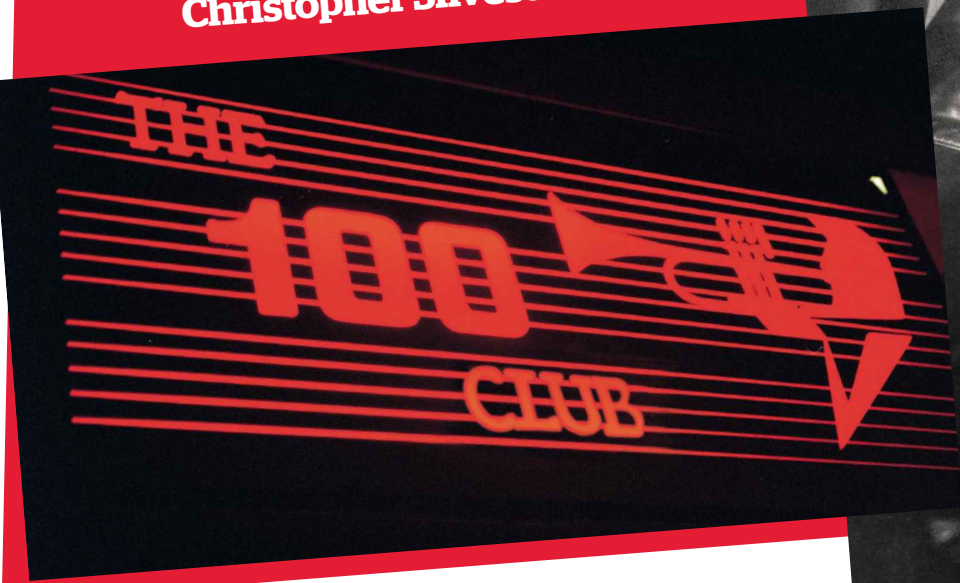


Can the 100 Club, a venue that saw Satchmo, the Stones and the Sex Pistols strut their stuff, survive in a post-Simon Cowell world? The vultures are circling, but with Jagger and co. on board, there's still hope, says **Christopher Silvester**



THE KING OF

When owner Jeff Horton announced in September that the 100 Club, London's oldest live-music venue, might be forced to close because of swingeing increases in its rent and rates, the worlds of jazz and rock reacted with horror. Frank Black of The Pixies has pledged £100,000 in support; Ray Davies of The Kinks has suggested, albeit facetiously, that Simon Cowell should step in; Liam Gallagher of Oasis added his voice to the campaign against closure; even Mick Jagger, whose Rolling Stones played there in the 1980s, has spoken up. 'There's a real need for these places as they have a connection with the past,' Mick declared. 'And what is important is that you have places where bands can cut their teeth and places of a certain intimacy and size that new bands can experiment in. There aren't that many great places in London, or

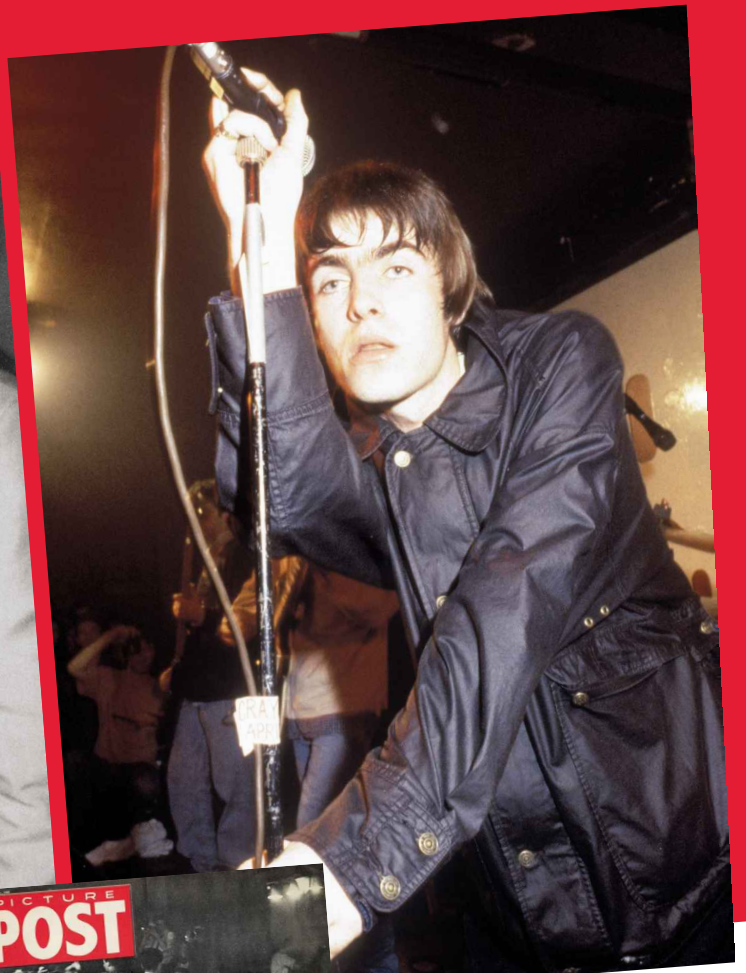
indeed any city, that you can say that about.'

Could this treasured space, a dingy basement located at 100 Oxford Street that over almost 70 years has hosted gigs by such performers as Louis Armstrong, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, and the Sex Pistols, be about to go the same way as the Roxy and the Marquee? During the 25 years since Jeff Horton took over from his father Roger, the annual rent has risen from £11,000 to £166,000, while the business rates have reached £48,000 per annum. Despite making positive noises about preserving our cultural heritage, the Mayor, Westminster Council and various heritage bodies have failed to find a solution for anything other than architectural landmarks.

'I would like it to stay exactly as it is,' says showbusiness historian and occasional jazz drummer Louis Barfe. 'It's one of those places that has almost no architectural merit, but it's got some kind of presence. You wouldn't want to preserve it for the sake of those red walls or

the pillars that get in the way of your seeing the band. It's a hugely flawed place, but it's wonderful. If everyone who claimed to have been at the 100 Club the night the Sex Pistols played there donated a fiver, I think they'd have no trouble meeting the rent.' Another fan of the place waxes lyrical: 'It's a real dirty dive. Its value is in its history.' The very same people who are brutally honest about its shortcomings are lost in adoration of its heritage and its undeniable anti-atmosphere, which set it apart from the world of rancid X Factor commercialism.

'The 100 Club is the daddy of them all,' reflects Frenchman Christian Him, who runs the London-based Jazz Index, a photographic library. 'It was the only jazz club here in the 1940s, still the most important throughout the 1950s, then with the advent of rock and pop in the 1960s it was still prominent. The Animals played there in the 1960s; the saxophonist John Dankworth in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. For



Far left: the Rolling Stones at the 100 Club in 1986. Above: Liam Gallagher onstage in 1994. Left: the cover of Picture Post from 12 November 1949 featuring the club

CLUBS

me it was really a kind of religious experience to go, because so many of the big names appeared there. It would break my heart if it really were to close down.'

The extraordinary appeal of this basement venue lies in its sweaty intimacy. Jill Furmanovsky, who has photographed events there, attributes this to its peculiar layout. 'It's a shrine, a bit like Abbey Road. The stage is very low, more like a platform, which means that you can get very close to the action, which is rare these days. You can be right up against the band, almost on the same level as them. It's long, with two bars, and you have the feeling of being in a room, not a hall. Also, there is the subterranean darkness. These are the key elements: underground, close to the action, drink-fuelled and the history of it.'

The 100 Club opened in 1942 as The Feldman Swing Club, London's only wartime jazz club. Its founder, Robert Feldman, was a pattern-cutter by day, but at night he played the clarinet.

With his brothers Monty and Victor, the former an accordionist and the latter an eight-year-old prodigy known as Kid Krupa because he played the drums with the same vigour as his idol Gene Krupa, they were the Feldman Trio. A Jewish family from Edgware, they put their tailoring careers on hold to pursue their dream of operating a jazz mecca. It was a restaurant at lunchtime and the owner charged Feldman £4 to rent the space each evening. The club succeeded because of its enlightened door policy, although the Feldmans' mother Kitty once refused entry to Glenn Miller, until Robert explained who he was.

The entrance fee of 3s 6d and 4d for half a pint of beer were prices that a working man earning £2 a week could afford. Jitterbuggers, whose exuberant dance moves were frowned on in other clubs, were welcome at Feldman's, as were black musicians from around the Empire. 'At Feldman's, a black man would be

accepted when you couldn't appear at clubs like the Mayfair or Embassy,' recalled the Guyanan vocalist and percussionist Frank Holder. 'Black guys such as Coleridge Goode and Ray Ellington were welcome, and all that mattered to Robert and Monty Feldman was that you were a musician.' Even modern jazz pioneers such as John Dankworth and Ronnie Scott were given a warm reception. After its first decade, Robert Feldman handed the club over to the manager of Old Etonian trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton, who let Lyttelton run it as a venue for traditional jazz. An anti-competitive ban by the British musicians' union against American musicians performing here provided an opportunity for home-grown jazz talent to flourish, inspired by American recordings, with New Orleans-style purists such as Ken Colyer vying with the Chicago-inflected riffs of Freddy Randall's band. From 1951 to 1956 was the 100 Club's heyday.



From far left: Humphrey Lyttelton with Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong in 1956; a jam session at the 100 Club in 1945 with Ralph Sharon, Victor 'Kid Krupa' Feldman on drums, Jack Fallon, Reg Arnold and Ronnie Scott; a poster for the Sex Pistols at the 100 Club in 1976

'You had the feeling when driving to the club that it was the night history was going to be made,' Lyttelton once told an interviewer. 'And that feeling lasted for five years.' There was one memorable night when, in defiance of the union ban, American saxophonist Sidney Bechet was smuggled on stage in a box. 'Suddenly he bounced up in the box and began to play,' George Melly recalled. 'It was incredible, but the club was heavily fined afterwards.' On another occasion, Lyttelton invited Louis Armstrong to the club with a couple of band members and they did an impromptu set.

Since the club was unlicensed, there was always a mad rush for the nearest pub during the interval, which was never announced so that the musicians could reach the bar before their audience. Some musicians didn't bother to wait for the interval. Trumpeter Kenny Ball recalled how, when he was playing with Mick Mulligan's band, they would set up the drummer Pete Appleby to play a solo, then leave for the pub while he thrashed away. 'We'd come back 20 minutes later and as we trooped in he used to say, "You rotten swine" because he couldn't stop until the rest of the band were back on stage.'

Lyttelton was a former art student at Camberwell Art College and most of his clientele were art students, wearing their requisite duffel coats. A young starlet named Joan Collins would perch on the front of the bandstand while the musicians lusted after her, and a young Oliver Reed would gesture girls towards the dancefloor with a cocksure jerk of his head. 'The club was a great place to pick up girls - a lot of them were very bohemian,' recalled George Melly, adding that 'John Mortimer once called it a temple of hot sex and warm coffee'.

Not everyone agreed with Mortimer, however. One 1950s regular described it as being less about sex than 'about sweat and dancing... more like a squash club'. As in the previous decade, during Lyttelton's tenure the club

ignored the usual social prohibitions. 'Other clubs in the 1950s, if you were black - get out,' said Bill Colyer, who invented skiffle jazz at the 100 Club. 'If you weren't wearing a tie - get out. But the 100 Club had no prejudice. It was always a place where you could come and be yourself.'

The third phase of the club's ownership began in 1964, when the basement was acquired by Roger Horton and given its now familiar name. Thereafter it remained a jazz club, but began to host gigs for rock and pop musicians as well. Jeff Dexter, a vocalist who became a renowned DJ in the 1960s, started going to the 100 Club 49 years ago. In 1970, when the Roundhouse in Camden was closed for maintenance, Dexter chose the 100 Club as the venue for Implosion, a series of Sunday rock concerts and shows with proceeds going to the alternative community. Later still, at the end of the 1980s, Dexter took his 2i's rock'n'roll club there as well (named after the home of rock'n'roll, the 2i's coffee bar on Old Compton Street). Pointing to the success of the campaign to save the Half Moon, a rock pub in Putney where U2 played on their first UK visit, from closure earlier this year, Dexter believes the 100 Club should be used as a dance venue. 'It's one of the few places left with an open floor in front of the stage, but hardly anyone seems to dance on it any more.'

Rock journalist Pete Clark's first memory of the 100 Club was the two-day punk festival at which Sid Vicious turned nasty in 1976. 'It was a straight-ahead music establishment. No frills, lovely for it, and I don't believe that they ever redecorated it in the 30 years I went there, from 1976 to 2006. There was never a lick of paint and I liked that. It was authentic.'

'Down those steep steps off Oxford Street was my playground in the city,' recalls erstwhile punk Toby Mott, who has recently been exhibiting his vast collection of punk ephemera. 'It was there, in 1978, that my early adventures with sex, drugs and punk began one memorable, loud night. I was drinking cheap lager with a peroxide punkette. We went into the

girls' loos. The fast, frenzied teenage sexual energy combined with the smell of sweat, beer and cigarettes has stayed with me.'

Once the punk era had passed, the 100 Club reverted to what it had been before, a place for regular jazzers and R&B musicians, with occasional nods to indie and world music. Kula Shaker did a notable gig there in the 1990s, Siouxsie Sioux played there again in 2004 and the re-formed New York Dolls made an appearance in 2009.

With a 17,000-strong Facebook supporters' page and a parade of gnarled jazz and rock worthies lining up to offer support, the 100 Club could survive to enjoy a new phase in its history. Jeff Horton tells me that 'somebody, but I can't say who because I've signed a confidentiality agreement' has come forward to offer the club sponsorship for the foreseeable future. He tells me that it's a company rather than an individual. 'They've made a proposal, which is with my solicitors at the moment, though I've never been one to count chickens. It doesn't mean that the club is saved, but it will steer us out of some very choppy waters and into calmer seas, and give the club time to get itself branded better. The company I'm talking to is happy for me to use its PR and everything else. It has said that it's not interested in ownership, it wants me to carry on, all

it wants is to be seen to be giving a helping hand. We have to look at things like marketing and merchandising carefully. We've got to think of other ways for the club to exist in the long term.'

Besides, Horton knows the predators are circling. No sooner was news of the club's possible closure out than promoters were approaching the landlords offering to meet the required sum. 'They wouldn't be able to call it the 100 Club because I own the rights to the name,' Horton explains. 'But there is a licence here and that goes with the building, not with me. There should be a form of listing or protection for buildings of immense cultural significance. Every single bit of British musical history since the war started at the 100 Club.'

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