

# Avant-Garde Music Loses a Lower Manhattan Home

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The New York music scene can usually absorb the loss of one club or another without too much difficulty. If one shuts down, another will open pretty soon.

But when the Lower East Side club Tonic closes after a performance by John Zorn on April 13, it will be an especially hard blow. For nine years, this tiny room on Norfolk Street, in the former home of the Kedem kosher winery, has been the focal point of the downtown avant-garde scene, with an eclectic booking policy bridging jazz, noise-rock, folk and all sorts of unclassifiable styles.

“Tonic was the last bastion in Manhattan of live, creative music,” said Steven Bernstein, a trumpeter whose bands Sex Mob and the Millennial Territory Orchestra have been fixtures there.

As gentrification has spread through the Lower East Side, Tonic has felt the pinch. Gleaming new apartment high-rises have gone up on either side of the club, and recent raids by the authorities closed its downstairs bar, cutting off a critical source of revenue.

“We just can’t make enough money there,” said Melissa Caruso-Scott, one of the owners. “We’re just looking to break even, and once it became clear that we couldn’t do that, it became obvious that we had to put an end to it.”

Rent was about \$10,000 a month but the club has not been able to pay it for months, she said.

Tonic’s story is familiar. Last fall CBGB shut down after a longstanding dispute with its landlord, and tomorrow Sin-é, three blocks east of Tonic on Attorney Street and faced with similar real estate woes, will have its last concert.

When it opened in March 1998, Tonic quickly became a favorite of musicians and a prestigious standout on any tour itinerary.

Among the acts who have played there over the years are Cat Power, Sonic Youth, [Yoko Ono](#), Cecil Taylor, Dave Douglas, Norah Jones and the band Medeski Martin & Wood.

“It was always just the most comfortable, most artist-centric venue that we played,” said John Colpitts, a.k.a. Kid Millions, the drummer of the Brooklyn band Oneida, which played Tonic last Saturday.

Tonic will continue to present concerts elsewhere, including the Abrons Arts Center on Grand Street. And experimental music has other homes, including several new spots in Brooklyn as well as the Stone, an even tinier room on Avenue C and Second Street that Mr. Zorn opened two years ago.

But the slow disappearance of such clubs in Lower Manhattan has not been lost on Mr. Bernstein.

“My band closes some of the biggest festivals in Europe,” he said. “Meanwhile there’s only one club I can play in New York and it’s about to close.”