On Campus

Tales from the Crypt

By
Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA
|
Spring 2009



Columbia University / Sandy Kaufman

On a coffin-sized stage, Shawn Taylor, a husky folksinger wearing a dark blue Kangol cap and a Tom Waits goatee, sings Dylan's "I Want You" in a raspy voice. A crowd of 30 students has filled the dank, vaultlike room. Ten small tables hold beer bottles, bowls of popcorn. Dress is mixed: nose rings and designer eyewear, ripped jeans and cotton Dockers. A string of white Christmas lights, wound around a horizontal pipe on the brick wall behind the stage, forms a moody backdrop for

Taylor as he swings into a country-blues number of his own, “Granite Highs and Muddy Lows.” Welcome to Postcrypt Coffeehouse, the dark heart that has been giving Columbia its musical beat since 1964.

Hairstyles, clothes, and the subject matter of songs have changed multiple times in the past 45 years. Yet inside this intimate little club, located at the bottom of a winding marble staircase in the basement of St. Paul’s Chapel, much has stayed the same. Admission remains free, as does the popcorn. The spot was, and is, student run. And the talent that has passed through here has often been extraordinary.

“We’ve had amazing singer-songwriters over the years,” says Nishant Batsha, a junior, who is the venue’s booking manager. “Everybody from David Bromberg, Suzanne Vega, Jerry Jeff Walker, to Jeff Buckley has played here when they were coming up. They were all but unknown when they did the Postcrypt. Of our recent performers, I think Anthony da Costa may be in their league. He’s just 17 and already is an incredible live performer. Anthony’s thinking of attending Columbia next year. If he does,” Batsha jokingly adds, “we’ll probably just give him the keys to the place.”

The name “Postcrypt,” for those wondering if this underground space was indeed once a burial chamber, actually has typically Columbian intellectual roots. In 1964, the University’s chaplain, Rev. John Cannon, dubbed the spot “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,” the title of a text by Kierkegaard. Over the years, the name was shortened, then buffed into something hip and Gothic.

“I found the place by accident,” says one sophomore with a tiny yin and yang tattoo on his neck. “My taste usually tends toward ’80s hardcore, like The Minutemen. But the music here is just as uncompromising. There’s no hype and no pandering. Hey, there’s even no electricity for the performers!”

How does one get to play the Postcrypt? “Certainly you can send us a demo and some information about what you do,” says Batsha, “but it’s more fun to come and play on an open mic night. You get about 10 minutes or two songs. Make an impressive showing and it can lead to a gig.”

Shawn Taylor now strums another original tune, “The Bottom Line,” a lament for a working-class fellow who’s another victim of the current economy. “Billy lost his job today / He walked on in and they walked him away / Nothing personal, sorry / Have a nice day.” Not exactly a pleasant message for a bunch of college students who will

soon be entering the job market. Yet judging from the smiling faces, Billy’s hard luck is still a distant abstraction. Tonight, it’s all about the music; there will be time to worry tomorrow.

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***