

Bowery Style Sounds

CBGB serves it up hard and loud for 30 years

By Dave Dermont

The Bowery in New York City's Greenwich Village has often been synonymous with vagrants, winos, and "down and outers." But in 1973, a man named Hilly Crystal transformed a bar on the first floor of one of the biggest Bowery flophouses into a club that's got a name now most revered in live music circles.

It's called CBGB, for short. Or CBGB OMFUG, in a more detailed version. Or Country, Bluegrass, Blues, Other Music For Uplifting Gormandizers, in its most complete form.

The initial focus was on the "Other Music" portion of its name – the venue had an original-music-only policy, and unlike other NYC venues, being signed to a major label (or any label at all, for that matter) was definitely not a prerequisite to take the CBGB stage.

In other words, it was a place where artists could play music that might be thought of as a bit "too imaginative" for other venues. At the height of the disco era, and before punk rock even had a name, CBGB presented what it dubbed "street rock." And it definitely flew in the face of the prevailing "corporate rock."

Located in one of the "seedier" (some would say "character-enhanced") zones of the city worked to the club's advantage. An area with a healthy dose of seasoning became a bit more seasoned. By and large, the locals didn't really seem to mind some rock 'n' roll coming to the neighborhood.

Serving an average of a half-dozen bands each night for almost 30 years, the CBGB house sound system sees very heavy use. And a lot of the gear that was part of the original 1970s installation is still plugging away show



A young Sting belting it out on the CBGB stage. (Photo by Ebet Roberts)

after show.

On my inspection during a recent visit, the house system looks totally whacked. And I've mixed on this rig in the past!

Josh Wertheimer, house soundperson, and Fade, stage manager, take me for a tour of the "guts." As I'm looking at a collection of largely "vintage" PA gear, put together in what looks to be haphazard fashion, I can't believe how good the thing actually sounds.

Simple fact: the system rocks. If you've ever found yourself trying to get a mumbling vocalist heard over a couple Marshall stacks and an Ampeg SVT, this is a rig that will deliver the goods.

FITTING THE ROOM

The physical dimensions of CBGB make it not so much a room as a hallway. My estimate (made by counting ceiling blocks) is 24 feet wide, and about 100 feet from the stage to the front door. "I believe the boxes (main loudspeakers) were designed to phys-

ically fit this room," Wertheimer notes.

Indeed, the low-end cabinets – horn-loaded affairs each loaded with three 15-inch drivers – are something I've never seen anywhere else. These are stacked against the walls on each side of the room and turned "sideways" so that the horn flares point up and down, rather than side to side.

This arrangement puts the 15-inch drivers three-across. As of this writing, there are three bass cabinets stacked stage right, and two stage left. "I don't know why, but one of the bottoms has ended up in the cellar," Wertheimer explains. (The original JBL cones have been replaced with Electro-Voice drivers.)

Low-mids consist of six horn-loaded loudspeakers, again, of the "home-made" variety, each housing a single 12-inch driver. These are stacked, also turned sideways and mounted at the ceiling in the center of the room.

And, oh, take me back! Horn/driver combos flying in all of their geeky glory handle both mid-highs and highs. Mid-high and high sections, separate entities, both offer JBL radial horns, with Community M-200 drivers on mids and RCF drivers on highs.

The house system runs in mono, but is tweaked out with seven channels of a dbx Driverack 480 for crossover and other loudspeaker processing. The amplification package driving this rig are Crown CE-1000 and vintage DC-300A (anyone still have one of these?), along with Crest V-900 and three hard to identify single-space amps. One looks like a QSC MX Series, and the other two seem to be Haflers.

The venue is having trouble upgrading the power amps because



A look at the loudspeaker package - why move away from a good thing, especially when it's customized with graffiti?

the shallow depth of their "closet home" limits what will fit inside.

TWEAK THE MONO

Four of the eight auxiliaries on the Soundcraft K2 house console send

mixes to a collection of well-known workhorse effects units - you'll find a Yamaha REV-7 and SPX-90 along with a Lexicon PCM-80 and a DeltaLab Effectron. A Klark-Teknik DN-300 tweaks the mono house mix.

Using a common rock club practice, the console inputs are set up festival style to make for smooth set changes.

Dynamics processing is inserted semi-permanently into the inputs or subgroups in a logical fashion. A Behringer Intelligate and an Alesis 3630 are strapped together and inserted into channels one and two for kick and snare.

The next four console inputs each have an insert channel of a Behringer Multigate. Other dynamics processing includes a dbx 166XL for vocals, dbx 166A on bass and an original dbx 163 (without the "A" or "X" designation) squeezing the guitars.

For a small fee, the club will record a band's set on CD, DAT, cassette and even VHS videotape. The eight subgroups of the K2 house console are sent to a Mackie 1604 compact console, along with a feed from a pair of room mics. The 1604 is used to both mix the tracks and distribute them to the various recording decks.

Microphone selection is spartan. "For vocals, the SM58 is what works in this room," definitively states Wertheimer. He ought to know since he mans the system most evenings!

More Shure is applied, with SM57s on most everything else on stage. There are a couple of mic cables taped together for bass guitar sends, one being connected to a DI (direct box) and the other to an Audio-Technica ATM25 dynam-



Vintage amplifiers and processing to drive "street rock."

ic. The ubiquitous AKG D 112 dynamic is used on kick drum.

Monitors are also handled via the K2 at front-of-house, providing a total of four mixes: stage right, upstage center, stage left and drum monitor. It's all very straightforward. The mixes route from the corresponding console auxiliary into an Ashly equalizer, and then on to the amp closet.

The bi-amped sidefills are huge, dual-12-inch-loaded cabinets topped by more 90-degree radial horns. Drumfill comes from an old EV SR Series box, and downstage center monitor is covered by a single RCF powered loudspeaker mounted high overhead.

As I conclude my tour, my first thought is that kudos must go to the house team, especially on those nights when the entire production staff is one person who does everything. And in particular, a big shout-out to Josh Wertheimer, who works magic with a pile of what some would call worn-out and out-dated gear.

It's not always about the latest and greatest equipment. It's about the people using it, the people who figure out what's good enough to get the job done and then go about doing it. Even in a world-famous punk-rock tourist attraction. ■

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