



Fly Life

## Dead Again

Tonic's demise triggers the 15,000th or so 'New York City club life is dying' frenzy

by **Tricia Romano**

April 9th, 2007 4:02 PM

The end is nigh. Again.

How many times have I written this column? A club moves in and makes a neighborhood exciting, bringing new residents to the area. The new residents get richer, tonier. They buy condos and get mad that the club that introduced them to the area in the first place even exists. They cause a commotion, and call 311 over and over. The club gets harassed out of business. Rinse, wash, repeat. You may have already heard, but Tonic, the little grimy experimental venue on Norfolk Street, is closing. The date is apt: Friday the 13th. The finale is, too: Headlining will be **John Zorn**, a musician whose legacy is intertwined with the venue's origins. After Zorn, Bunker, Bryan Kasenic's techno fest, will be the last thing to haunt Tonic's halls.

I went last Friday to say my own goodbye. I hadn't been in a while. It was more decrepit than I remembered—a sign on the glass door read, "Vacate: Do not enter" in red, alarmist letters. That was for the basement area, known to most as Subtonic, which had been shuttered a few months ago when **Matthew Dear** played. As for Tonic itself, the bathrooms were easily among the most disgusting I've seen recently. Downstairs, they didn't have doors on the stalls; upstairs, there were only two restrooms, and only one was working. The bloom was long off the rose.

Outside, in the balmy spring night, the techno diehards had a smoke. Looming overhead next door is a towering condo building; its size and sheer newness make it seem menacing. Already, Kasenic says, there are complaints from what few neighbors there are about the noise, the cigarette butts, the noise.

I am so tired of writing this column.

While it's easy to chalk this up to a simple David-and-Goliath real estate battle, the reality is murkier. The two owners, **Melissa Caruso Scott** and her husband **John Scott**, were months behind in paying their rent, and now owe more than \$10,000. They are being evicted. "It's always been a struggle for us to make rent," Melissa says. "For the most part, we're just aiming to break even."

It turns out the basement, which hosted relatively big moneymaking parties like Bunker, had been closed by the city because the Scotts lacked the simplest of paperwork—a certificate of occupancy and a public-assembly permit, both required for any space. That they'd gone so long without getting busted was a gift. That it wasn't a licensed cabaret and had been operating as one for several years without incurring violations was like winning the lottery.

When Tonic first opened nine years ago, it was the only thing going on the block. Its rent was low enough that the Scotts didn't have to fret about how they would make it. They were only hosting music once a week—it was set up like a café, with tables and chairs, and books and zines for sale. Soon,

Zorn came in and booked two months of music, and a venue focused on avant-garde and experimental music was born.

But experimental music is a hard sell—just ask many of the artists who've left the city to make a living overseas. And when your average cover is \$10, well, that's a lot of \$10 covers to make the rent. "At some shows, we'd be lucky if even half the people bought a drink," says Melissa.

You could argue that supply outstrips demand in this case, but Scott says it's not the demand that's changed, just the rent. Back then, when **Medeski Martin and Wood** graced the stage or there was a **Guided by Voices** karaoke contest, it was enough. Now, "with the kind of music we present, it's hard to make the amount of money they want from the space," says Melissa. And in the face of a changing cultural climate, Tonic stayed fixed to its roots.

Tonic almost went under two and a half years ago when the Scotts needed to upgrade the sewer system but couldn't afford it. A series of benefits bailed them out. But even if they could have afforded their rent, Kasenic thinks that the building next door would have had final say anyway. "If you have one crazy neighbor raising hell for a venue, it's almost enough to shut it down," he says, noting the demise of Halcyon, another spot where he used to promote shows.

Tonic joins Sin-é, another beloved downtown music space, in the cemetery for the city's recently dead clubs. Looking ahead, the Scotts are launching a Tonic Presents series at the Abrons Arts Center on Grand Street, starting April 14, but the Tonic we know and love will soon be gone.

If it's sad for music fans, it's worse for musicians. **Rebecca Moore**, a longtime downtown resident and musician, wrote an impassioned e-mail to me: "With Tonic's closure, I am officially losing one of the last few spaces I can gig at in New York City that is a good venue for my kind of music. These spaces are closing because wealth is forcing them out with unreasonable rents or, in the case of CB's, a mayor is not intervening to help save these places that are major havens for entire communities."

Carrying Tonic's torch is the Stone—a nonprofit performance venue, barely bigger than a living room—on Avenue C. As Kasenic sees it, "Art should somehow be able to exist for reasons other than commerce."

Of course, it seems like we're constantly bemoaning the death of downtown. But New York is a living, breathing organism, something that seems to bother New Yorkers, some of whom move here only to see their NYC dreams slip like sand through their fingers. We're all still hanging on to the city's potent mythology—created by Salinger, *Taxi Driver*, CBGB, Studio 54, and the Mudd Club. These days, the city's sustenance is money, not art. It is a place that draws people who can afford \$500,000 studios and who want a nice \$40 bottle of wine and a steak, not experimental music. It is a reality we all have to face. The end has already come and gone. We're the ones in denial.

**Michael Musto** wrote about the death of downtown in a cover story for this paper—in 1987. "It was about how the mid-'80s downtown club and culture scene had imploded from too much attention and fabulousness," he says. "But I ended on a hopeful note, suggesting clubland will never really die; it will always just go through lulls and then reinvent itself. Sure enough, the club kids were waiting in the wings. Since then, I've tried to hold back in saying anything's dead because it sounds too old-fogeyish."

*Paper* magazine has declared downtown dead over the years, too. They're still here, with new offices in midtown. *The New York Times* ran the headline "Is Downtown Dead?" in 1997. I co-edited a special *Voice* section called "Superclubs Die—Let a Thousand Parties Bloom" in 2001. And just a few weeks ago, I wrote about the end of another era when the Roxy shut down. It's always over. It was always better back in the day. You darn kids don't know what you're missing. Someday in 2012, there will be an article about the death of downtown, bemoaning the loss of that great music venue, Pianos. How we barely knew ye.