

The city as artform (1)

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In the first of four special reports on New York and the arts, **Richard Ings** finds rock music haunting the cityscape in East Village.

I am standing with my son Joe and a guy with a pushbike from New Jersey who was at Woodstock in '69 and we're on Avenue B in the summer of 2001 in New York City. We're listening as Bobby Pinn points out the house where jazz legend Charlie Parker grew up. A couple of doors along from that elegant townhouse is The Christadora House, a high-rise where Iggy Pop had an apartment until very recently. According to Bobby, Iggy could often be seen striding through Tompkins Square Park, behind us. This park, now dappled with sunshine and full of people strolling or chatting idly under the trees, was once notorious, the site of a makeshift city of homeless people. That's all been swept away and it was here 15 years ago that they invented Wigstock, an ever-expanding and joyous celebration of dressing up in drag. That, too, has moved on, to the Chelsea Piers, a bigger site on the West side of Manhattan. The places might remain, if you're lucky, but the times are still, as someone once sang, a'changing.

Once the owner of Double Deuce, a punk rock record label, and still a bleached-haired record company employee, Bobby Pinn has seen a few times change, too. He and his companion, Ginger Ail, a part-time actor, have been busy charting the various musical histories of Greenwich Village for the benefit of paying visitors such as us. Today, their first Rock Junket of the day, no one else has turned up but the tour goes ahead anyway. We kick off on the south-west corner of East 9th street and Third, where Joey Ramone used to live until his recent and untimely demise. The city is now thinking of renaming the section of the street between Third and Fourth Avenues Joey Ramone Way.

As we walk through East Village, we slip through time shifts. In St Marks Place, Bobby waves over at a large blue building. It's currently unoccupied and looks ripe for redevelopment. Back in 1966, this was where Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, featuring the Velvet Underground, metamorphosed into The Balloon Farm and then again into the infamous Electric Circus, which attracted seminal ensembles like The Doors. Acid flowed like the music, and people tripped out to light shows, all for a few dollars entrance fee. The mirror mosaic ceilings are apparently still intact.

Later in the tour, we turn a corner and there is the cover of Led Zeppelin's Physical Graffiti album in bricks and mortar. Another corner and we're staring at the Emigrant Savings Bank that fronts what was once the legendary rock venue, the Fillmore East, one of the seemingly endless places that the Grateful Dead appeared at in New York (they played Tompkins Square Park and the Electric Circus, too). Concerts would regularly go on until three or four in the morning. A couple of hours later our pop pilgrimage ends, appropriately enough, at CBGBs.

Begun as a venue for 'Country, Bluegrass & Blues'



Street corner in the Village

(hence the acronym), the club came to epitomise the thriving alternative rock scene of the 1970s and 1980s. This was despite an inauspicious start, when the owner was persuaded to let an unknown band called Television play on a Sunday, the one night the place used to be closed. The gig was disastrous and even fewer people turned up when another new band, The Ramones, came the following week to whip up support. The rest, as they say, is history.

Touchingly, in a city that regularly recycles its buildings and spaces, CBGBs has not only survived as a rock venue but seems to be sporting the same awning that it did when Debbie Harry and Joey Ramone and Tom Verlaine were photographed outside the club, back when they were just getting famous. It's the kind of detail that excites Bobby and Ginger. Like the Gem Spa kiosk on the corner of St Marks and Second Avenue, which was once the best place to buy European papers and alternative magazines. Bobby pulls out a photograph taken of the New York Dolls for their first album. Behind them is the same store we can see now, down to the lettered advertisements. The Dolls have long since entered history, of course, as progenitors of punk, but some trace is left in the photograph of their passing through this city of rock dreams, and making it visible.

■ You can visit Bobby and Ginger's website at www.rockjunket.com

Next week, American pie - painting the dream

Richard Ings is a freelance writer, editor and researcher, splitting his time between (income generating) work in the arts and (head stretching) postgraduate research on photography in Harlem. He also edits the national youth arts magazine, Ninety-Five Per Cent

Simon Tait is away.

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