

MOMMY WAS A PUNK ROCKER

—a mild-mannered middle-aged mom who used to drive a minivan—once played CBGB as the drummer for a punk band

by Robin Eileen Bernstein | Saturday, December 24, 2016

My boyfriend and I were waiting for our flight out of Newark, killing time in the food court with lukewarm pizza, when a few feet away something caught my eye. It was a white awning with a familiar logo comprising four bold red letters: CBGB.

Yes, *that* CBGB. I stopped eating and thought, "Huh?"

CBGB was the renowned club on the Bowery that dominated the punk rock scene in the '70s and '80s, back when a token bought you a graffiti-covered subway ride and getting mugged was a New York right of passage. That CBGB was where legends like the Talking Heads, the Ramones and Blondie cut their teeth. A decade ago, that CBGB shuttered its doors, as much a victim of gentrification as triple-X theaters in Times Square and meatpackers in the meatpacking district.

And now, like some acid-fueled flashback, that CBGB was being reincarnated as an overpriced family restaurant in Terminal C of Newark Airport.

I glanced at the travelers nearby. More than a few looked north of 50, as I am. Most were tapping away at their phones, oblivious to the travesty in front of them. Didn't they see the irony?

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If we're talking 1970s pop culture, I'm more Rhoda Morgenstern than Joey Ramone. So I'd expect more than a few raised eyebrows if I shared that I—a mild-mannered middle-aged mom who used to drive a minivan—once played CBGB as the drummer for a punk band called The Skitzocrats.

I took up drums at 16, after a yearlong battle with my mom and dad, who insisted, "Girls don't play drums!" As far as I knew, they were right. I couldn't name one female drummer, because there weren't many. Karen Carpenter was one of the few with any name recognition and most knew her only as a singer.

When I played my CBGB gig at 21, the ink on my college diploma barely dry, I was living back home with my parents in Rockaway Beach, a 10-mile spit of sand that dangles like a hangnail off Queens into the Atlantic. It was the same not-hard, not-far-to-reach place the Ramones wanted to hitch a ride to.

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The Skitzocrats was a catchy name for a punk band but a lousy fit for me as a drummer. Keeping time to punk made my arms cramp up. Bluegrass, country and bluesy rock were more my speed. (Oddly enough, CBGB stands for "country bluegrass blues," which was what Hilly Kristal had in mind when he founded the club in 1973. When punk instead became its mainstay, he added OMFUG—"Other Music for Uplifting Gourmandizers"—to the name.) But a friend's chance encounter while waiting on line for the midnight show of "Eraserhead" opened a door. She called me the next day with big news. "I overheard these two guys behind me say how cool it would be to have a girl drummer in their band!"

I was leaning against the Formica counter in my kitchen, the pink receiver cradled between my ear and shoulder. The tangled cord—long enough to wrap around the house—draped across the linoleum floor.

"But they didn't know any girl drummers," she continued. "So I turned around and said 'I do!'" A week later, after an audition in a wood-paneled basement on Long Island, I was officially a member of The Skitzocrats, which perhaps makes me the first female drummer ever hired thanks to punk rock affirmative action.

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There was no pay for our 45-minute CBGB set. But it wasn't about money. It was about playing the same fabled stage as those impossibly cool bands, as if their fame would mingle with the cigarette smoke and drift down from the spotlights, coating us with pixie dust.

My recollection is spotty but I can confirm that pixie dust was in short supply. The Bowery then was New York's skid row, a low-rent district for the derelict, the drunk and the otherwise marginalized. A ragtag mirror of its neighborhood, CBGB was a dive. Long, dark and narrow, its gritty walls were plastered with the remains of flyers, graffiti and sticky residue the origins of which I'd rather not know.

The stage, a couple of feet off the floor, was in back. And oh, the bathroom! Everything you've heard about the infamous bathroom is true. Lining the seat with toilet paper was pointless; what you needed was industrial-strength latex. (Actually, what you needed was to hold it in until you got home.)

The climax of our set would come at the end, when we'd give the middle finger to capitalist America by taking a cue from The Who. This was 1980 and we were fresh off a national oil crisis, so our band's brand of anarchy would have us obliterate an Exxon sign onstage. For the record, this was not my idea.

Finding one was out of the question. It's not like we could do an eBay search for "used gas station signage." Maybe we could build a reasonable facsimile out of plywood? Lodged in my memory of that night is the pathetic image of a roughly 4'x5' length of white poster board, hand-lettered with the word "EXXON" in thick black marker.

As we neared the end of our set, the lead singer—a tall lanky guy about my age with a shock of brown hair—grabbed the sign, such as it was, and held it up. As I recall, he lifted his chin and on cue, I hit the ride and crash cymbals as he screamed and rammed it into the stage. The letter "E" bent backwards. We did this three more times until it said "XXON," then "XXO" and finally just a lonely "XO"—as if we were signing off with a hug and a kiss. My arms were about to seize up. I put down my sticks and the gig, blessedly, was over.

The Talking Heads tune, "Life During Wartime," with its post-apocalyptic lyrics about a forgotten CGBG, was arguably inspired by the cesspool that was 1970s New York. So it's ironic that the end for CBGB wasn't the city's spiral toward dystopia but a "new wave" of prosperity that turned the bad old Bowery into a Mecca for hipsters, high-priced

condos and Whole Foods. Even my down-at-the-heels hometown of Rockaway is morphing into an alternative Hamptons West. Patti Smith, who played CBGB's final show in 2006, moved there not long ago.

So should I be upset that a faux CBGB offers weary air travelers a seared togarashi tuna appetizer with wakame seaweed salad for \$16? Or that its former home on the Bowery now sports a black awning with white letters touting John Varvatos, a men's luxury fashion designer? I guess not. Drummers get to keep time, not stop it. That's a good thing.

As for that iconic white awning with the red letters—the real one, that is—it's now in Cleveland, in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. Which is exactly where it belongs. An artifact. Safe from the elements. Untouched by time.

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8 COMMENTS



Ann Whitcher-Gentzke · Employed as senior editor/At Buffalo magazine editor at University at Buffalo
Congratulations, Robin! You write evocatively with rich word play and enviable energy. Though I know nothing of punk now or then, I was pulled into the world you describe.

Like · Reply · 1 · Dec 27, 2016 5:34pm



Robin Bernstein
Thanks, Ann, for your kind comment--and it's especially meaningful coming from a fellow writer!

Like · Reply · Dec 27, 2016 6:22pm



Emily Armstrong · Owner / Partner at GoNightclubbing
Love your piece, from one punk mom to another. (gonightclubbing.com)

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Robin Bernstein
Thanks, Emily! I checked out your website and...wow! You guys really saw it all! So cool. Will you be exhibiting anywhere in NYC anytime soon?

Like · Reply · Dec 28, 2016 12:02am



Ellen Licht Tepper · Works at Tepper Cruises and Travel

Great article Robin!!! (Except that bayswater was not really downtrodden)

Like · Reply · 1 · Dec 27, 2016 10:55pm · Edited



Robin Bernstein

Thanks, Ellen!

Like · Reply · Dec 28, 2016 12:09am



Christine Dalton · Biller manager pee queen at PROS Medical

Well done! From one north of 50 to another. I was more Ramones then Rhoda, but I went to high school in Rockaway. Small world. Spent many a night (and sometimes day)! In CBGB back in the day. This mom of two (23 and 17) year old kids was and is a punk rocker too!!

Like · Reply · 1 · Dec 29, 2016 9:37pm



Robin Bernstein

Thanks, Christine!

Like · Reply · Dec 30, 2016 9:02am

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