

These Hands Make Music, Too

In Search of Sound and Soul as a Student

I am constantly in motion between classes and rushing home. Caffeinated buzzing, my feet light tapping against tiled floors, my heart bursting as I try to catch my breath. I have an exam, some assignments and speeches to gloss over and reiterate in mouthy mutters, and obligations that occupy my phone screen. *Ding-ding-ding*. I hear the reverb echoing bits of conversation, the TTC announcements, pockets of Patois, cussing, and laughter. I hear *wallahis*, oaths to God and the doors are closing. *Please stand clear of the doors*.

In between these spaces, I am on the run to the next task, beating to the sound of my own heart palpitations, the airy shudders; a pathetic excuse for a pause. A jazz-funk playlist blaring from my earbuds to fill the disconnected depths of droves; crowds of folks who are just as busy and dwelling in their commutes. Still, I felt empty those days against mundane patterns of whirling alerts and going along. Rushing to the sound of Torontonion time and my busy body out of breath, I was far from tranquil. With or without my playlists.

Some things change. I came across something that spoke directly to me. A rumble within the underbelly of Toronto that ripples through; industrial spaces now anew, noisy nooks, secret DJ parties and fantastical fetes. I knew there was a scene, but the motions and sounds were a beacon towards clarity and liberation. Multiple scenes emerged to nurture youths and counter-cultures. Safe spaces. Sanctuaries. Where burnouts or crashes did not exist – solely the spaces underneath this city that make me feel seen.

Let me take you there.



187 AUGUSTA AVE

187 Augusta Ave settles in the corner of Kensington Market, tucked away from the bustling of fast food joints, stores collecting niche reputation and dust, and nightclubs with lines of partygoers that pour into the open street where cars and people coincide casually. Gospel lingers softly inside of the misfit venue titled exactly after its address, as children run from wall to wall. Little foldable chairs are distributed, and everyone spreads out into the 550 square feet of available room.

The bare white space splashes with red light and the venue is filled with chatter. Nathan Baya approaches the front of the venue, silencing everyone politely: “We’re about to begin momentarily, folks,” clapping his hands together warmly and grinning to a small, eager crowd. Baya, a dark-skinned man, with iconic Dwayne Wayne inspired glasses, tropical print button-up, a swinging, golden Jesus piece around his neck and plain trousers, asserts himself cautiously.

After brief separation of his hands, he charms the cameraman, musicians, and supportive mothers, asking “are you good?” before clapping once again, grabbing everybody’s attention and commencing the event.

“Alright everybody,” his voice booms, microphone-less, making his lisp more ostensible, “Welcome to 187 Augusta Avenue. The space that is here for our community. Shout out to the Westend.” And before he can even think about wrapping up his humble speech, the crowd cheers, rapidly beat-making with hands to walls and floors.

A counter-culture against colonial, corporate gatherings and events makes the true start of the event by visuals and sounds; faces and voices are Black. The music is Black. Rooted in diasporic pursuits, longing for home while at home, for many folks feel at odds with Toronto. 187 Augusta is like a ripple: holding a small sound emerging to an admirable accomplishment. And it starts with a land acknowledgment:

“Toronto is in the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory.’ The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and peoples and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect.”

In all its variations and repetitive additions...*we acknowledge*, echoes in the majority of Toronto’s music scene. It’s a staple. An event does not truly start without collective focus and silence during its reading. But the moment the crowds tune in and *deep it*, roars begin, and the show is on.

187 Augusta Ave is swooning; filled with poetry, signature snaps, and soulful acoustics. I have no shame forgetting to record the whole thing and tune into the performances with my heart, clapping two by fours along with the singers once their fingers let go of their trusted guitars. A young woman belts a river of high notes, her chords running as she intently throttles. The crowd is into it. Fragments chopped and sharp follow: *ah ah ah* and *jeez jeez jeez*. She is hypnotic yet welcoming. And we let her know that we are immersed, we are won over, we are in tune.



THE BEGUILING



I discovered a rundown store with a show lurking within, through a Facebook invite with “msg for location, punks only.” S.H.I.B.G.B’s is a relic. Still, its influence leaves trails of secret shows, gatherings, moshes, and support systems. A basement underneath a store, its once shaky staircases are trials of bravery. I gulp every time I enter. But adrenaline pounds onwards and soon spurs spaces like itself, replicating into under-dwellings of homes, storefronts, and abandoned indoor skate parks.

Pulsating bass shoots up to my core. I can feel my heart and arm hairs electrify in harmony to the harsh clashes mixed with dreary guitar and eerie vocals, shouting back at one another as folks clamour and shove. I soon learn the ritual to it; moshing and thrashing to rhythms known and unknown, bumping bodies.

Trans frontwomen, men, and nonbinary folks lead the night for a whirlwind of



aggressive soundbites and war-cries – they are in everybody’s faces against the dashes of cymbals and transferable sweat. Their music coded for claiming space – activist or blatantly flipping off their fathers, fare inspectors, or city councillors who dare shut down live venues. Still, people swing themselves onto one another, embracing or politely punching. Gushes of blood and beer fill the air.

The aromas are far from sweet and yet I keep returning. After S.H.I.B.G.B’s on Geary Ave is shut down, her legacy trickles into a full-blown festival, ‘Not Dead Yet,’ and the city is greeted with DIY venues and openings to ear-numbing noise, clashes, and storms of solidarity.



The Beguiling is a shy, ordinary comic book store on College Street nearby Kensington Market. But beneath its storefront lies a realm of its own much like S.H.I.B.G.B's or Ossington's late Faith/Void punk pop-up shop and venue. I turn and twist past the towering bookshelves and vibrant standees and finally face a door – no labels on it. Leading to a descending set of stairs, hollow loops of bass *thump thump thump* and my feet try to catch it on my way to the opening act. The space is compact with bobbing heads and raised pints of Pilsner. The lead singer shrills and folks shrill or woo back. Flashes of photography, Instagram, phone screen glows and cyan blue light from the stage bounce around the dark basement. Heaps of wires and overflowing boxes and books enclave the rambunctious performers. They are celebrating and they are celebrated concomitantly after years of academic devastations and anxiety epidemics. I know this because it is my friend shrilling into their mic whose first words are always “fuck school,” and last words are “I love to learn,” or “knowledge is power.” I know this because they carry it within the music, share it with me and the crowds beneath. They are in a rage against the noise and hardships in between.



Rach of Oxails @ the Beguiling

THE CTRL ROOM

Other sounds are harder to trace. While major areas may bustle, trickle or haunt, some spaces refuse to surface at all. The CTRL room is in absolute self government and independence, looming and enabling their remarkable, ballistic raves and listening parties in the “heart of the Junction.” Scratches and dunes of spellbinding coils of eclectic trance music hover over heads, eyes closed. Its studio is unmarked and kept under wraps over the low and industrial West Toronto. Anyone is allowed to beat-make there. And listeners are intent and often times silent before the



masses turn to disco. Worldwide samples and features of high-pitched vocals spin and spin until the crowd is shell-shocked into euphoria and neon imprints.

Laid out, organized chaos in the form of buttons and screws support the space and beat-makers are challenged to memorizing and harvesting each effect onto the audience's mood. The speakers are placed on both sides, waiting for their conductors.

My friend boasts that we were directly invited to one of their hushed events – the only trick is that locations are not given. We simply locate the heart of the junction. And I'm sworn to secrecy to never reveal that. The trek makes it all while, walking by the musical enclaves sanctioned in the junction. Exiting from Dundas West Station, I absorb the distant Peruvian flute from a street player on a corner, the bangs and clangs of thick, gold bracelets colliding, the multilingual pathway along Dundas and the valves of rundown and ghostly mechanic shops. The CTRL room lingers.

THE REX HOTEL JAZZ AND BLUES BAR

Some spaces are louder than others without shame or secrecy; blaring against downtown traffic with a symphony of groove, sex appeal, and rustic twangs unchallenged by time. The Rex Hotel Jazz and Blues Bar is no hidden gem but underrated and hardly pouring out as the music within accomplishes in oozes and pools of classic tunes. Whether a big or small night for the venue, the Rex spills its sultry atmosphere, its intimate crowd hollers after each soloist's climatic breakthrough and another round is always just right on the corner of St. Patrick and Queen Street West.





The instruments are lustfully wooing. I always feel like the Rex is charming me. It's a place to take a loved one and dissolve into the soulful bellows of horns and brass. Against the panelled, brown walls, the instruments are gems calling out like I'm in the middle of my own living room, except with a shot of whiskey. The musicians have the Midas touch in vibrations. I swindle.

POETRY JAZZ CAFÉ

A night's waltz through downtown has led me to places I never heard of. I simply stumble along the Poetry Jazz Café for its husky hums and smoky presence. Located on 224 Augusta Ave, the venue is hard to see but its enthralling mysticism is even harder to ignore. Few folks hang back, bathing in deep purples, royal blues, and timid baby pinks. Voices boom on Blackness, womanhood, and other prolific issues dear to Torontonians. This realm exudes the art of spoken word and freeform jazz. *Ka-ka-ka-badum.*



THE CAVERN BAR

The Cavern Bar sits under an international hostel on the corner of King and Church. Pieces of Italian, Polish, Mandarin, German, and Spanish wander its cave entrenched in wonder, industrial wires overhead, and dusty bricks. Folk and acoustic international music is its go-to and occasional karaoke, covers, and trivia. I won't lie. Shit doesn't get me moving, gearing, bumping, grinding. But its soothing wallows encompass me in its frigid space.



A lone man strikes up his guitar, riveting through its chords. People are either deep in thought, babysitting their drinks, whispering to someone they admire, or chopping an earful to the Italian bartender who doesn't care for a lick of philosophical, dreary talk that stretches into the mundane. A regular night at the Cavern is a somber night of reflection. Its music hounds after untapped passion, an old flame and the search for greatness to spite depressive longing and loss. Much like the overflowing number of tourists that visit the hostel everyday and only check in downstairs when there is nothing else. Occasionally when a Friday night becomes an early Saturday, drunken yaps are too frequent. Nothing is quite more settled and subdued than the preferred genre of the space that beckons stirred emotions within the moment. Folk and Sufi acoustics just bring up the past once forgotten.

BAREGYAL/COZY

“I want EVERYBODY to put their fucking hands up! Make some NOOOOOOOOISE!” shouts DJ Lissa Monet. A reggae airhorn booms behind her final shout out. There is a literal pop where waves of arms clasped in glow bracelets shout up to her command and the music pursues an international pool digging in and out of Spanglish and Patois.



This shtick repeats and ripples. In Phoenix Theatre, Mod Club, a frat house along St. George, Cherry Bomb – across all corners and pockets within downtown Toronto both open to the public and coded in secret messages and locations. DJ Lissa Monet staples herself along other reggae dancehall and soca events and organizers such as BAREGYAL and COZY, which now pave the way for more Afro-Caribbean events and music. The focus of their missions is to ensure that everyone is comfortable, that Black LGBTQIA+ folks are put at the forefront and that music is bumping.

Tic-tic-tic-tic

Give it to them

Joanna your busy body

Busy tonight

Make you no dey dull me tonight

Joanna your busy body giving me life, ooh

The crowd elevates in a pandemonium of *OOH'S* before everybody instantly *bruks* it; the DJ proclaims, “RESPECT BLACK WOMEN’S BODIES OR YOU’RE OUT, FAM!” and other rules that follow the night include paving way for marginalized groups. A blissful whirlwind of tropical beats and romantic men declaring their love for the winin’ and enriched melanin fills the night for a fantastical fete, occasionally dousing crowds in water, laughter and in sync dancing.

THE REVERBERATION

People begin to trickle out of bustling nightlife and into regularity, gathering in small cigarette circles or leaving beer cans “for the old woman who picks them up,” figuring out how everyone is going home. Throats are a bit hoarse from the exclamations. Yet I deeply feel that I belong where I stand. Seeing and listening to folks who look like me, love like me and live blissfully as human as I do. And the crowd always communicates back, either to me or to the performer, the DJ, the community maker. I found more than a soundtrack to fulfill my life.

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A quieter heart and mind, Toronto’s musical gems are a memorable and prolonged pause. Where nights on the sullen, empty 1:35 AM, trying to sober up or calm down from the chilling highs induced by crowds in the same thirst as my own, I regret nothing except not finding these places sooner. An enriching collective soul in-between the sounds, vinyl record itches and scratches mark my discovery of something heartwarming, aggressively resilient, secretive, sultry, yearful, and inclusive. Ultimately, I am here. My hand, my PWIC, and my Toronto counter-cultures under the surface stand tall. There is resistance against the shutdowns and the marginalized voices carry Toronto beyond ‘local music.’ And I have resettled.