



Rhona Bitner Captures Rock n' Roll Through Photographs

Leslie Velez |

January 28, 2012 | 9:25 a.m. PST

“In the camera, as in the theater, one walks into a black box, and an image appears.”

Photographer Rhona Bitner suggests this chimerical possibility offhand, as if realizing such an abstract notion was as simple as just showing up. For her latest body of photographic work, the CalState University Long Beach exhibition, *Static Noise*, featuring selected images of “every single iconic, mythic, historic venue of American music left standing, with rock and roll as the parentheses and punk as the nucleus,” it is.

Bitner began collecting images of storied clubs, arenas, and churches, and studios, each a Vatican of rock n’ roll history in its own right, in the spring of 2008. What began as a mission to capture New York’s punk rock club CBGB as it prepared to close its doors turned into a 200-venue footslog, with hundreds more now on the docket.

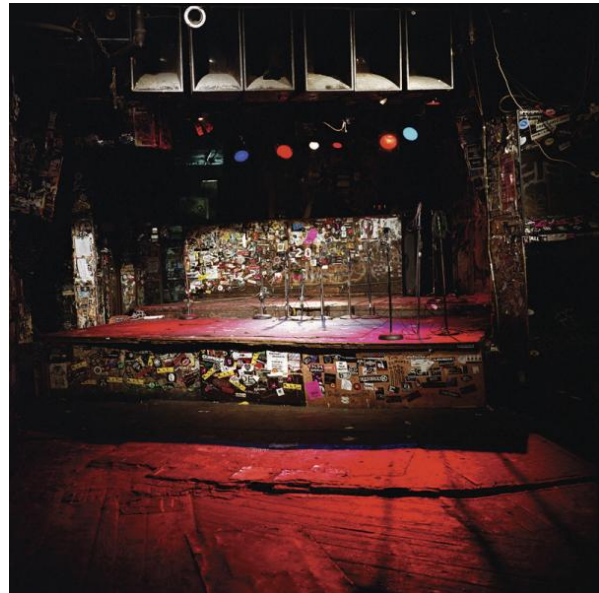
The work, beginning pre-Elvis and ending around 1986 with the Ramones (“the protracted end,” Bitner says, “it took them a while.”), reveals the various states of affairs to which these hallowed grounds have been left. Some are gone; some have been refurbished, or repurposed. There is a hodgepodge of architecture. “In a way,” Bitner explains, “it represents what music is now.”

tomb-like shell of the New Roxy Theatre in Clarksdale, Mississippi, was nearly completely reclaimed by Mother Nature’s leafy tendrils; Birmingham’s Tuxedo Junction, once a mainstay on the Chitlin’ Circuit, is shown litter-strewn and barren but for a single hopping cart. The Overton Park Shell in Memphis, Tennessee, the site where Elvis first went for it and staged the first rock and roll concert, has since been replaced by a new shell with LED lighting. Bitner captured the original as the first rainbow panels were coming down. The Grande Ballroom of Detroit, once a home of The Stooges, Frank Zappa, Eric Clapton, and The Who, is now faded and crumbling, even as its supporters vie for landmark status.

Echoes of life resound in Bitner’s rooms. These inner sanctums, all empty, seem to retain the sounds of voices, the motion of dancers; the smells of drum set varnish, 1980s electronics, sweat, and breath. Band members mentally materialize on the bare stages and in the empty chairs; light beams and moves manically from the ceilings. It’s all in the photograph--and it’s all in the viewer’s mind, in the memory what occurred on those hallowed punk grounds. The work isn’t meant to be a documentary or an opportunity to pine for eras gone by, but rather to hold the sound of the music in the image, and to hold onto what’s left.

“It is solely about what these spaces look like the day that I am there,” Bitner explains. “It is not at all about nostalgia—I’m not wishing for a better time or hawking vinyl. It’s about trying to listen to what happened.” And so she bears witness in these venues, showing up and trying to hear what the walls heard, trying to catch whispers of the past.

Static Noise is on view at the University Art Museum at California State University Long Beach from January 27-April 15, 2012. Find visiting information [here](#).



Static Noise brings music history to the present. (Rhona Bitner)

The photographic evidence tells the tale of what brings rock n’ roll and punk to the present, using the memories of her audience as its narrative. The photographs, un-staged and shot on film with only naturally available lighting, frame flashbacks: the

