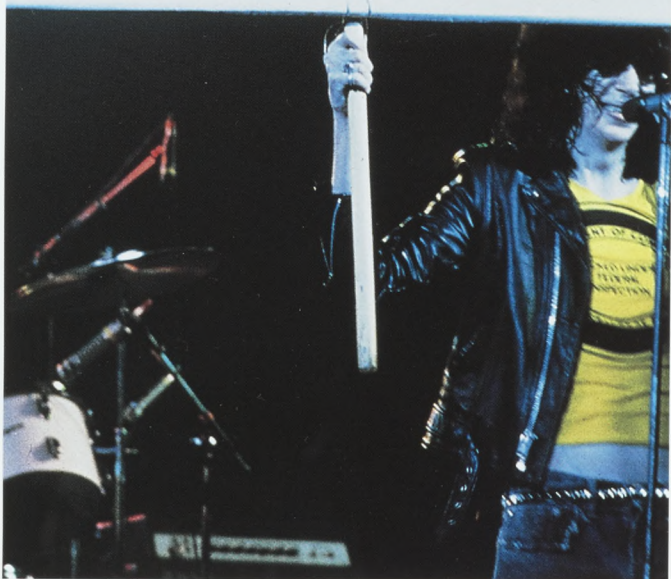
The original band members grew up as disaffected boomers repulsed by the legacy of peace and love. They were loners, outcasts in their outer-borough middle-class apartment complex. Typical neighborhood guys, bassist Dee Dee lived across the street from Johnny, who played guitar, and Johnny was in a band with Joey's brother, guitarist Mickey Leigh. Johnny knew Tommy since high school – they had a band called Tangerine Puppets. After graduation, Tommy got a job as a recording engineer, setting up Performance Studios, a rehearsal space and showcase for early Ramones shows, two-dollar cover, mostly

friends. In addition to playing drums, Tommy began coproducing, and after the Ramones' third album, *Rocket to Russia*, he left the band to produce full-time. Dee Dee knew Joey as the singer in a glitter band named Sniper, who performed at a Queens club called Coventry. A free spirit, tall, shy and gawky, Joey seemed a most unlikely rock star. When he hooked up with his band mates, he was selling acrylic-dipped flowers in the Village and painting with vegetables. Like Dee Dee and Johnny, Joey was alienated at home, at school and in the neighborhood. In their early days, Dee Dee and Johnny sat on rooftops killing time, getting wasted, looking for cheap thrills. "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue" was Dee Dee's deadpan dead-end kids' one minute, thirty-six second ode to the pleasures of solvent abuse. Joey claimed the song was just a goof: "We were really just writing about teenage frustration." As Johnny explained, "We couldn't write about girls or cars, so we wrote songs about things we knew."

The Ramones were their fans – outcasts, frustrated suburban youth who played stickball, worked at odd jobs and checked out shows at Flushing Meadow Park. Johnny and Dee Dee were obsessed with war movies. Johnny had spent two years in military school; Dee Dee grew up in Germany on a military base, an army brat. Fiercely patriotic, the two collected war memorabilia. They rode the subway to shows, carried their guitars to rehearsals in shop-



GABBA
GABBA
HEY



ping bags. Legend holds that in the early 1970s, when Johnny first saw the New York Dolls perform, he took one look and declared, "Hey, I can do that!" The rest is U.S. cultural history.

The Ramones took their name from Paul McCartney's alias – Paul Ramon – when his band was called the Silver Beatles. Like most kids stranded on the wrong side of the bridges and tunnels of New York City, the Ramones knew heaven was just a train ride away. So they hopped the subway to Manhattan and eventually found a home on the Bowery, at CBGB. At first, people wondered if they could play at all, but that wasn't the point; their twenty-minute sets of rapid-fire, under-two-and-a-half-minute songs earned them a recording contract before any of their contemporaries, except Patti Smith.

You had to be sophisticated to realize they weren't d-u-m-b. But if you took them too seriously, you'd miss the point. Joey's clipped words made people wonder if he was serious or just spoofing. He deployed an eccentric phrasing that was wholly

unique, a mix of regional Queens dialect and Britboy bastard inflection. Dee Dee and Johnny never smiled; they stood onstage with their legs spread apart, stoic, staring psychotically at their instruments. Sometimes Johnny's white pick guard turned totally red; he played with such ferocious fury his fingers bled. Joey sang with the same twisted intensity that lacerated Johnny's hand. Sometimes Dee Dee's bass lines soared past at the speed of light. Their minimalist aesthetic was rooted in Dee Dee's Queens logic: "I think rock & roll should be three words and a chorus, and the three words should be good enough to say it all."

The Ramones' songwriting reflected their obsession with popular culture and all things American – pizza, Carbone, Coney Island, Burger King, chicken vindaloo, surfing, horror movies and soda machines. They helped us laugh at our dysfunctional families, psychotherapists, politicians and piss-poor social skills. Above all, they upheld a belief in the emancipatory promise of rock & roll radio: the Top Forty seven-inch vinyl, three-minute hit single. Unlike the snotty urban art crowd, they loved television, baseball, comic books and cartoons. Joey wrote "Chain Saw" after seeing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, rhyming massacre with me. Dee Dee and Johnny's "I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement" was an ode to all the B-movie horror flicks they loved. Likewise, Dee Dee's "Pinhead" was inspired by the 1932 horror film *Freaks*.

Over the course of eighteen studio and live albums, and more than 2,250 shows, the band remained accessible and local. As Joey explained, "Our fans played a major part in the whole thing. I remember meeting certain artists I admired and them being real obnoxious. That wasn't how I wanted to be."

Brooklyn boy Marc Bell, an acclaimed drummer for Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Dust and Wayne County, replaced Tommy on drums in 1978 and became Marky Ramone. The son of a longshoreman turned labor lawyer readily embraced the band's ethic of inclusion. Marky said the most important thing he learned from being a Ramone was "how to treat people right, you

know, don't act like a rock star, just be yourself. . . . I hate rock stars." Through it all, the band upheld the primacy of the fans, the importance of the kids, the purity of band-fan relations. *Of the people, by the people, for the people.*

Over the years, the Ramones worked with Phil Spector, starred in Roger Corman's 1979 movie

Opposite: The Ramones perform at New York's New Music Seminar in 1990, (from left) Johnny, Marky, Joey, C.J.; above: Joey leads the audience in the "Pinhead" chant, which was taken from Tod Browning's 1932 horror flick 'Freaks,' 1978



Rock 'n' Roll High School and wrote the title track to Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*. American popular culture spawned the Ramones; today their legacy permeates it. You'll hear them at football stadiums, as crowds cheer, "Hey ho, let's go!" and on film soundtracks ranging from *The Royal Tenenbaums* to *Jimmy Neutron, Boy Genius*.

E Pluribus Unum. The Ramones always called themselves an American band, patriotic, goofy, innocent and too tough to die. Individualistic yet inclusive, eccentric yet populist, the Ramones stood firm, in perfect paramilitary formation, a uniformed assault team, a well-disciplined fighting army. They became one of the most prolific, hard-touring bands in the world. Their all-for-one, one-for-all work ethic prevailed over self-interest or ego. After Dee Dee left the band in 1989, C.J. played bass with edgy vitality and great humility. The former U.S. Marine said, "I try not to look like I'm taking his place, but go up there and do my job and entertain people."

When the band broke up in 1996, the members pursued solo projects – cool new bands, art shows, memoirs, novels, spoken-word tours, films and albums. Tragically, at age 49, Joey Ramone passed

away on April 15, 2001, following a lengthy battle with lymphoma. Joey's worldview is evident in his posthumous solo album, *Don't Worry About Me*, in the upbeat momentum of songs like "What a Wonderful World" and "I Got Knocked Down (but I'll Get Up)." Today the former high school reject is a personal hero. By just being himself, "the King of Punk" gave teenage outcasts everywhere something to believe in, an alternative to killing themselves or blowing up the high school.

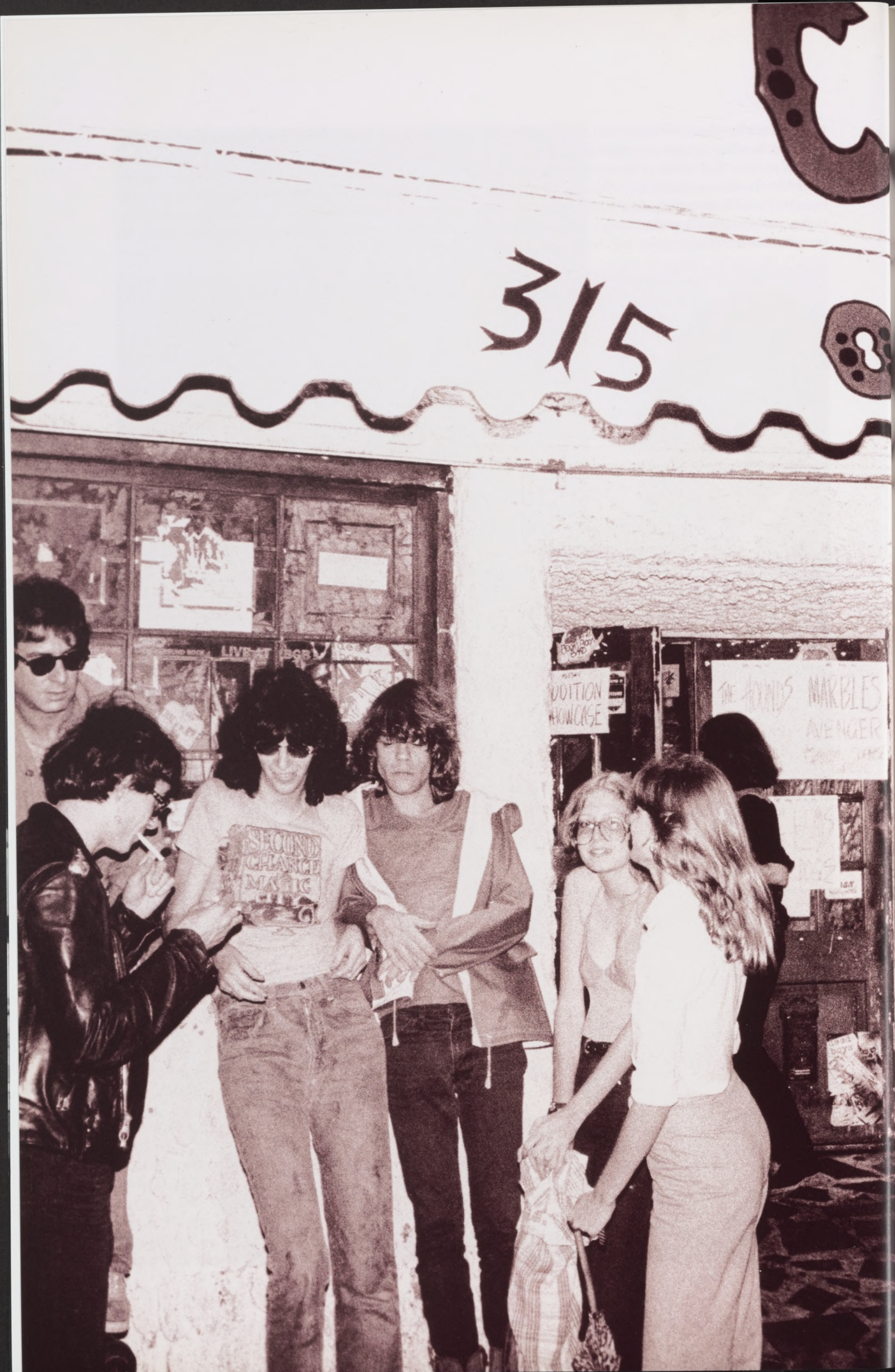
The Ramones have given us many brilliant anthems to hang our dreams on. Whether by land or by sea, the Ramones never forgot their primary purpose – to be true to their fans. When they played, we knew they did it for us. They never wavered, never betrayed our faith. Their impact on popular music, their influence on

youth subculture cannot be measured in the banal, quantitative language of market shares, chart positions and radio airplay. Like the proud-standing Militia of Lexington who fired the shot that sparked the American Revolution, the Ramones of New York City changed history. *

Above, live at CBGB, the club where they got started, ca. 1977; Joey (center), Dee Dee (left), Johnny (right); opposite: Joey Ramone hanging out before going onstage in a double bill with the Patti Smith Group in Asbury Park, 1979

Essay in loving memory of Joey Ramone.





LIVE FROM CBGB

*Hilly Kristal and Lenny Kaye recall
the early days of the Bowery dive
where inductees Talking Heads and the
Ramones, as well as countless
other punk bands, got their start*





HILLY KRISTAL: I opened CBGB in December 1973. The name stood for Country, Blue Grass and Blues. That was the music I was into and wanted to present. Back in the late Sixties, I'd had a club on Ninth Street, and then I had decided to look for a place around the Bowery because artists had begun moving into the area. This was pre-Soho, and three or four galleries had opened there and the lofts were cheap. I found the biggest bar on the Bowery – it was called the Palace. It stank; it was awful. I was paying six hundred dollars a month for rent, and there was a flophouse upstairs – used to cost three, four dollars a night for a bed. It had been a bar where derelicts used to line up at eight in the morning for their first white port or muscatel of the day: all lost souls, indigents, alcoholics.

So I started doing music there, mostly acoustic bands at first: country, bluegrass, blues, folk. One day, when I was on a ladder outside, Tom Verlaine walked by and asked me if I was interested in booking rock music. His band, Television, had a manager, Terry Ork, who was the one who really started badgering me. Around March 1974, he said that he'd like to put Television on at CB's on Sunday nights, because I currently wasn't open then, and that he'd put someone at the door to charge a dollar a head. So I agreed.

Television was horrible, just horrible. And nobody came, so I said, "No more." But Terry pleaded, saying he had another band, this one from Queens – and that's how the Ramones first started playing at CBGB. They were even worse. They were a mess.

Previous: Joey Ramone, Danny Fields (back, left) and David Johansen outside CBGB, 1977; the Patti Smith Group, at CB's, 1975, Richard Sohl (left), Ivan Kral, Smith; above: Elvis Costello guests with the Voidoids, Robert Quine (center) and Richard Hell, ca. 1978, at a CB's benefit for St. Mark's Poetry Project

Then there were the Stilettos, who were actually good. Debbie Harry and Chris Stein were in the band, and the group was campy and fun.

Terry had a lot of friends; he knew a lot of people and managed to get them all to come to the shows. Eventually Television improved, in three or four months. The combination of Richard Hell, Tom Verlaine, Richard Lloyd and Billy Ficca was really quite special. Word got out and people started coming around, and the scene started growing. During the summer of 1974, there were so many rock groups wanting to play at CBGB that I established a policy requiring bands to perform their own original music because there were enough cover bands being heard out there and disco was getting too big and formularized.

At the time, popular rock had become increasingly complex and polished, and now there was a rebellion against that. With these new bands, there was a movement back to basics. I think it was a self-expression thing for most of those kids – Television and a lot of the others. They certainly couldn't play their instruments as well as the musicians I was accustomed to hearing. I'd previously managed the Village Vanguard and was used to hearing some really great jazz musicians – Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Thelonious Monk, Cannonball Adderley and Gerry Mulligan – so these CBGB bands were not thrilling to me at first. But soon I saw that many of them were doing something really interesting, that they had their own vision. Some-

times limited technical facility can give a group its own distinct personality as far as its instrumentation goes. And here it did: Some of the groups became exceptionally original.

Tom Verlaine and Patti Smith were friends and around the fall of 1974 used to meet nearby at Yonah Schimmel's Knishes Bakery. Patti and her manager, Jane Friedman, started coming down to the club. Arista president Clive Davis had expressed interest in signing Patti, so she needed a residency in which to showcase her band and decided to play here as a test. She and Lenny Kaye had played at Max's Kansas City before, but this was the first place her whole group played live, here at CBGB.

Patti and the band liked it here and ended up playing two sets a night, four nights a week, for quite a few weeks. Television was the opener for those shows. As a poet, Patti was already well known. As a rock singer, she was surprisingly good right from the beginning. She had magnetism, and her voice sounded great. From the first night, people came. The shows weren't sold out, but they were definitely very crowded, even for those days, when we had more seating than now. That was the beginning of a wider circle of people finding out about CBGB. Patti played until the late spring of 1974, and then Clive signed her to Arista.

Around that time, Talking Heads and the Shirts

tried out to play at my club on the same night – a Monday, CBGB's audition night. The Heads were quirky, obviously, but they played well and knew what they were doing. Chris Frantz was a very good drummer, Tina Weymouth played a definite bass line, and David Byrne was David – he played that crazy guitar style. I liked them right away.

After the Patti Smith residency, things started to cool down at CBGB. I figured I had to do something to keep the crowds coming in, so I decided to have a festival. This was midsummer 1975. I called it the Festival of the Top Forty Unrecorded New York Rock

Bands. I waited until there was literally nothing musical going on in New York City, after the Newport Festival, then I started taking out huge ads in the *Voice* and the *Soho Weekly News* – and at that time nobody took out huge ads.

The ads did the trick. All the early CBGB bands played, except Patti's, because she was recording. The Ramones, Blondie, Mink DeVille – countless groups. And everybody played at least twice, seven days a week, for three weeks. People came from all over, from *NME* and *Melody Maker* and *Rolling Stone*. The Japanese came, too. So CBGB and the bands playing here really got heard around the world, so to speak.

I don't think the punk bands played in order to become music-biz successes; they did it to express themselves. They just wanted to say what they wanted to

**Paul Simon visits
Television backstage
at CB's: (from left)
Simon, guitarist Richard
Lloyd, drummer Billy
Ficca, bassist Fred Smith,
vocalist/guitarist
Tom Verlaine, 1976**



say, in their own way. They stripped the music down to basics and then allowed it to grow from there. That's why punk rock was such a dramatic change from what was then being heard on the radio.

As far as my being there, that was an accident. I was here trying to do something else; these bands happened to be around, too, and I have always liked new talent. Maybe it all came together because I wanted to do for others what I wished had been done for me when I had tried to make it as a musician earlier on. Most bands' musicianship is much better these days, which makes it easier for them to get booked sometimes. But if a group has something to say, and that's the driving force behind its music, to me that remains the most important thing.

LENNY KAYE: One night in April, Hilly's dog was hit on the Bowery.

A saluki. Ran out between two cars and got clipped at the junction where Bleecker runs smack into CBGB's front door.

He was named Johnny; and Johnny – the protagonist of "Land" – was always Johnny, long before the dog. Johnny would live, and during that spring, playing our version of "Land of 1000 Dances," the world

gathered at our portal as the Johnnys moved their shadows across the walls of a Lower East Side bar.

Downtown. Manhattan: "Ob, look at this land where we am," declaimed Patti, and when we did, it became a time for retrospection and re-creation, a reminder of why we started listening in the first place. "There is not twilight on this island."

Call it what you will – and lumpen punk rock fits as well as anything – but you do it for yourself first, for the person in you who wants to pick up a sounding device and activate the sleeping self. To find through music life's beating heart and then wear it on your sleeve, genre sewn on like military patches, signifying your company, your rank, your serial number. Battle scars, campaign ribbons, war wounds. And every once in a while, you get to raise a flag. *Corregidor*, man. I was there.

Television found CBGB. Hilly had toyed with country and bluegrass and blues before, and even while he continued to live in the back room with his pack of dogs, he gave the bands a space to set up on the left side of the room – as long as they didn't block the pool table.

Every Sunday night, Television would play. It was a good night to go for a hang because it was after the weekend flood tide, the bridge-and-tunnel waters receding and leaving mostly your fellow travelers on the shore, gasping for air and wriggling their tail fins. Everything was pretty cacophonous, erratic and jerky, teetering on the edge of grasp. Out of tune. On target.

The bands started to cluster. The fans, and most of them were the other bands, stayed to watch. Small world, isn't it?

Though it might have seemed insular to a wandering outsider, within the CBGB world everyone brought differing influenzas to the petri dish. Garbage-picking from the detritus of rock, the music leapfrogged a generation backward and forward, excavating scorned pop objects and hex-rated perversities. The bands were held together by philosophy alone – they were hardly alike in style, at least in these formative stages. The only time-share they cultivated was another way of looking at the world: good old Us versus Them.

Inbred and feeding on itself (though I'm sure it avoided Hilly's hamburgers from its kitchen, which is now the rear undressing room), CBGB became an exotic castle keep for this medieval morality play in the making. The bands that rooted there – stalwarts all, including Ye Talking Heads, the good Lady Blondie, those Knights of the Ramones Table, the

Below: Hilly Kristal at his club; opposite, top: Talking Heads, 1977, (from left) Jerry Harrison, David Byrne, Chris Frantz, Tina Weymouth; bottom: Blondie's Debbie Harry with guest guitarist Robert Fripp, 1978, at a CB's benefit for stabbed Dead Boy Johnny Blitz





aforementioned Sir Television and our humble selves – then rode off into the worldly night to seek fortune and frolic.

Self-propelled. Shot through the vortex of pop culture. *Whoeee!*

But even at its most projectile, you have to realize it's not you that's the pebble in the sling. It's your moment. Your arc is the distance it takes to carry this blip of history-as-it's-lived to someone who picks up a piece of it, a large chunk or a sliver that drops off along the way, sometimes unrecognizable, and makes it his own.

National acts still performed at Madison Square Garden; radio playlists had little to do with local music. But word spread that a home for the disaffected had been founded on an avenue where many had traditionally come to lie in the gutter, to eat and sleep on the street and to see what life was like when it started from scratch.

It wasn't just New York at the time. Everywhere I traveled in that Horses-drawn year, every city and interstate, there were pockets of people with mutual affections. Did I say afflictions? Stylistically, this simpatico spit off a myriad of directional signals, a survival of the fittest for accoutrements: slashed-and-burned clothes, motorcycle jackets, cranked guitars, overdriven rhythm. Wave that high sign and let the world know you gotta do it Your Way. But a few years later, when Sid Vicious sang the Frank Sinatra anthem as a flaming finale to punk-as-a-way-of-life (not that any of us wuz punk, see?), little did he know that it could never die, because it always reconfigures. New wave begets hardcore begets industrial begets

grunge. For New York, CB's begat Hurrah begat the Mudd Club begat Danceteria, the concentric circles of an earth movement in seismic pulse.

Cut up. Imprised. The lineage can be traced wherever you like, styles notwithstanding. The impulse to pick up a guitar, beat a drum, blow a horn, scream into a microphone, turn a table and ultimately stick your hand down your throat and pull out your heart for the universe to see, is ever replicating.

You never know where it's going to strike next. And that's what I remember most about those weeks in early '75: the possibilities endless. I'm standing outside the rock & roll club after we played, or Television played, two sets a night, Thursday through Sunday, sharing a smoke with "T" in the next-door hallway of the Palace Hotel, and looking up Bleecker Street as it starts its slow curve around the world. ✦

