

# MUSIC; Requiem for a Club: Saxophone and Sighs

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There was plenty of exuberant noise at Tonic on Friday night: shrieking horns, fuzzed-out guitars, the jackhammer thump of a bass drum. It could almost have passed for a typical night at the club: two sets of improvisation organized by the saxophonist John Zorn and an installment of the Bunker, a techno party hosted by Bryan Kasenic, aka DJ Spinoza.

But Friday was the final night at Tonic, a hub and hangout for avant-garde musicians, a constituency with few reliable resources. For them the club's eviction, because of rent arrears, has hit hard. "It's a disaster," said Stephanie Stone, a concertgoer who has frequented Tonic since Mr. Zorn's first event there nine years ago, a few months after the club opened.

Back then Tonic was an outpost, situated on a stretch of Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side that might charitably have been described as rugged and obscure. Formerly a kosher winery, the space had attracted the attention of Melissa Caruso and John Scott, proprietors of Alt Coffee, a cyber cafe on Avenue A. Together with the accordionist Ted Reichman they had been presenting experimental music at Alt Coffee regularly. Tonic was an entrepreneurial expansion, with costs cheap enough to support the risk.

Now high-rise condominiums tower over the space on either side, an apt illustration of the squeeze of gentrification. In some respects it is surprising that Tonic survived as long as it did. Facing similar rent pressures, numerous clubs have shut down in recent months, notably CBGB and Sin-é. (Alt Coffee closed last week too.)

"Our rent has doubled since we opened, and business has not doubled," said Ms. Caruso, who is now married to Mr. Scott. "We've always struggled in that building," she said. "Whether it's flooding or a complete disaster with our plumbing system, it just seems that we're hit with something every couple of years that's a huge expense." In the most recent setback Subtonic, the club's basement lounge, was shut down by the city for permit violations.

It was fitting that Mr. Zorn presided over Tonic's swan song: his initial two-month stretch of programming in 1998 was what put the club on the map. His two sets on Friday night were a succession of ad hoc instrumental lineups. Some -- like a trio consisting of the saxophonist Marty Ehrlich, the pianist Anthony Coleman and the drummer Gerry Hemingway -- delivered the glorious dissonance of top-grade free jazz.

Other performances were less idiomatic, but had a common denominator of tonal friction and dynamic variation. Among the dozens of artists in rotation were the keyboardist Annie Gosfield, the pianists Sylvie Courvoisier and Vijay Iyer, the clarinetists Ned Rothenberg and Chris Speed, and the guitarists Elliot Sharp and Marc Ribot. All of them found a home in Tonic, to one degree or another, over the years.

Of course so have many artists outside the orbit of improvised music. "You would be able to go to three different shows in a week and have three completely different musical experiences," said Daniel Blumin, the former host of a popular WNYC radio show, who was standing outside the club with Drew Daniel of the experimental electronic duo Matmos.

Mr. Daniel, who has performed at Tonic, agreed. "There would be pin-drop-silent things that were very sparse, and then raucous hellish stuff," he said. "The only thing they really had in common was a commitment to a kind of integrity."

Along with Mr. Blumin, Mr. Daniel was waiting for DJ Spinoza's shift, which stretched well into the morning hours. (On Friday the Bunker will set up shop in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, at the Luna Lounge, a club that was priced out of the Lower East Side two years ago.)

The club's increasing proportion of indie-rock and pop shows had alienated some musicians in recent years. "For the immediate community of players that I work with," Mr. Reichman said on Friday afternoon, "this loss is reflecting a change that happened a while ago." Yet Mr. Reichman was quick to credit Tonic with being the only centralized haven for the avant-garde jazz and improvised-music crowd.

"When the Knitting Factory went corporate rock, Tonic filled the void," Mr. Speed said between Friday's two sets. There are other sympathetic places in the city, he added, like Barbès and Issue Project Room in Brooklyn and the Stone in Manhattan, a nonprofit space opened by Mr. Zorn in 2005. But none have Tonic's size (capacity 180) or the sociable environment sustained by Mr. Scott and Ms. Caruso, who took in Friday's festivities with their one-month-old baby, Addison, in tow.

The indignation surrounding the club's closure was best illustrated by the demonstration held on Saturday at Tonic by an activist group called Take It to the Bridge, led in part by Mr. Ribot, the guitarist. Lasting from 11 a.m. till shortly before 5 p.m., it culminated in two brief arrests.

In an interview that morning Mr. Ribot said the purpose of the demonstration was not to save Tonic, but to expose the need for city financing for experimental music. "New music serves as research and development for a much larger music scene," he said. "It has a cultural and economic weight beyond its immediate audience."

Moments later Mr. Ribot was playing a solo acoustic rendition of "Cold, Cold Heart," as a worker on a ladder beside him wrestled with one of the club's hanging speakers. During the afternoon a number of musicians took the stage, including Mr. Rothenberg, the pianist Matthew Shipp and the conductor Butch Morris. Patricia Nicholson, the founder of the Vision Festival, which will present several of Tonic's previously scheduled shows this week in a neighborhood gallery (information at [visionfestival.org](http://visionfestival.org)), served as a de facto stage manager.

By 4:30 most of the club's equipment had been carted out, and the room was empty of patrons. A smattering of police officers stood watch as Mr. Ribot played "The Nearness of You" (a wry dedication to the officers, perhaps).

Then there was an announcement that any lingerers would be guilty of trespassing. "I wouldn't say that we want to get arrested, but we will not leave," Mr. Ribot replied. Along with Rebecca Moore, another Take It to the Bridge organizer, he was handcuffed and led outside to a squad car. Across the street a gathering of supporters let out a cheer.