

The Place To Be

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SPORTS EDITOR

9:34p.m.—Some three hours after you have answered your friend's rhetorical query, "So what are you doing tonight?" with the equally rhetorical, "I don't know — who's playing at Ziggy's?" You are in a position familiar to nearly all college students in Winston-Salem.

Perched on an almost-adequately-upholstered stool, or on your feet wedged between four-and-a-half people whom you have never seen before, you crane your neck to try to discern whether anyone with any type of musical instrument has showed signs of making his or her way onto the vacant stage a few feet in front of you. The air smells of cigarettes, spilled

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Ziggy's owner

beer and space heaters, and the speakers are channeling college radio's demented answer to Muzac. You spend your idle moments trying to remember the exact name of the opening act.

Welcome to Ziggy's, Winston-Salem's premier "college music" live performance locale.

A few hours before the scene above, Jay Stephens, '89, is on the phone (really on the phone). He has been occupied with this particular call for at least 10 minutes, and in that time the building's other line has rung four times or more. An afternoon visitor begins to arrive at the realization that this must be a little bit of that "music industry" thing people are always talking about.

Stephens is the owner of Ziggy's, the current Lambda Chi Alpha torch-carrier of a facility which has been the fraternity's family heirloom since its creation (under a different name) in 1978. He is also, as a result of a car accident in 1988, a partial quadriplegic who moves about in a powered wheelchair.

Having finished up the phone call, Stephens is currently maneuvering out of his office among the aforementioned stools, trying to reconstruct the early history of the facility he purchased in 1991. The stage is empty, the heaters are off in deference to the warm October day, and someone with a hose and a mop is trying to take care of last night's spilled beer.

The bar, Stephens relates, was originally named the "White Horse" (here he points to a sign mounted on the wall which bears the old name), and was first located across the street from its present location.

"When they expanded (Joel) Coliseum and the Coliseum bought up all the land to the corner, they actually picked up the White Horse and brought it over to this land and put it here," Stephens said. According to Stephens, the city donated the land on which Ziggy's currently sits because of ownership's desire to remain close to the university campus.

The original owner of the White Horse eventually chose to sell the place, and in 1980, John Ziglowski, '79, a Lambda Chi who had been the main bartender at the White Horse, bought the building and changed the name to its present tag.

As college rock plied its subterranean existence during the 1980s, Ziggy's likewise did its fair share of scraping by. Throughout a series of ownership changes (always between Lambda Chis) during the decade, the bar existed as a fair weather-only performance site; the facility's only stage was an outdoor patio, and bands played only on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

In an era of Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Bruce Springsteen and mega-shows designed to entertain 50,000 people at a time, Ziggy's existed in the musical margins, playing host to "alternative" rock's pioneers, among them the Replacements, Let's Active (a band fronted by Mitch Easter) and R.E.M., whom Easter helped record their debut EP "Chronic Town" and their first full-length album "Murmur."

A club by the name of Baity's was also in business during this time (on the same street), and, according to Stephens, handled some of the more mainstream acts. "They were the big

concert venue back then," Stephens said.

With the advent of Pearl Jam, Nirvana, and the like in the early 1990s however, music changed; what before had been "college rock" was now pop music. Interestingly while the world of music was undergoing drastic changes, Ziggy's was doing some changing of its own. Disenchanted with his job with American Express and the problems of traveling in a wheelchair, Stephens purchased the facility in 1991 and promptly began renovating it into the structure familiar to today's patrons.

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Stephens said. That grasp included a host of structural changes, including the construction of the current stage and viewing area (complete with roof), larger bathrooms, a public address system and the fenced-in outdoor "beer garden," to which patrons can momentarily retire for a breath of fresh air and (if you're old enough) a cold one.

"When I bought it in '91, it was a fenced in backyard," Stephens said of the original performance area. Ziggy's maximum capacity is now 750 people.

Such improvements have enabled Stephens and his venue to take full advantage of the changes going on in popular music.

"In the last three years, our business has grown a great deal due to the fact that the public tunes into the radio and hears these new artists," Stephens said.

"Now we can get a band that only has one song, but everyone knows about who they are. When they come through the area

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for the first time, we can afford to have them play at Ziggy's."

10:53p.m.—The opening act is doing its thing, and your recurring thought is that, whatever "its thing" is, it is certainly loud. In classic "opening act" fashion, the band is doing its darnedest to rock, and the intimate musical setting of which you are now a part is granting you a clear picture of the limits of this particular group's talents. The frontman is somewhere shy of competent and somewhere beyond enthusiastic.

You feel the makings of a headache begin to creep into your consciousness, and a good part of you thinks that a quick trip to the beer garden would be just the thing to reset your equilibrium. Nevertheless, the realization keeps dawning on you that you are being critical of this band largely because the musical purity of the environment allows you to be. From your stool, you have a view the like of which few venues within 100 miles can match.

Nope, you're not going anywhere. Lousy opening act or not, you have a great seat to a building custom-tailored for college rock music, and you are psyched about the main act. If they ever take the stage.



Stephens said. According to Stephens, three main reasons exist for such enthusiasm.

"The venue is real unimposing to them. They walk in and they like the feel — it's got kind of an island feel to it," Stephens said. "Number two, we've got a great PA system, and the room sounds real good, which is something that a lot of clubs don't have. Either they don't keep up their PA, or the room is made out of concrete, which doesn't have the right acoustics."

Concrete is one thing Ziggy's pointedly lacks. The decks surrounding the stage are constructed wholly of wood, and the result is an acoustically rich setting which displays the full extent of a band's musical prowess.

"Three, we have been in the business so long that we know how the artists want to be treated. It's a real professional attitude here. We make sure that we take care of them. Most artists leave here with the feeling that, 'Hey, we want to come back,'" Stephens said.

Part of the reason for bands' enthusiasm is the architectural makeup of the place, which makes a crowd of 200 or so seem like significantly more.

"That's one good thing we've got going for us," Stephens said. "Because of the way the venue's set up, your focus is on the stage. Everything looks straight down on the stage. That way the artists feel like someone is looking on them when they're on stage."

How bands make it onto that stage, according to Stephens, is generally the result of two processes. The first involves national touring acts (of the type handled by agents) and the second, smaller-profile regional acts which the locale individually schedules.

Agents, according to Stephens, generally call and ask the venue to hold the days when the band is in town, and make an offer for the amount the club can afford to pay.

"Luckily, we've got a good reputation, and the agents have enough confidence in us that they're going to call us every time for most touring acts," Stephens said. According to Stephens, he bases his decision to book such bands on several criteria.

"You look at the amount of airplay they get on the stations around here, you look at the charts, you look at the album sales, we call the Record Exchange, we watch MTV, we read *Rolling Stone*," Stephens said.

On the regional act level, Ziggy's functions somewhat differently, and wholly less quantitatively. The type of decision-making process which has yielded area favorites such as Vertical Horizon, Last One Standing and Jackpierce is, according to Stephens, largely intuitive.

"Basically you go on the vibe," Stephens said. "Are people listening to them? Or you build them — we give bands two, three, or four shots to play here and we try to build them by putting them in front of crowds."

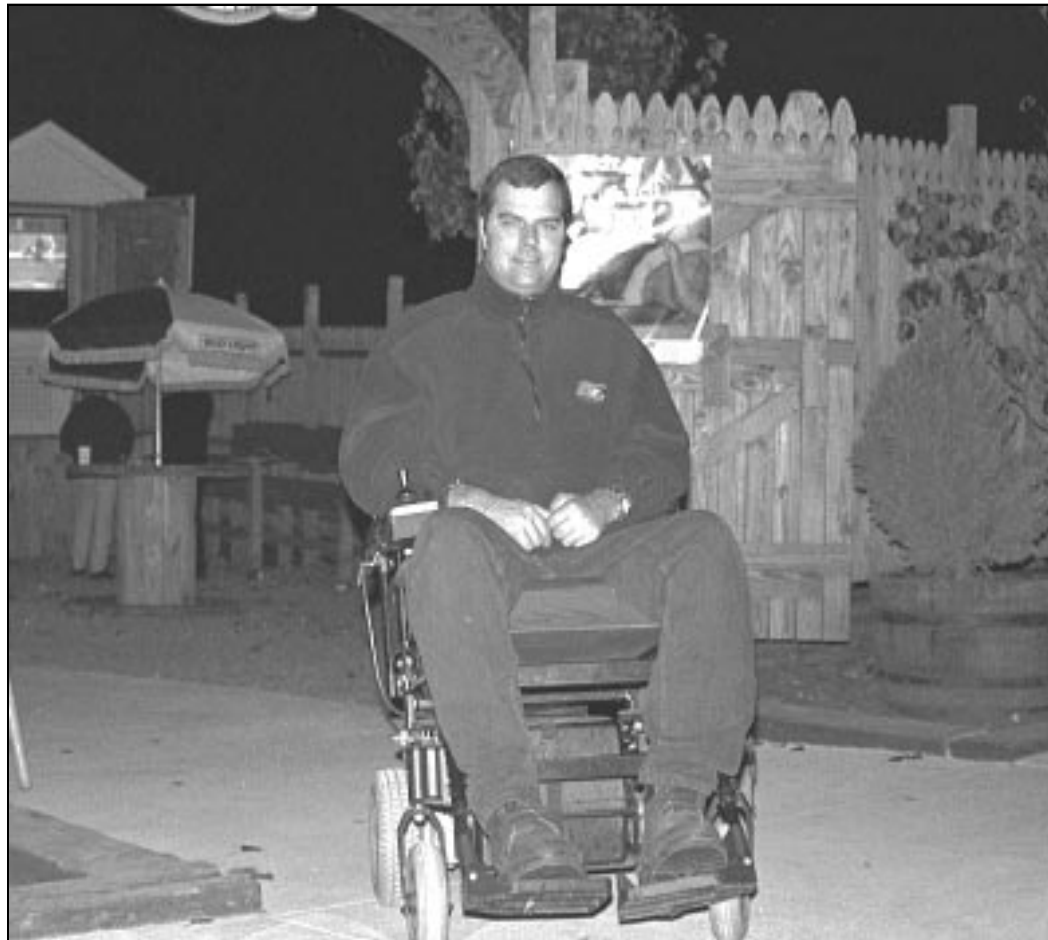
Generally, according to Stephens, after several shows a regional act has either begun to attract or lose a fan base, and the venue can then decide whether or not to continue to schedule shows for them. The process is a decidedly tricky one, and one which, according to Stephens, is complicated both by the university's lack of a big-time radio station and (on a related note) the student body's tendency to steer away from acts whose reputations do not precede them.

"College radio is a lot different than modern alternative radio," Stephens said. "There are bands on college radio who are avante-guard musicians who can play Cat's Cradle (a club in Chapel Hill). They get a lot of play on those stations and people get acquainted with them," Stephens said of lesser-known bands.

The lack of a high-profile college radio station in Winston-Salem has impacted the way university students approach new acts at Ziggy's, according to Stephens. "If it's a popular band, they'll come out," Stephens said of students' finicky nature.

12:27a.m.—The main act is on, and they are *on*. From your seat a scant few feet away from the stage, you can make out the musicians' facial expressions well enough to discern that they are loving it. The sound coming out of the speakers and off of the walls is richer than that experienced at a coliseum show, and truer than that felt at many smaller clubs and auditoriums.

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Jay Stephens, '89, is the current owner of Ziggy's, his pride and joy.

Most major bands only have one stop in North Carolina," Stephens said. "Sometimes they'll do two stops, whether it's Raleigh and Charlotte, or Winston and Charlotte, or Winston and Raleigh."

Whichever locales the bands ultimately choose, Stephens' comments make one thing clear: Ziggy's is a major player in the North Carolina rock music scene.

"Basically, when we do a show, we try to keep it to where we get at least half the state," Stephens said. "Our mailing list is 8,000 people right now. Our draw is from Raleigh, Charlotte, and as far north as Roanoke."

If the structural changes Stephens has wrought on Ziggy's have endeared its audience members (and countless numbers of current and former university students), they have had an even greater impact on the bands. For reasons ranging from the feel of the stage to the acoustic quality of the music to the way musicians are treated at the venue, Ziggy's is a hit among artists. "They love playing here."

ZIGGY'S
433 Baity Street
Winston-Salem, North Carolina