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Daily Mail

INSIDE PUNK ROCK'S HARD CORE IN ITS 1970S HEYDAY: NEVER-SEEN-BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHS SHOW REVELERS AND ARTISTS EARNING THEIR STRIPES AT THE LEGENDARY CBGB-WHERE PATTI SMITH PERFORMED IN A NECK BRACE AMID THE FRENZY OF GRUNGE AND MUSIC

By Regina Graham, May 18, 2018



© Meryl Meisler/Steven Kasher Gallery

Forty years ago, a tiny East Village club became the haven for punk rock music, ultimately altering the course of music history. With walls covered in graffiti, the smell of beer and cigarettes were constant scents lingering inside the CBGB during the 1970s and 80s. Located in what was then a seedy and grungy part of New York City, the venue became the stuff of legend due to the numerous bands that took to the stage.

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Patti Smith, the Ramones, Blondie, The Dead Boys, Television, Alter Ego, Elda Stilleto and more all performed gigs at the club located at 315 Bowery into the wee hours of the morning. CBGB, which stood for Country, Bluegrass and Blues, quickly became known globally as the spot for hardcore punk and was often a stop for up-and-coming bands hoping to make it big. But over the years, gentrification took hold, and the grungy neighborhood - that was once known as New York's 'Skid Row' due to an overwhelmingly large homeless population and where CBGB belonged - transformed into a haven for hipsters.

As a result, the owners of the venue could no longer afford the skyrocketing rent and the beloved club closed its doors for good in 2006. Two years after closing, a pricey John Varvatos men's retail store took its place, angering New Yorkers enough to protest outside of the store for days when it opened.

Now, DailyMail.com has obtained exclusive and never-before-seen images taken inside CBGB during its heyday in the 1970s by acclaimed photographer Meryl Meisler.

'Here was this enigma, the CBGB, with crowds all the time, people hanging outside all the time,' said Meisler, who is a New York native. 'The place itself, you can almost remember the smell - the smell of beer and whatnot - in the room, and it was very interesting. I photographed some of the people whether they were performers or friends of the performers hanging out in the downstairs, going towards the restrooms or the preparations areas.'

'The graffiti was awesome on the walls, because you can see the names of the band members - the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, Jimmy Page, Patti Smith Group and Miriam + Joey with hearts around each other. This was a place that helped launch their careers and made them so well known.'

Of the captivating black and white photo collection, the 66-year-old shared that the images she captured of Smith at the venue are some of her favorite.

'I went purposely to see her and I also went purposely to see The Dead Boys, because they were somewhat well known. So I purposely went to go see those groups because it was a thrill - and so here I was, right in front of her,' Meisler recalled.

'I liked photography; I'm not usually someone who takes photos of people performing though, but I couldn't resist snapping photos of Patti Smith because, you know, here she was literally singing 'Gloria'. And she had a neck brace on because she had hurt her neck.'

'She's a performer who didn't burn out and has always been true to who she is.'

Meisler, who captured hundreds of photos during the disco scene, noted that the clothing style that people wore to the CBGB is still being sported now, decades later.

'Looking in retrospect, when you look at the style from back then, I mean that is still a style of fashion,' she stated. 'It's still in style and it was a very, very East Village-Bowery look. I mean you heard about the SoHo look in London, but this is very different.'

'And the customers, the crowds and the performers really had a distinctive style of looking and the coolness.'

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She added that the scene at the iconic club wasn't a big range of ages like the disco clubs and that it also wasn't expensive to get in.

'I fit right in and everyone was welcome,' she noted. 'If you look at the photos, you see people smoking but people can't do that anymore in restaurants or bars.'

Meisler also captured images of the late Stiv Bators, who was one of the leaders of The Lost Boys. She said his death in the 1990s was truly 'a loss to music and culture.'

'He is really respected by many generations of music lovers. These (performers) are people who really lived how they wanted to live and share how they wanted to share in their time,' Meisler stated.

'It's pretty impressive and I also want to say that it was very impressive the long lasting styles.'

The thrilling photos Meisler captured at the CBGB are set to go on display on May 20 at The Living Gallery Outpost as part of the Enthral & Squalor: Photographing Downtown 1977-1987 exhibit.

The pop-up exhibition part of Lower East Side History Month aims to 'hark back to a time when living and (life) was cheap and legends were born' according to a press release from the gallery.

Meisler is one of four photographers who will be featured as part of the exhibit thanks to her being a 'New York original who captured the essence of a time indelibly etched in the City's consciousness.'

Her images of the iconic bar show a glimpse into how the CBGB played a critical role into music history.

'It's never been cheap to be in a place like New York City and the owners of the CBGB kept it going for a really, really long time and I think that's impressive,' Meisler shared.

'It shaped our culture in a lot of ways. I mean, this tiny club had a long-lasting effect on the early 21st century, and I am glad that those people who were there said yes when I asked if I could photograph them.'

Meisler is also the author of two books, A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick and Purgatory & Paradise: Sassy 70s Suburbia & the City, which include photos from Fire Island, Studio 54 and the Lower East Side.