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Closing of Tonic strikes sour note

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April 18, 2007

The shuttering of the live avant-garde music hall Tonic in the Lower East Side last week was not only a blow to local musicians, but also emblematic of the city's willingness to trade culture for construction cash, a group of activists charged Wednesday.

"Vienna and Paris have real estate developers as well, but don't chop down their opera houses," musician Marc Ribot said. "Those cities protect their cultural contributions to the rest of the world. The question is, why don't we do that here?"

Ribot and another musician were arrested at a demonstration last Saturday at the 9-year-old Tonic on Norfolk Street when they refused to stop playing and vacate the stage. The club had officially closed the night before, and workers were dismantling the stage as Ribot played.

A letter from the club's owners on its Web site explains: "We simply can no longer afford the rent and all of the other costs associated with doing business on the Lower East Side."

Demonstrators at City Hall Wednesday were joined by Councilman Alan Gerson (D-Manhattan), who said he would propose a new tax break to help music venues survive the peril of skyrocketing rent.

"This is not just about music," Gerson said. "This is about whether New York will remain the cultural capital of the world. It's time to sound a note of crisis."

Tonic's closing follows that of nearby clubs CBGB and Sin-é, both driven out by high rents.

Musician Steve Swell said he was touring with his band Slammin' the Infinite when a local stage manager in Grand Rapids, Mich., began complaining about the loss of Tonic.

"There is a whole community of people around the world who are into this music and like to stay in touch with New York City," Swell said at the protest. "They were very sad to hear about the fate of Tonic."