

Wanted: music fans to back the Triangle's up-and-coming bands

By JENNY LIVINGSTON
Assistant Omnibus Editor

This is a tale of three cities. It could be called the best of times and the worst of times for the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill live music scene. The Triangle, host to three major universities, a semi-major airport and more Ph.D.s than anywhere else in the world, seems to have more bands than it knows what to do with.

It is the best of times because now, more than ever, the three cities are home to some of the best of the newest new music bands around. The Connells, The Accelerators, The Pressure Boys and The Bad Checks are all beginning to enjoy national reputations. And among the lesser-known set are literally hundreds of good, solid music makers.

But even in the face of such a rich supply, it is perhaps the worst of times for area music clubs. Business is falling off.

There's certainly no shortage of clubs. Raleigh has The Brewery and The Fallout Shelter. Chapel Hill has Cat's Cradle and The Cave and Durham has Under the Street. Plus, all three cities have a number of smaller live music clubs. The only problem is that there seems to be more bands playing the clubs than there are fans to fill them.

"There are plenty of venues," said Ed Morgan of Black Park Enterprises, booking agent for The Brewery. "Where the support is lacking is in the audience."

These days every garage on the block booms with the beat of ever-hopefuls practicing their own brand of local rock 'n' roll. Many won't make it past the garage stage, but those who do face a veritable obstacle course in front of them on the road to success.

The first obstacle that faces Triangle bands now, as always, is that elusive first gig. They face the task of convincing a booking agent that even though nobody's ever heard their music, or maybe never even heard of them, they still deserve a chance.

Many booking agents are reluctant to be the first to showcase talent from nowhere. Band-sparking-new

talent. It's the old catch-22: nobody wants to book you if you don't have experience, but you can't get experience if nobody wants to book you.

"It's hard to make those decisions," said Ruth Nix, booking agent for Under the Street. "You want to book these local bands — after all, they are our existence — but on the other hand, they don't always bring in the crowds."

Indeed, the band could be as good as the million-dollar bands seen every day on MTV — a somewhat less than Herculean feat these days — but if nobody comes to see them, everybody loses. The club loses money, the band gets minimal exposure and all those would-be music fans miss out on another great show.

Some clubs are more willing to show less established bands. The Cave and The Fallout Shelter often have weekly lineups without a single big name.

"The new bands need a place to play," said Scott Zekanis, booking agent for The Fallout Shelter. "They can't just start out at The Cradle or The Brewery — there have to be the smaller venues like us to start out in. How do people expect the music scene to keep going if they won't try anything new?"

Unfortunately, it is these smaller venues that tend to suffer the most when the audiences stay home. The bigger, established acts will always draw a crowd. Somebody's always going to go out to see Guadalcanal Diary or Fishbone or C.O.C., but what about The Insurgence or Soul Train or The Wallabouts? Maybe. Maybe not.

Many of the clubs respond to the trend by booking more of the big out-of-town acts. According to Morgan, The Brewery shows as many out-of-town bands as local bands. But there are limits to the strategy.

"The touring bands look at a club's gross potential," said Morgan. But since the club can only hold so many people, he said, to make enough money for the band would require a high ticket price. "The market just won't bear it out," he said.

And now that the main outlet for the name-recognized touring bands,

The Pier in Raleigh, is closed, even fewer of the big bands will be coming through the Triangle. Rumors of a new large-venue club abound, but so far none has surfaced.

The Pier folded late last year due to attendance that couldn't keep pace with the astronomical overhead of its Mission Valley location.

"The Pier brought in a lot of the larger bands that usually wouldn't route themselves this way," said Debbie Cecil of Pro Motion Concerts, former booking agent for The Pier. "A lot of the bands used the Raleigh shows to pay for gas money between Atlanta and New York."

The effect of The Pier's failure is hard to determine. On one hand, it means less competition for the surviving clubs. They have to worry less about who's playing up the street when calculating their risks. But on the other hand, The Pier seemed to stimulate the market when it was around. After seeing a major act, the enthusiasm of the audience would often spill over into other aspects of the local music scene. One good show would spur people on to see more bands in other clubs.

But why aren't people going to see the bands now?

Plenty of clubs, plenty of good music, but no takers. Why? Most club owners agree that the change in the drinking age a year and a half ago had something to do with it. But some clubs allow anyone over 18 in, and some, like The Fallout Shelter, are for all ages all the time, with others offering the occasional all-ages show. The catch is, the underage people can't drink there, so they might be less inclined to go out at all.

But there has to be more to the mystery of the disappearing scene.

Is this new healthy, trying-to-be-wealthy, future yuppie generation more interested in GPAs and resumes than having a good time? Are they afraid to see something new and different? Is the local fringe contingent to be banished into oblivion, swallowed up in a mire of sameness? It would be a tragedy for more than just the bands — our three cities would be poorer for it.



Photos by Matthew Plyler

