

# Whisky a Go Go: An Oral History

THE DOORS WERE THE HOUSE BAND. AND REGULAR GUESTS TO THE SUNSET STRIP'S WILDEST LIVE MUSIC CLUB INCLUDED THE RUNAWAYS (LED BY JOAN JETT), IGGY AND THE STOOGES, LED ZEPPELIN, VAN HALEN, X, GUNS N' ROSES, MÖTLEY CRÜE, AND SO MANY HAIR BANDS TO FOLLOW. HERE, SOME OF THE LIVING CASUALTIES TELL THEIR TALES—NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED. BY MATT DIEHL

When people think of the heyday of Los Angeles' fabled Sunset Strip, in reality they're most likely thinking of the Whisky a Go Go. Over the course of many musical incarnations, the live-music club would prove again and again to be the city's late-night lightning rod for the coolest crowds, fashion, and sounds, bringing a new threshold of cosmopolitanism to West Hollywood. The Whisky was opened and founded in 1964 by Elmer Valentine, who, despite an unlikely previous profession as a Chicago cop, quickly transformed the club into the Mecca of hip musical innovation. Johnny Rivers—of "Secret Agent Man" fame—was the Whisky's first big musical success, and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles even paid tribute to the legendary nightclub with their 1965 hit "Going to a GoGo." The Whisky would continue to be the cherished crucible for rock's greatest artists over many eras, from '60s legends like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and the Doors, to '70s bad boys like Led Zeppelin and the Stooges—and still is for rockers today. Indeed, the Whisky's stage provided the transition for everything from California folk rock and glam-bands like Joan Jett's Runaways—to punk rock, new wave, heavy metal, the grunge revolution, and beyond. Here, recollections by those that were there.

**Ron Asheton (guitarist, the Stooges):** The Whisky a Go Go was the big place in Los Angeles, the classic rock hangout like Max's Kansas City was for New York City. Elmer [Valentine] and Mario [Maglieri] ran the Whisky. Mario was the nighttime person, with the diamond pinky ring and powder blue suit. He was the manager, the guy on the floor, the heavy—he had the authority. Elmer was the owner. He reminded me of a school principal; quiet, not flashy.

**John Doe (singer/guitarist, X):** Valentine was a tall, thin, dry East Coast character—the kind of person you're immediately attracted to. When you looked out the windows of his office, it satisfied all your fantasies of a Hollywood nightclub. The hallway leading to the stage had these red linoleum tiles: when you realized Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix, and the Doors had all stood on those same tiles...that was magic.

**Ray Manzarek (keyboardist, The Doors):** In 1966, The Doors were the Whisky's house band, and we'd open for all the headliners. In our first week, the headliner was Van Morrison and Them. We had become friends, and by the end of week we were all jamming together on "Gloria"—Van Morrison and Jim Morrison, playing together onstage like cousins. It was a transcendent evening of rock!

**Ron Asheton:** There were strict rules at the Whisky. You'd get kicked out if you put your head on the table!

**Ray Manzarek:** We played "The End" for the first time at the Whisky, in the summer of 1966. When Jim sang the "Oedipal" section—"Father, I want to kill you/Mother, I want to fuck you"—we were fired. Fortunately, Robbie [Krieger, Doors guitarist] said to one of the owners, "It's Thursday—don't you want us to play the weekend?" So they said, "Okay, then, you're fired starting Sunday." And Jim asks, "Do we still have a bar tab until then?"

**Ron Asheton:** The Stooges first played the Whisky a couple times when we put out *Fun House* [1970]; we lived at the Whisky, we were such a part of the scene. Things got really crazy, though, during the *Raw Power* era a few years later. Other than The Doors and Chaka Khan, we were the first band to play the Whisky for a whole week. It was packed—such a big party, with a line around the corner into the parking lot. I got drunk with Keith Moon, there was a lot of coke, and all the groupies we were having sex with were there—"headliners" like the GTOs, Sable Starr and Lori Maddox; my brother [Stooges bassist Scott Asheton] got with Lori whenever Jimmy Page wasn't in town. People were into throwing shit back then—glasses, lit cigarettes, coins. [Stooges frontman] Iggy [Pop] would get rolling around in the mess, get cut up a bunch, then fall off the stage. Iggy was really going overboard because we were in L.A., and he tried to outdo himself every night. That was probably our worst and most decadent moment: for me, it was my addiction to sex, and for Iggy, a very bad drug time. One night it was time to do the second set, and Iggy had disappeared. Mario came into the dressing room screaming "Where's that fuckin Iggy?!" We couldn't find him. We looked everywhere except the utility closet, which is of course where he was: it was the size of a refrigerator, but there he was, passed-out naked. We woke him up and played our set. We felt like we'd been in combat.

**Joan Jett:** I started going to the Whisky when the Runaways formed; I was around 15 years old. The first time the Runaways played there, we opened for a band called the Hollywood Stars. I enjoyed playing there, especially because I lived behind a gas station across the street; at the time nobody was of age, so everybody would party at my house before going over. People were partying quite hard, so the details are not fresh in my mind. The Whisky provided the transitional home from '70s glam and hard rock to punk rock, both for out-of-town buzz bands from New York and the U.K. as well as the increasingly vital local L.A. punk scene.

PHOTO: HENRY DILTZ/CORBIS



I'M WITH THE BAND:  
PRODUCER KIM FOWLEY WITH THE  
RUNAWAYS (FROM LEFT) SANDY WEST,  
JOAN JETT, LITA FORD, JACKIE FOX, AND  
CHERIE CURRIE, DECEMBER 31, 1976.

**John Doe:** The Whisky was off limits to punk bands at first. The booker was against the whole punk rock thing. Then it became one of the focal points for the punk explosion. I remember seeing Blondie open for Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers there; Tom had just gotten out of Florida, and he was hungry. There were just 100 people there. We were like, "These guys are so good—why isn't anybody here?" I saw the Ramones, Television, Mink deVille—everyone played the Whisky. The Screamers and the Weirdos played there, too, and we all did well; the Go-Gos even opened for us several times. Our song "The Unwritten Music" was written about the Whisky.

**Joan Jett:** I saw a lot of amazing shows—people like Billy Idol with Generation X, and Devo, who really surprised me. They had perfectly greased hairdos and glasses, but when they played, they were very dirty, and their energy was very sweaty.

**Jerry Casale (bassist, Devo):** Joan was already a legend when we met her the first time we played the Whisky; I swear it was an opening slot for the Weirdos in June or July of 1977. We had already played the Starwood, so then the Whisky deemed us hip enough. We had met Marshall Berle, who was the proprietor there, and also the nephew of Milton Berle. Marshall was affable but condescending; he knew he was in charge of the oasis when you needed a drink of water. We played for free, in front of a crowd filled with the tastemakers from the punk scene; we were nervous, because these were the kids who decided who was good and who was shit. But we were really tight, and we had punk energy. There was plenty of moshing and gobbing from the crowd, which they'd learned from seeing footage of the Sex Pistols. During "Jocko Homo," [Devo frontman] Mark Mothersbaugh would go right into the crowd during the "Are we not men? We are Devo!" call-and-response part. We weren't sure if he'd get back on stage because it was pretty rough and nasty. They pulled off all of his clothes except his boxer shorts; Mark looked like he'd been in a fistfight.

**John Doe:** We had our way of dealing with the crowd. If they wouldn't stop, I would go down there and punch someone in the face; sometimes the police would have to come to break things up. It was pretty raucous, and that was part of the attraction. We were living a dangerous life and we liked that.

**Jerry Casale:** All bands went to the Whisky to watch the other bands—the Dils were there, the Germs, X; you felt the competition. And when [L.A. punk fanzine] *Slash* gave us a good review of our Whisky show, that proved to be our catapult.

**Joan Jett:** Around '78-'79, the Germs, and especially X, were really amazing as part of the scene around the Whisky. X were so respected as artists in the true sense: they were a fun party band, but they had more important things to sing about than just getting fucked up every night.

**Ray Manzarek:** Many years after the Doors played the Whisky, my wife and I went to go hear a new punk rock band called X. They were incredible: [frontwoman] Exene and John Doe would do these vaguely Chinese, Schoenberg-style harmonies. Four songs in, my wife asks me "Do you recognize this song?" I said no. She pointed out they were playing [the Doors' song] "Soul Kitchen"—but at 1000 rpms! After that I was hooked, and went on to produce the next four X albums. They were the number-one band in Los Angeles—and the number one punk band in all of America.

**John Doe:** Ray was always a great supporter; from early rock and roll to '60s psychedelia to the '70s punk era, we were just lucky to be a part of that heritage. And when we looked outside the dressing room and saw a line around the block, we thought in some fashion we'd arrived. The Whisky was like a home: we could get dinner for free if we didn't overstay our welcome, which we did a couple times. The night Exene's sister was killed on the way to a show in a car wreck, we went ahead and played the show; it was a life-changing event. Danny Sugarman, in one

of the few good things he did in his life, brought us a bottle of whiskey, and we got through the show somehow. We poured our feelings into the performance, and it was cathartic. The Whisky would prove to be a bridge between the old and new Hollywood—a place where boldfaced celebs could make the scene and hang out with the freaks du jour.

**Ron Asheton:** The best thing about the Whisky shows was we would buy all the celebrities drinks. Max Baer, Jr., who played Jethro Bodine on "The Beverly Hillbillies," came in one night—he was dressed in his finest clothes, covered in gold chains. When he walked up, I was like, *this is too cool*. The GTOs started screaming "Jethro! Jethro!" He was a little disconcerted, like, "Don't call me Jethro!" Then our tour manager comes down and says, "There's a girl outside who says her grandfather was in 'The Three Stooges.'" That's how we got our name, from me loving "The Three Stooges"! It was Larry Fine's granddaughter, so I got to meet him at the Motion Picture Rest Home.

**Jerry Casale:** The second time we played the Whisky, the celebrities started coming to check us out. That's when Candy Clark, Toni Basil, Dean Stockwell and Iggy Pop all showed up. Leonard Cohen was there, too, but I didn't know who he was; same with Iggy Pop. I was irritated because we had to change into our stage clothes and people were hanging around backstage. There was this one guy with chopped-up hair and little reading glasses sitting against the wall in the dressing room; he looked like he'd already lived a few lives. I asked who he was and he said "I'm Iggy Pop"; I said "Yeah, right!" He got really pissed off. That night, Candy Clark decided I was worth bestowing her charms on—she picked me up right off the stage and said "I want you tonight!" By the early '80s, the hair-metal era had overtaken punk as the Sunset Strip's dominant flavor, which caused decidedly mixed feelings among Whisky diehards.

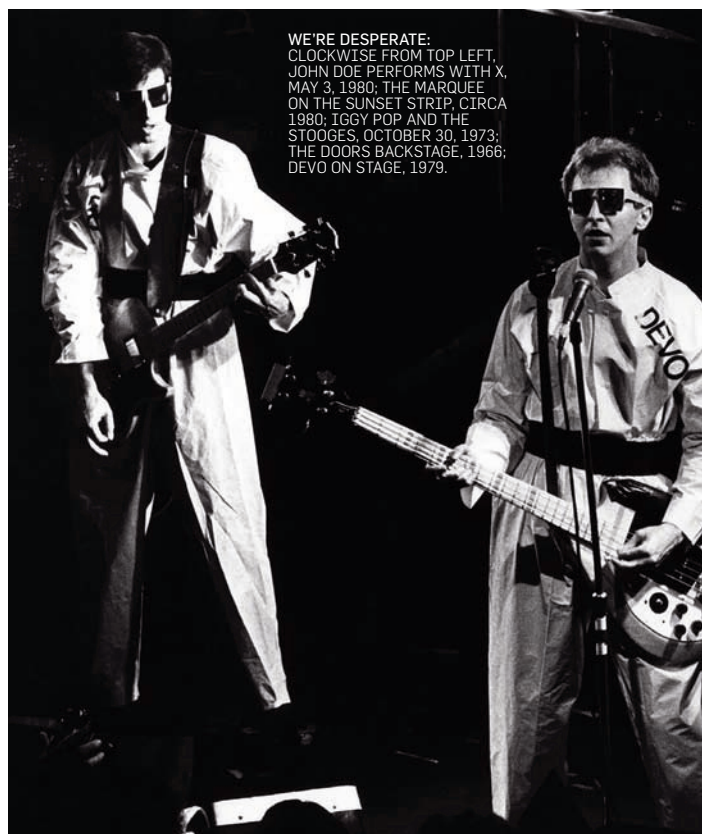
**Greg Dulli (frontman, the Afghan Whigs and Twilight Singers):** I saw a couple metal shows at the Whisky in the early '80s: cheeseballs in spandex, makeup and poofed-out hair were everywhere. That was right around when Guns N' Roses were starting up.

**John Doe:** When hair metal hit the Whisky around '83, well, we'd moved on. That was a sad part of the history: women were second class—that scene had all the stupid shit that punk rock tried to put aside. The music was shit, too. By the early '90s, a new musical revolution was underfoot, and once again the Whisky would be there to capture it. Even before Nirvana hit with "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the Whisky would serve as a crucial L.A. showcase for them and other grunge/alternative bands like Mudhoney, Soundgarden and the Afghan Whigs right as they came into the height of their powers.

**Greg Dulli:** I saw Dream Syndicate at the Whisky in '84, and it was one of the big revelations of my musical awakening. I had read about the Doors, so I was well prepared for the lusty pageantry of the room, and there were beautiful women everywhere. If you're a kid from the Midwest, you hear about the Hollywood Babylon of rock 'n' roll, and that was one of the temples. When I finally played there with the Afghan Whigs on the *Gentlemen* tour in 1993, I was thrilled. I'm pretty sure I went pretty rock 'n' roll that night—so much so that I don't really remember that gig. After a series of fits and starts since that heyday, the Whisky has swung back and forth in terms of relevance; flashes of the old magic, however, are not unheard of.

**Ray Manzarek:** In November 2006, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Doors with a party at the Whisky. It was a riotous event: there were more people packed in there than I had ever seen before—wild, Dionysian types of people. That night, we rocked out with the young rockers: I played with Perry Farrell, Slash, Chester Bennington of Linkin Park. It was equal in passion and power to what we'd experienced in 1966: we had truly come full circle at the Whisky.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN DOE & MARQUEE PHOTOS; GARY LEONARD/CORBIS; IGGY POP & THE STOOGES; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/CORBIS; THE DOORS; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/CORBIS; DEVO; GEORGE ROSE/BETTY IMAGES



**WE'RE DESPERATE:**  
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT,  
JOHN DOE PERFORMS WITH X,  
MAY 3, 1980; THE MARQUEE  
ON THE SUNSET STRIP, CIRCA  
1980; IGGY POP AND THE  
STOOGES, OCTOBER 30, 1973;  
THE DOORS BACKSTAGE, 1966;  
DEVO ON STAGE, 1979.

