

Musicians cram in when jammin' in T.O.

ADAM BISBY
The Globe and Mail

If Frank Zappa had grown up in downtown Toronto today, the lyrics to his anthemic song *Joe's Garage* might have included:
"We could jam in Joe's garage, but Joe's garage is booked solid for the next two months."
"Joe now charges \$20 an hour to jam in that rat-trap."
"It's -30, -50 with the wind chill in Joe's garage."
"Joe's house and garage have been demolished to make way for a strip of condos."
"Joe lives in Port Hope."

Such is the lot of today's Toronto musicians. While a housing shortage has grabbed headlines, the city's musical community is being threatened by the lack of available rehearsal space.
Chris Skinner owns The Rehearsal Factory, Toronto's largest collection of jam rooms. The Factory consists of 175 rooms spread out over three downtown buildings, and caters to around 400 musicians. At the end of January, it had just one room available.

This "lower-end" room, which is relatively clean but lacks air conditioning and sound proofing, measures 35 square metres. At \$375 a month, it is one of the better deals in town.
Indeed, many of Skinner's new customers come to him with horror stories from elsewhere of stolen or damaged equipment, electrocution and rodent bites. However, close to half of the Factory's spaces will be torn down to make way for condominiums when a "demolition clause" puts an abrupt end to the Factory's lease on the largest of its three buildings.

"We rarely have much available space as it is, and when this building goes we'll have even less," Skinner laments. "We want to expand, we need to expand, but we don't have the means to do it."
High real-estate prices, \$70,000 in new municipal taxes and the Factory's financing woes are all hampering Skinner's dream of building a downtown facility — dubbed Music City — where musicians could rehearse, record and gain access to a host of other services.

"It's criminal how this city treats its musical community," Skinner says. "If our musicians don't have a place to rehearse, we'll lose our music scene."
Bruce Cockburn, part of that scene for 30-odd years, remembers

Rehearsal space is at a premium as suitable places are torn down to make way for condos. Musicians are risking financial ruin — or electrocution and rodent bites — to rent space



No room: Joshua Pierce (left), Lee Whalen and Trevor Spot make a point about rehearsal-space crisis.

JOHN MORSTAD/The Globe and Mail

jamming in a couple's Cabbagetown home in the late 1960s. "For a couple bucks, they let us play in their living room — all they had to do was put up with all the equipment stacked floor to ceiling."
Today, a comfortable arrangement like this seems less likely. Cockburn points out that as the socioeconomic status of Toronto's downtown neighbourhoods has improved, the availability of low-value real estate — typically where jam rooms are found — has fallen.

In 1968, a Cabbagetown-area residence fetched between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Today, the same house in the now-trendy neighbourhood costs 10 times that amount.
Cockburn describes the condos that replace jam rooms as a "can-

cer" that threatens surrounding rehearsal space, since the wealthy occupants are often intolerant of wailing Stratocasters.
"Everybody just seems more uptight about everything," he says. "This jealous guarding of property and privacy makes it difficult for musicians, since our craft extends beyond personal space."

Despite the expense and decrepitude of many rehearsal rooms, demand is quickly outstripping supply. This means many musicians are risking financial ruin or discomfort to rent space, or are not rehearsing very often or at all.
Musicians such as Joshua Pierce. Since moving to Toronto from Vancouver about a year ago to compose and record an album, the

guitar player and the musicians he works with have moved from one subterranean "mushroom den" to another, unable to find a spot that is both comfortable and affordable.
Pierce has rehearsed in a damp basement with exposed electrical wiring for \$400 a month, paid \$20 an hour for a room with paper-thin walls and even ventured into the basement of his own apartment building, which, with its low ceiling, would be shunned by the Minis-Pops.
At the moment, Pierce and another group, Moevius Stripper, are looking to split the monthly rent for a jam room. The trouble is, there's very little available.
"Any of the buildings I've visited that are nice enough to create

music in have been taken over by people — architects, sculptors, ballet dancers — who would never allow live drums and guitar amps."
The lack of available space is taking its toll on Pierce's career. "I came to Toronto because it has this reputation as a great place to meet and work with other musicians," he says. "That much is true — you meet these talented people, and you want to get things started, but there's nowhere to start. It's like you have to show up in Toronto fully rehearsed and ready to go."

If things don't change, Zappa's Toronto version of Joe's Garage could conclude just like the real rendition: "So the band broke up and it looks like we will never play again."

COC urges lobby on new site

RAY CONLOGUE
Arts Reporter, Toronto

The Canadian Opera Company wants its land, and it's taking to the telephones to get it.

During the next three days, a telephone/computer hookup will begin calling the COC's 18,000 subscribers with a recorded message urging them to lobby the Ontario government on behalf of the new opera-house project.

Earlier this month, the Harris government withdrew its offer to sell the COC a building site at the corner of University and Queen Streets in Toronto. The COC would like its subscribers to ring up the government and urge it to honor the original agreement to turn over the land.

"It's absolutely essential," says company artistic director Richard Bradshaw. "We've invested \$4-million in getting ready to build on that site, and we can't launch the fundraising campaign until we have title to the land."
Bradshaw, who is well-known to Torontonians for his fireside-chat-style radio commercials (in which he amiably enthuses about upcoming productions), will prerecord a message urging subscribers to become part of the opera-house campaign.

"Then the program, which is called Ventriloquist, will automatically call all the people whose numbers we have in our database," explains Kevin Garland, the director of the opera-house project. "Unfortunately, it has an impersonal aspect, in that it's a recording, but we hope people will understand that things are moving quickly and we have to reach them quickly."

When subscribers pick up their phones, they will hear Bradshaw's voice telling them that this is an urgent message and asking them to accept the call.

The message will urge subscribers to write to one or more of the three levels of government involved in the opera-house project, urging them to co-operate and get it moving again.

The COC has already conducted an experiment to determine the level of support among subscribers. Last week, it included a similar message in programs for the Giovanni d'Arco concert at the Ford Centre. According to Garland, more than 100 attendees have forwarded to the COC copies of letters they wrote to government in response to the request. "And certainly others wrote letters without telling us," says Garland. "So I think there's a strong level of support."

SHORTLIST

The best of what's on today

MUSIC
Femi Kuti: The son of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti updates the Afrobeat music his father created. James Brown-style funk meets the indigenous music of southern Africa. 9 p.m., \$25-\$27, Phoenix, 410 Sherbourne St., 416-870-8000.

ART
Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy: Philip Monk's curator tour of the artist's collaborative works: high-energy conceptualist art that pushes the limits of what viewers' minds can understand, and what their senses can bear. 6:30 p.m., \$2-\$4, members free, Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, 231 Queens Quay W., 416-973-4949

DANCE
Stomp: A hit in more ways than one, the percussion-dance troupe makes its fifth visit to Toronto. 8:30 p.m., \$49-\$59, Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge St., 416-872-5555.

HOME & GARDEN
One of a Kind: In addition to endless displays of crafts, the annual spring show features daily fashion shows. 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., \$6.50-\$8 (children under 12 free), National Trade Centre, Exhibition Place, 416-960-3680 or www.oneofakind-show.com

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