



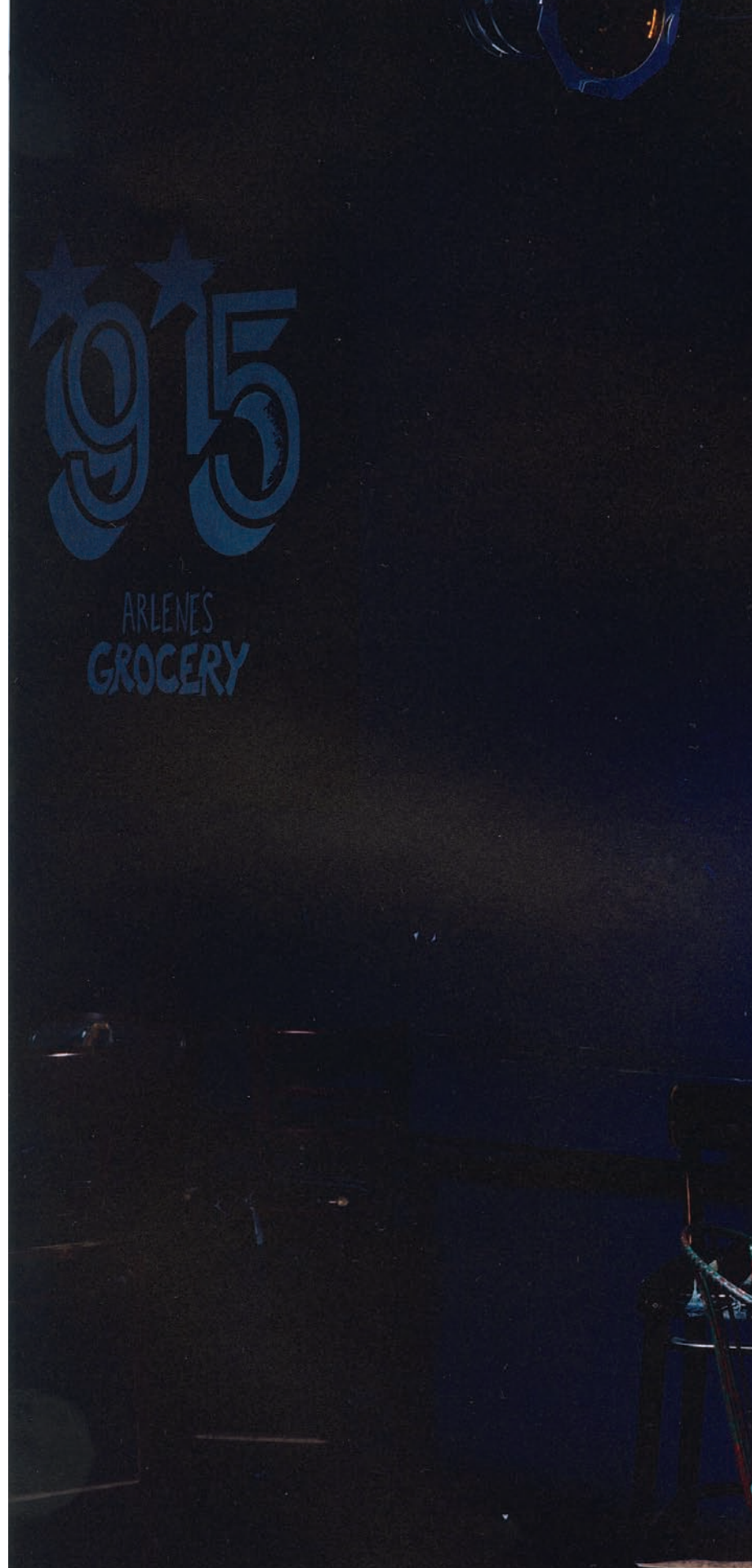
Moby is the Lower East Side's unlikeliest of elder statesmen. Maybe it's the glam video he made with Gwen Stefani for his 1999 hit "South Side," or the fact that his blockbuster *Play* album got major airtime in restaurants and lounges the world over. But the multiplatinum recording artist would seem the type to hide his celebrity far away in New York's ritziest of nooks, only leaving rare "Page Six" mentions from behind the velvet ropes at Chelsea hotspots. In reality, however, Moby putters around the Lower East Side—jumping onstage to play guitar with some of his favorite bands, knocking back an organic iced tea at his vegan café Teany, or simply catching the madness of punk rock karaoke at Arlene's Grocery. This is his neighborhood. The Harlem-born (148th Street to be exact), Connecticut-raised musician, who deejayed area bars back when the only pay they could offer him was a plate of spaghetti, has never lived more than an hour from New York's Lower East Side, and from his modest Little Italy apartment, only blocks from his stomping grounds, Moby speaks with *Room 100* about the area he's watched grow, struggle, thrive, and succeed for more than 15 years.

Room 100: What first drew you to the Lower East Side?

Moby: When I moved here in 1991, a lot of my friends were moving here because it was one of the only places in Lower Manhattan where the rent at the time was still really, really cheap. So people were able to experiment a lot more as far as opening bars and venues. If you opened a place like Collective Unconscious, at the time, their rent was probably \$500 a month.

What has kept the area relevant throughout the years? One of the things that keeps it relevant is just the fact that—I don't know how the community board ever went along with it—there are just so many bars and nightclubs and restaurants. Normally they do everything in their power to prevent that from happening, but somehow they just kind of went along with it. There's also a geographic function. Brooklyn is the most populous part of New York City. And the Lower East Side is right next door to it. If you live in Williamsburg or Greenpoint or Bedford-Stuyvesant or Red Hook, it's pretty easy to get to the Lower East Side, whereas if you live in Bed-Stuy, trying to get to the Upper West Side is an hour-long trip as opposed to a ten-minute trip.

Where can we hear the Lower East Side in your music? In the mid-to-late '90s, all of a sudden I started hearing all these bands who were inspired by the



Here we are now, going to the Lower East Side...

FROM SONIC YOUTH TO THE STROKES, THE **L.E.S.** HAS PROVED FERTILE BREAKING GROUND FOR RAUCOUS BANDS FOR DECADES NOW—AND IT SHOWS NO SIGNS OF LETTING UP. DOWNTOWN DENIZEN **MOBY** STILL HOLDS COURT, WHILE A WHOLE NEW BROOD OF ROCKERS—ASOBI SEKSU, THE BIG SLEEP, AND DRAGONS OF ZYNTH AMONG THEM—CUT THEIR TEETH AT SOME OF THE MOST VITAL CLUBS IN THE CITY.

STORY AARON RICHTER PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL SCHMELLING

Moby, photographed at Arlene's Grocery, 95 Stanton Street.

music I'd grown up with. It was almost as if musicians who lived in New York and the Lower East Side aggressively turned their back on alternative rock from the '90s. No one sounded like Bush, and no one sounded like Limp Bizkit. Instead they were sounding like Echo and the Bunnymen, Joy Division, Hüsker Dü and the Pixies. I can remember being in some bar on Ludlow Street and the DJ was playing ESG and Suicide and the Gun Club. It was so interesting that the 20-year-old DJ was re-presenting me with music I had loved when I was growing up.


What still draws you to live near, participate in, and support the music that's being created there? Part of it is just an enthusiasm, and part of it is that so much music has come out of that neighborhood in the last six years. If you think of the list of bands who've come out of there, it's pretty remarkable—from Norah Jones to the Strokes to TV on the Radio to Interpol to the Scissor Sisters—and everyone started at Arlene's Grocery or everybody started at Piano's or Mercury Lounge. It's amazing that tens of millions of records have been sold by bands who all, at one point, were playing to five people at Arlene's Grocery.

You must attract attention when you go out in your neighborhood. Why wouldn't you feel more comfortable, say, in a house in Westchester? Even though ultimately I'm a WASP from Connecticut, I feel like I've become Woody Allen. For me, quality of life is so much based on stimulus and convenience. Living here, it's so easy. If you want soy milk at three o'clock in the morning, you go buy soy milk at three o'clock in the morning. If there's a night where you have nothing to do, you choose from one of 50 movie theaters or off-Broadway plays or 100 venues.

People like to attribute the cultural richness of spots like the Lower East Side to this somewhat-romantic melting pot effect. But it seems like competition plays a larger role than people would like to admit. Yeah, there's that healthy dialectic between support and competition. All these people in different bands and different deejays and different singers and different musicians—they all want to be the ones to succeed. But they also don't want to burn any bridges. I don't know if there's a lot of genuine altruism. I don't think there are too many musicians who genuinely want their friends to succeed. Everyone's selfish. Everyone's self-interested. But at the same time, they're all going out to see each other's bands. And they're all having nights when there are four or five bands on a bill. So it seems to me to be pretty healthy. I can imagine if you're a 22-year-old kid living in Greenpoint and your band is playing in the Lower East Side, in the back of your head, you're thinking, "Oh, this is how Interpol started. This is how TV on the Radio started. This is how the Rapture started." It's a scene that can fuel aspiration.

What's your definitive L.E.S. evening? It would begin with food. I'm a vegan so—actually there isn't much apart from [my café] Teany—maybe Tien Garden, maybe Caravan of Dreams on 6th between First and A, or Kate's Joint on Avenue B and 4th Street. Go out to dinner there. Then head to Tonic to see a band play, then over to Arlene's Grocery for punk rock karaoke, which I love, and stumble out of there, and honestly, if it's a Sunday, Monday or Tuesday night and if I'm not drinking with my friends, for better or worse, I just end up at [the bar] Max Fish. I think the first time I went there was fifteen years ago and every time I go there, which is once every three or four months, I'm still surprised because you see people you haven't seen in ten years. Max Fish is the only place at three in the morning on a Sunday that there are going to be interesting people, and I like how counter-intuitive it is. It's too bright, and the music's not very loud. Somehow at 3:30 in the morning when you've been drinking cheap domestic beer all night, it makes perfect sense.





The Big Sleep, photographed
at Pianos, 158 Ludlow Street.

The Big Sleep Don't be fooled by the name: The Big Sleep has perhaps the most thunderous sound to emit from a New York band since Sonic Youth. Typically, people blame the guitarist—in this case, Danny Barria—which is exactly where The Big Sleep drummer Gabe Rhodes turns when pinpointing the source of his band's monsoon gust of a sound. "The volume is the by-product of a certain intensity that we all have as people," adds Rhodes, noting that the band's bassist and occasional vocalist (and, not to mention, Barria's wife) Sonya Balchandani brings a haunting chameleonic presence behind the microphone with wispy, ethereal vocals that ground even the hardest-driving songs in melody. The largely instrumental trio left eardrums throbbing at L.E.S. staple venue Piano's, an intimate, two-story mainstay that routinely hosts hipster bands long before the likes of *Rolling Stone* discover them. "When we feel the best, it's when an audience is mesmerized and we can sort of knock 'em on their ass a bit," Rhodes says. "That's what a live show should be!"

Asobi Seksu

For Asobi Seksu's vocalist-keyboardist Yuki Chikudate, singing in her native tongue, Japanese, sometimes just makes more sense than English. "Japanese is very syllabic and very rhythmic," Chikudate says of her bilingual vocal tendencies. "It's fun to work with syncopation and more jagged rhythms in Japanese. I also feel like I can say whatever I want in Japanese. I can say the most ridiculous things." Case in point: "Strawberries," off the New York band's highly acclaimed sophomore album, *Citrus*. "It's literally about a field of talking strawberries," says Chikudate, whose shoe-gazer quartet layers enormous, cloudlike guitar swatches over her gumdrop vocals, effortlessly balancing the realms of chaos and control. It's just the type of sophisticated sound well suited for the L.E.S.'s elegant new 5,000-square-foot venue, The Box, whose owner Simon Hammerstein, a grandson of Oscar Hammerstein, is bringing in both live music and fine dinner theater. Meanwhile, Asobi Seksu—whose name is a Japanese slang term meaning "playful sex"—are currently dreaming up new material for release later this year. Expect them to continue bearing the torch for all New York City art-rockers whose dreams are still filled with images of Thurston Moore, Kim Gordon, and Creation Records.

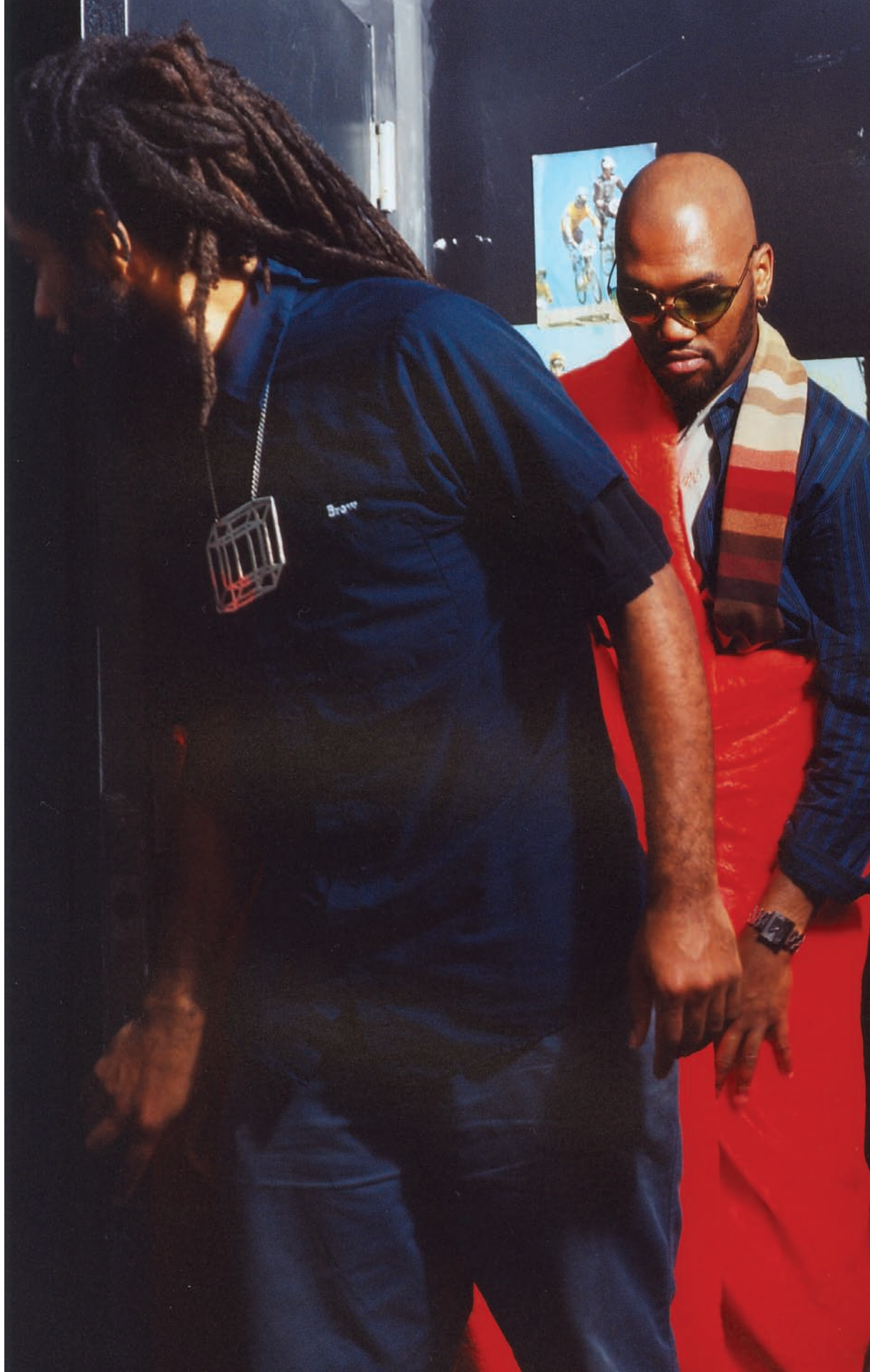




Asobi Seksu, photographed
in the dressing room at The Box,
189 Christie Street.

Dragons of Zynth

The moment Aku Orraca Tetteh added keyboards to recordings his twin brother Akwetey had made with a friend in Long Island, sparks flew. Together, the twins formed Dragons of Zynth (now a five-piece) and gave birth to a new fusion of rock, jazz, and experimental noise called Afrotek, which, they explain, ties the body and soul to music. "Everything works in a complete sound that can be provocative," Aku Orraca Tetteh says. "For me, it's about the movement of the body. We're Ghanaian, so a lot of the music that we grew up on and that we still listen to is definitely present in the sound of Afrotek." Veterans of the New York City urban music scene since they helped with the rise of rapper Mos Def and Rawkus Records in the '90s, the brothers are now getting their own moment in the spotlight. Having recorded a new album with members of TV on the Radio, entitled *Coronation Thieves* (due out in spring), and collaborated with Massive Attack on a handful of the trip-hop group's upcoming material, Dragons of Zynth continue to electrify such intriguing spaces as the L.E.S.'s bakery/record shop/bar/live venue, Cake Shop. The low stage and tight walls intensify the group's already-confrontational live shows that feature dragon-headed dancers and the brothers Tetteh thrusting themselves into the unsuspecting audience.





Dragons of Zynth, photographed at
Cake Shop, 152 Ludlow Street.