

London, the ever-rainy capitol of England and one of the epicenters of the modern world, hosts an exquisite music scene that would satisfy a devoted music fan from anywhere on the planet. The subway (“tube”) connects most of the venues for easy transportation, but ticket prices do tend to be higher than in America. Nevertheless, the musical soul of London has no boundaries, and can be heard emanating from various places around the city. On any given day in the underground tube, a man might be gracefully picking a harp or blasting a saxophone. Above ground, there could be someone strumming a guitar near the London Eye, or tapping a steel drum in the Portobello Road market. The enormous music celebration O2 Wireless Festival (www.wirelessfestival.co.uk/london) took place this June 14-17, for the second time in London’s expansive Hyde Park. However, the indoor venues are the vital organs of the music scene in this cosmopolitan jungle.

A basement, not a dungeon

The 100 Club (100 Oxford Street, www.the100club.co.uk), a small venue with a huge personality, is situated along one of the busiest stretches in London. The long room is in the basement, with the stage placed on the long wall, and enormous wooden numerals – a one and two zeros to form a “100” – sit behind the spot where bands perform. A sign above the stage informs would-be You-Tube-ers that it is not allowed to take pictures, video, or audio recordings of the bands in the venue. Many visitors have photographic proof, which means that the rule is neither well followed nor strictly enforced.

Small tables with accompanying orange chairs are scattered on either side of the stage. The bar staff, hidden away in the lone bar, are friendly, and the crowd is a mix of young and aging people. Smoking was banned in all public places in England as of July 1, so that won’t create a problem for non-smokers. In the restroom, patrons find an AirBlade, a futuristic device that dries hands that are inserted from the top, using high-speed air streams like the last phase of a car wash. It is a crazy contraption that inspires experimental types to wash their hands.

The 100 Club claims to be the oldest music venue in the city, and its history can be felt with just a few glances of the walls. They are adorned with pictures of blues and jazz musicians that have been involved with the club throughout the years. There’s also an



unassuming picture of Metallica sitting on the clubs stage, with long hair hanging down their backs, dated August 16th, 1984.

Stairs, stairs and more stairs

The Scala (277 Pentonville Road, www.scala-london.co.uk) is a mid-sized club located above the King's Cross tube station. Climb the stairs to find the venue bar, where the drink of choice is Red Stripe pint cans. Two staircases on either side of the bar lobby lead to the stage and viewing area. Another staircase from that lobby up two levels leads to the restrooms. In fact, those who enter Scala will soon feel like they've entered one of Escher's famous labyrinth drawings.

The performance experience here is top notch. The stage is about 4 ft off the main audience surface, which extends backwards for 20 ft. From there, a second tier rises, and then a third, allowing height-impaired viewers a suitable view. There is also a cubby bench at the rear of the third tier, where recluses can hide in the dark. The lights are always kept at a dim level, to aid the viewing of the "Scala" projection rotating on the ceiling. The smoke machine sets an appropriate mood, and the sound system is superb, ensuring that the crowds are very attentive.

The new east side

For those who make it to the growing east London area, Cargo (83 Rivington Street, 020 7739 3440) could be where they get their live music fix. The venue – with a comfortable capacity of 500 – has been open since January 2001. Joe Roberts, press coordinator for Cargo, says, "We get all sorts (of bands) in – a broad mixture from hip hop to funk, house to reggae, weird Americana to twee Scottish indie, international big names to under-discovered local gems." They have performances by bands and DJs seven nights a week, and they pride themselves on providing an eclectic sampling of London's musical options.

Roberts says that London's music scene is strong, and that any modern scene depends on the efforts of the musicians, because anyone can currently record and promote their own music using technology and the Internet. He says, "The middlemen are shitting themselves at the moment, whether it's agents or record companies. The musicians and the live venues of London are in rude health." He says that music festivals cut club attendance a little bit in the summer, but the harm is exceeded by the benefits. "Festivals are a great way for people to find



new music, music they can follow into London," Roberts says. "It does create interest in live music and seeing a band in a small room rather than the open expanse of a field."

Not quite a shrubbery

Shepherd's Bush Empire (Shepherd's Bush Green, www.shepherds-bush-empire.co.uk) can be found in the western stretches of the London tube map on the Central line. This seems like a slightly dodgy area at first, especially when entered around sunset as the waxing light casts an eerie glow on the triangular field.

The venue is a compact theatre, with two separate entrances: one for standing stalls and one for the three balconies above. On the floor level, the standing area sits deep below the stage, with a bar on each side. A sign on the wall reads, "ZERO TOLREANCE – crowd surfing is dangerous and will result in ejection from the venue." At the rear is a raised area with a third bar and standing stalls.

The venue wasn't designed very well, or wasn't intended to be a live music spot. The third bar blocks the view of shorter people trying to see from the back, and the lowest balcony adds to the problem by dipping very low, so everyone at the back has their view cut from above. Then short people in the lower standing area have their entire view of the performer blocked by others in the crowd, because the floor was given no slant.

The sound can't be heard well from the back of the venue, and the theatre could use some restoration work for an aesthetic boost. Still, if London's music scene were defined by its worst venue, Shepherd's Bush Empire probably wouldn't be the one under examination. And the crowds seem happy with the diverse schedule of bands as well.

The kingly way

Lodged up against Hyde Park, across the street from the gaudy Albert Memorial, is the gorgeous Royal Albert Hall (189 Queen's Gate, www.royalalberthall.com). This large, oval-shaped venue has become a trademark of London's culture. The Hall was opened in 1871, and currently fits 5,222 people. Many events outside the realm of music – ranging from tennis to film premieres to award ceremonies – combine with concerts of various genres for a total of 350 events per year.

Jodie Jenkins, press coordinator for the Hall, says, "Everyone...from every nation and culture should feel welcome at the Hall and be able to enjoy the shared experience and



excitement of live performance from the very best of today's global artists." When Queen Victoria opened the venue, she probably didn't expect the annual attendees to exceed 1 million people.

About the influence of music festivals on the Hall, Jenkins says, "In a fast growing world of digital media and home entertainment, and much competition for customers' leisure time and leisure pound, encouraging people to experience live music, whether in music festivals or clubs, is positive for the industry as a whole." And that industry is healthier than ever in London, according to Jenkins.

