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TEEN BANDS GET HEAD START IN ROCK SCENE

By Brett Milano

If you're under 21, there's only one way to get into most rock clubs: Play in a band.

Because of the recent change in the drinking age to 21, there aren't many teenagers in the audience at local clubs. But that isn't stopping the underage crowd from forming bands, getting an early entrance to the rock world.

Legally, an underage band can perform in a club that serves alcohol, as long as they don't drink or don't bring in underage friends. But clubowners are often worried that such bands may not be able to draw a legal-age crowd.

"I'm reluctant to book underage bands," says Rick Paige of Johnny D's club in Allston. "Their friends and their fans may be underage - so what kind of audience are they going to bring in?"

Adds Kathie Logue of the Rat, "The bands we book are definitely getting older. Young bands may have a strong following, but it can't follow them into the clubs."

Some clubs, such as the Channel on Necco Street in Boston, schedule regular all-ages nights, but most bands agree there aren't enough all-ages gigs to go around.

Other factors may also be cutting down on the number of young bands. "I think this is the grimmest period for teenage rock in the last eight years," says Chuck Warner of the local Throbbing Lobster record label. "Along with the drinking age, I think that MTV has warped a generation. It softens the brain tissue, and leaves kids visually fixated and instrumentally uninclined. It keeps them from interest in clubbing. There's a generation of kids now who look for rock 'n' roll by turning on the TV."

Still, Boston's teenage scene is far from dead. Young bands may be fewer in number today, but there are still gifted teenagers who'd rather play rock than watch it on television.

At the moment, there is no "teenage sound" sweeping the city the way the hardcore-punk explosion did a few years ago. Instead, there's a scattering of bands developing their own styles which have almost nothing in common except youthful energy, and a determination to survive. There's the Stingers, with their moody, melodic pop. There's Expando Brain, whose jarring attack continues the punk tradition. And there's Throw-

ing Muses, whose abstract sound defies categories.

"People freak out when they see how young we are," says Stingers guitarist Michael Leahey. "I think people expect young kids to play hard-driving, rocking music. But we're a lot different - I hate to use the word 'mellow,' because that sounds too wimpy. But we're definitely more easygoing than the punk bands. I think we've got a Southern sound, a country flair. I haven't heard anyone in town who sounds like us."

The band includes two pairs of brothers with Brian Dunton on bass and Peter Leahey on drums along with guitarist Paul Higgins.

Most surprising is that the Stingers take their inspiration from the '50s and '60s. They're all fans of the Beatles; and a favorite encore is the Del-Vikings' "Come Go With Me," a hit song long before any of the Stingers were born.

"I learned songs from my dad, he had a band in college," says keyboardist Dave Dunton. "I wasn't one of those people who rejected everything my parents played, because a lot of it was fantastic. My dad's got great taste."

In fact, the Stingers began as a cover band, playing early rock hits at high school parties. But this year moved from school gigs to clubs, started phasing the oldies out of their live set and put out a single with two originals - "Unkind Love" and "Don't Let Go."

Since then, they admit, life has gotten riskier.

"It's definitely been harder to get gigs as an original band," Dunton says. "The cover shows were easy and they paid well. Now we have friends that we're in contact with every day, who can't see us play anymore. We understand the law, and thank God they'll even let us play. But it stinks that we can't get our friends in."

The Stingers first caught the rock 'n' roll bug when they heard '60s sounds on the radio. But Throwing Muses, a four-piece band from Newport, R.I., had a different inspiration - the simple desire to make noise.

"At first I was interested in the visual arts, and Tanya (Donnelly, guitar) was

writing poetry," recalls singer Kristin Hersh.

"But painting didn't seem loud enough. You can't yell at people with a painting. But if you play music in somebody's attic, and you scream at them, you affect them.

"When we started, we were real left-field. We made sure that we'd do something weird in every song: We'd bark, or play washboards, or aim for notes nobody could hit. We were outcasts, really angry and upset."

But these teenage misfits became a strikingly original band.

Onstage the four of them jump from sweet vocals to manic screams, from unruly noise to pop warmth. "People still think we're insane when they hear us," Hersh sighs.

"But we feel like we're still growing up, so we don't have any stuck ideas of what music should sound like. Some of the older bands, they play the same clubs over and over, their life goes in a circle and they're so angry they can't break free. But that hasn't happened to us; we're still happy enough to act like kids."

At first, the band had trouble winning an audience. "We played high school parties, and that was ridiculous. There was one party where the only song they liked was Harry Belafonte's 'Banana Boat Song.' So we played it 15 times."

Originally an all-woman trio called the Muses, they changed the name after the addition of drummer David Narcizo. Earlier this year, original bassist Elaine Adameds was replaced by California native Leslie Langston.

But a recent EP on their own Blowing Fuses label won critical praise, and the crowds are getting larger.

"I'd say we sound more accessible now. But our stage shows are always different. Sometimes it's all communication; sometimes we never look at each other. Sometimes we jump around, sometimes it feels right to be immobile."

The young age of the band members, she says, never kept them from getting booked. "We never told anyone, and they never asked."



PHOTO BY PHIL SPRING

Throwing Muses, from left: Leslie Langston, Kristin Hersh, Tanya Donnelly, David Narcizo

Also on the wild side is Expando Brain, a thrashing three-piece from Boston's northern suburbs. If the band sounds rough and nasty, the reason, according to drummer Nick Hook, is simple. "It's more fun to play fast," Hooks explains. "At home I listen to reggae and classical music, but in the band it's more fun to be angry and violent. But that doesn't mean we're nasty people.

"We don't take the whole concept of being a 'teenage punk rebel' seriously. We've done shows where nobody smiles, and the dancing is stupid and violent. But we're not like that. Our music has a hard edge, but it's getting more melodic."

The band started as a rebellion. "I guess we were social outcasts. We went to stupid suburban public schools in Concord and Acton, full of people who wear alligator shirts and listen to nothing but Springsteen. Where people get beaten up, because of the way they look. At my school, there were maybe 10 people who liked the kind of music I did."

The members of Expando Brain, which now includes guitarist Steve Smith and bassist Steve Davis, first got together in a band called KSK which stood for Kinski Sex Kult, a tribute-of-sorts to film star Nastassia Kinski.

"People in school didn't take the band seriously, they thought KSK was rather poor. Our major inspiration for us was boredom - not having anything to do, wanting to make our time more artistic."

Now that they're out of school, getting shows is easier. "I think we're more together than most teenage bands. We practice a lot more than we used to; we play only our own songs. If you played our tape for people, I don't think they'd guess our age. We've reached the point where anyone could tolerate us."

All three bands have just made a stronger commitment to the Boston scene. The Stingers plan to commute every weekend from their colleges; Throwing Muses have moved here from Newport; Expando Brain have gone full-time.

"You've got to have a lot of determination," says the Stingers' Michael Leahy. "A lot of bands get discouraged from entering the music industry. They read the papers, see that there's 1500 other bands in the Boston area, and wonder how they can compete. But you've got to say, 'We can do it, we can rise above.'" □

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