Folk Music Scene Still Thrives At One Of New York City's Best Preserved Venues

BY JASON HOLLANDER

In a subterranean corner of St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia's center for spiritual conversation, lies one of New York City's oldest and most revered acoustic-music venues. It's hard to believe many on campus don't even know it exists.

A haven for those seeking a break from the techno-laden landscape of modern New York, the 1960s folk-music scene comes alive inside the Postcrypt Coffeehouse every Friday and Saturday night, much like it has for almost four decades. Dozens of candles are lit. Tables and chairs—many used since opening night—are arranged in a semi-circle around the original stage: a small, rectangular wood platform. Coffee and tea are brewed; muddled cider is prepared; beer and soda are chilled, and popcorn is popped.

The Postcrypt attracts an audience that spans generations, including—but not limited to—students, staff and faculty. Performers have said that playing there can be a "religious experience." Some say listening to music in the space is "transcendental.

Powerful words for such a small room, though most agree that the magic of the "Crypt" comes from its tiny size. After

38 years, the space is still a magnet for some of the area's best folk talent, and a destination for those who want a unique music and social experience.

Opened in 1964 by Reverend John Gannon, assistant University chaplain at the time, the space was a dusty storage room in the chapel's basement that he and co-worker Dorothy Sutherland worked to clean out in an effort to encourage students to frequent St. Paul's more often.

They modeled it after Greenwich Village coffeehouses, like "Cafe au Lait" which had gained such popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s with headliners like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. The stone walled "crypt," reached by descending the winding brick stairways on either side of the chapel's front entrance, quickly became known both on and off campus.

A mosaic bar in the corner of the room was designed and handmade by Janke. The bar, held in place by large paintbrushes inserted into a shelving bracket to act as support rods, is a genuine example of bohemian patchwork. Behind it, colorful, handwritten signs advertise refreshments for sale—proceeds from them are the main source of financial support for the coffeehouse—and photos of former musicians who have played the room serve as wallpaper.

The deep gray walls of stone and two giant wrought-iron chandeliers create a medieval atmosphere in the snug chamber where walking space is minimal. Audience members, balled in candlelight, sit no further than fifteen feet from performers.

Prominent artists have been drawn in by the intimacy. David Bromberg played here while he was a College student in the late 1960s. Suzanne Vega performed while attending Barnard in the early 1980s.

The stage has also hosted the likes of Ani DiFranco, Lisa Loeb, Jeff Buckley, Shawn Colvin, Martin Sexton and Jerry Jeff Walker.

Rebecca Josephson, CC'03, who voluntarily co-manages the space with Adrienne Baranowicz, CC'03, is in charge of booking musicians while Baranowicz handles most administrative responsibilities. Josephson says she receives about 100 CDs a month from those hoping for the chance to play the venue, mostly from artists in the tri-state area. Musical styles of those selected typically fall under traditional folk, but also include bluegrass, country, jazz and gospel. There are also the occasional Irish folk groups or California "jig-pie" drummers who make the bill.

The room's stone walls carry sound better than most clubs, making any seat in the house a good one. Josephson notes though that many singers haven't experienced the challenge of performing without a microphone, as is the rule at the Postcrypt. Because of this, she makes sure to bring in the "You kind of feel like you're tip-toeing through history down here," says Baranowicz.

"You don't want to do anything to change it."

One can only imagine the widespread disappointment if Postcrypt had moved to a new venue, a proposal made just last fall.

After a water main break flooded the basement in St. Paul's, Josephson and Baranowicz were encouraged by the administration to find a larger, more functional location for performances. Some suggestions included moving the shows to more central places like John Jay or Lerner Hall. Neither manager considered the option for a minute.

"We told them we weren't leaving," says Baranowicz. "[The Postcrypt] does not exist if it's not in this space."

Instead, compromises were made. Crowd capacity for shows has been reduced from about 50 to 30, depleting the income from performances. This also results in volunteers sometimes having to turn people away before shows. In both managers' opinion, the sacrifices were well worth remaining in the historic space.

"It's like a time-warps being down here," says Josephson. "The experience really has a lasting effect on people."

After 38 years, the performers and faithful folk audiences seem to be having a lasting effect on the Postcrypt as well.

The Postcrypt Coffeehouse is open Friday and Saturday from approximately 9 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. during the academic year. For information on performance schedules, go to: www.columbia.edu/cu/postcrypt/coffeehouse.

“You kind of feel like you’re tip-toeing through history down here,”

—Co-Manager Adrienne Baranowicz, CC'03

best artists she can find.

"You need to have an incredibly strong voice to sing in this place," she says. "You have to be incredibly talented."

Though Josephson does give some preference to Columbia's who want to perform, she says that much care is put into selecting talent. Many past performers request to do a set when they are in town.

Several musicians now living in other countries even express the desire to play Postcrypt when they are touring the States.

Upon their return, most who

used to attend or play shows in the early days of the coffeehouse say things have remained exactly as they remember.

"We told them we weren't leaving," says Baranowicz. "[The Postcrypt] does not exist if it's not in this space."

Instead, compromises were made. Crowd capacity for shows has been reduced from about 50 to 30, depleting the income from performances. This also results in volunteers sometimes having to turn people away before shows. In both managers' opinion, the sacrifices were well worth remaining in the historic space.

"It's like a time-warps being down here," says Josephson. "The experience really has a lasting effect on people."

After 38 years, the performers and faithful folk audiences seem to be having a lasting effect on the Postcrypt as well.

The Postcrypt Coffeehouse is open Friday and Saturday from approximately 9 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. during the academic year. For information on performance schedules, go to: www.columbia.edu/cu/postcrypt/coffeehouse.

38 years, the space is still a magnet for some of the area's best folk talent, and a destination for those who want a unique music and social experience.

Opened in 1964 by Reverend John Gannon, assistant University chaplain at the time, the space was a dusty storage room in the chapel's basement that he and co-worker Dorothy Sutherland worked to clean out in an effort to encourage students to frequent St. Paul's more often.

They modeled it after Greenwich Village coffeehouses, like “Cafe au Lait” which had gained such popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s with headliners like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. The stone walled "crypt," reached by descending the winding brick stairways on either side of the chapel’s front entrance, quickly became known both on and off campus.

A mosaic bar in the corner of the room was designed and handmade by Janke. The bar, held in place by large paintbrushes inserted into a shelving bracket to act as support rods, is a genuine example of bohemian patchwork. Behind it, colorful, handwritten signs advertise refreshments for sale—proceeds from them are the main source of financial support for the coffeehouse—and photos of former musicians who have played the room serve as wall paper.

The deep gray walls of stone and two giant wrought-iron chandeliers create a medieval atmosphere in the snug chamber where walking space is minimal. Audience members, balled in candlelight, sit no further than fifteen feet from performers.

Prominent artists have been drawn in by the intimacy. David Bromberg played here while he was a College student in the late 1960s. Suzanne Vega performed while attending Barnard in the early 1980s.

The stage has also hosted the likes of Ani DiFranco, Lisa Loeb, Jeff Buckley, Shawn Colvin, Martin Sexton and Jerry Jeff Walker.

Rebecca Josephson, CC'03, who voluntarily co-manages the space with Adrienne Baranowicz, CC'03, is in charge of booking musicians while Baranowicz handles most administrative responsibilities. Josephson says she receives about 100 CDs a month from those hoping for the chance to play the venue, mostly from artists in the tri-state area. Musical styles of those selected typically fall under traditional folk, but also include bluegrass, country, jazz and gospel. There are also the occasional Irish folk groups or California "jig-pie" drummers who make the bill.

The room's stone walls carry sound better than most clubs, making any seat in the house a good one. Josephson notes though that many singers haven't experienced the challenge of performing without a microphone, as is the rule at the Postcrypt. Because of this, she makes sure to bring in the "You kind of feel like you're tip-toeing through history down here," says Baranowicz.

"You don't want to do anything to change it."

One can only imagine the widespread disappointment if Postcrypt had moved to a new venue, a proposal made just last fall.

After a water main break flooded the basement in St. Paul's, Josephson and Baranowicz were encouraged by the administration to find a larger, more functional location for performances. Some suggestions included moving the shows to more central places like John Jay or Lerner Hall. Neither manager considered the option for a minute.

"We told them we weren't leaving," says Baranowicz. "[The Postcrypt] does not exist if it's not in this space."

Instead, compromises were made. Crowd capacity for shows has been reduced from about 50 to 30, depleting the income from performances. This also results in volunteers sometimes having to turn people away before shows. In both managers' opinion, the sacrifices were well worth remaining in the historic space.

"It's like a time-warps being down here," says Josephson. "The experience really has a lasting effect on people."

After 38 years, the performers and faithful folk audiences seem to be having a lasting effect on the Postcrypt as well.

The Postcrypt Coffeehouse is open Friday and Saturday from approximately 9 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. during the academic year. For information on performance schedules, go to: www.columbia.edu/cu/postcrypt/coffeehouse.