

MAY 24

## I used to go to Barbarellas

### People and bands and music and sticky carpet make places



Birmingham... Barbarellas.

I've been working up a few posts for [Time Out Brum](#) of late. Some of them are on local music history, including [this one on lost venues](#). It's had a big reaction, and I'm now looking at more stories that have come my way. **Thank you!** And keep them coming.

We've lost a lot of venues over the years. It's sad to seem them go, of course; hardest on the people who made a particular place what it was. There was a great book published last year about [JBs](#) in Dudley. There's memories aplenty scattered around on websites. But there really isn't enough about one place I spent lots of time either DJing or sticking to the carpet: the primo 70s and 80s Rock venue in

### Hey, where did Cumberland Street go?

Barbs was great... until it wasn't. Times changed, and the place staggered on through those changing times, the death of Classic Rock and the rise of Disco, until the end of the 80s. The place was finally flattened around 2000, as Birmingham's Broad Street Brindley Place redevelopment began in earnest. The club was at the bottom end of Cumberland Street, which at the time looked remarkably like bits of Digbeth look now – old beat-up Victorian houses, smashed into workshops and warehouses. It was, essentially, a light industrial area at the time. And that meant you could make a lot of noise.



'Cumberland Street' in 2015. No loon pants in sight.

Now? Cumberland street still exists – in a way. It's two pedestrianised bits around a central square with aspirational posh eateries, Free Radio at one end and the Ikon Gallery at the other.

I DJ'd there on Sunday nights, when it was 50p in and the place put on local bands. By the time I started, Barbs had long switched from being an upmarket (ish) late night supper-club to a rock venue. But the black and white pictures of old big bands and crooners still lined the walls. Most nights, **Patti Bell** was on the door. You then walked up a wide corridor, lit in garish red, and came into the main room at the raised bar level, where the carpet was especially squidgy, and you could look over to the stage on your right. The DJ booth was across the room, next to the stage. And there was another raised area at the furthest end of the room, with its own bar. Total capacity? I have absolutely no idea. But I do know that whatever it was, it was exceeded, regularly.

### A roll-call of Classic Rock. And Punk

It was one of **Eddie Fawcett's** many clubs. **John Tully** booked the bands. But it also happened to be the place to watch UK up and comers and US bands who were breaking big. The roll-call was jaw-dropping: a literal Who's Who of classic rock and early punk. **Dire Straits**, **UFO**, **AC/DC**, **Thin Lizzy**, **Horslips**, **Judas Priest**, **The Police**, **The Steve Gibbons Band**, **The Clash**, **Talking Heads**. **The Stranglers**, **Sex Pistols**, **Generation X**, **Deaf School**, **The Sensational Alex Harvey Band**, **Blondie**, **Steve Miller**, **The Fabulous Thunderbirds**, **XTC**, **Chris Rea**, **Slade**, **Osibisa**, **Manfred Mann's Earth Band**, **Buzzcocks**, **The Ramones**, **Lindisfarne**, **Queen**, **Siouxsie and The Banshees**, **Simple Minds**... The list goes on forever. This is a heavily edited selection. If it was a major or particularly interesting gig, you'd find rock royalty up at the top bar – Plant and Bonham were regulars.

When Punk came in, they opened up a separate room. It became a second home for mohicans, extravagant make-up and piercings. You'd have prog-rock and mainstream on the big stage, and plastic bag dresses and gobbing round the side.



### The night Priest blew the place up

The night **Judas Priest** did their last Barbs show, I was down there DJing. The band had finally gained traction after a sluggish start and an iffy first album. Next stop would be the Odeon, and then the big arenas. But that night, it was Priest and a packed room of pumped rockers. So I rolled out the headbanger faves – Quo, Free, Black Dog and Rock and Roll from Zep, Starfucker from the Stones, Paranoid. The room was cooking when I stepped out from the booth, walked centre stage and brought the band on.

### BOOM.

Oops. Priest had rigged up a few too many smoke bombs to herald their arrival on stage. I could hardly see to get off stage. In fact everybody could hardly see. It took about twenty minutes for Barbarella's creaky ventilation system to fix things.

### People make places

Barbarellas staff were brilliant. Alongside **Patti** on the door, and the New Wave and later New Romantic crew who clustered around her, Barbs had a regular DJ. **Wayne Hughes**, who could not have been more helpful. His wife **Christine** worked behind the bar. Happy days: for me, it was hours of DJing in your face rock to an up for it head-banging crowd, topped off by a solid band. Sunday nights meant a late arrival home, half-out (Southern Comfort was my choice at the time, I'm sorry to say), my ears ringing, after catching the best of the Birmingham 70s scene. That one weekly gig paid me pretty much the same as my weekly salary at BRMB.

Of course, it's gone, along with dozens of others. Cities continually reinvent themselves, and Birmingham is no exception. Sadly, as rents go up, places like Barbs are squeezed out. It's sad to see venues disappear – at least two more have shut down this Spring. But it's inevitable. And as venues close, others open. There's a [new venue on Broad Street](#), for the first time in years, and the [Fiddle and Bone](#) is back as well, which is excellent news.



It's always the way. We miss the loss of a facility, and we regret the shrinking number of city centre venues, which is more serious.

But what we really mourn when a place like Barbs goes is the loss of a part of our lives.

### Links

While they're still there, check this [really interesting set](#) of very iffy bootlegs on YouTube, of major acts at Barbs. And here's my list of [lost and historic venues](#) on Time Out Brum.

### See more on [venues](#) on Radio To Go



## Sign up to the mailing list for weekly updates

Posted 24th May 2015 by [Radio To Go](#)

Labels: [Barbarellas](#), [Birmingham](#), [Classic Rock](#), [Club](#), [Judas Priest](#), [Music](#), [Nostalgia](#), [Photos](#), [Punk rock](#), [The Clash](#)

- Mark Evans** 24 May 2015 at 12:05  
 The best place to see a band. . . saw so many great people there. George Thorogood, Stray Cats, Frankie Miller, The Jam, Albertos los trios, Man, Cheap Trick, Robin Trower, plus more and who could forget Boogie Beer. . . Awful tittle!  
[Reply](#)
- Angelina Clementina** 24 May 2015 at 12:06  
 I remember being there when the original Ultravox were playing it was magic  
[Reply](#)
- Mick Howson** 24 May 2015 at 12:07  
 Saw loads of bands at Barbarellas but the best moments were Freddie King ,Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen, people were literally dancing on the tables and Country Gazette. it was also a great showcase for local bands where Little Acre were my favourites.  
[Reply](#)
- Ade Wakelin** 24 May 2015 at 12:08  
 I played there in the 70's with The Spliffs. I remember being shocked at the state of the place with all the lights up during the sound check and can confirm that the carpet was indeed very sticky!  
[Reply](#)
- Dee Aston** 24 May 2015 at 12:11  
 After watching Roxy Music at the Odeon, I went to Barbs to see Iggy Pop. £6 all in.  
[Reply](#)
- Maurice Linton** 24 May 2015 at 12:12  
 Walked in one night and a couple of punks were making out on the carpet! Billy Idol stormed off stage that night apparently the punk star objected to being spat at on stage!!!!  
[Reply](#)
- John Poole** 24 May 2015 at 12:14  
 So many great nights at Barbs - Blondie, Graham Parker & the Rumour, Chuck Berry, Stranglers, Cockney Rebel, Frankie Miller, a very young Leo Sayer, John Cooper Clarke. Feet stuck to the carpet with a plastic glass of weak lager-happy days!  
[Reply](#)
- Michael Ware** 24 May 2015 at 12:28  
 It wasn't just a place to see groups. I saw Freddy Starr, Bernard Manning, Charlie Williams and others there, but the biggest crowds always seemed to be when the Drifters were on.  
[Reply](#)
- Julian Crook** 24 May 2015 at 14:14  
 Saw some great bands there ... Played (& got through) the local heat of Melody Maker mag Battle of the Bands there with my own band of chums in 78 ... our Moms & Dads came along for support - I don't recall them returning again  
[Reply](#)
- Pogus Caesar** 24 May 2015 at 14:16  
 So many stories of great gigs. Kool & The Gang, Herbie Hancock, Al Green, James Brown, Thin Lizzy, Ian Drury and the list goes on.  
[Reply](#)
- Lili Vandiver** 24 May 2015 at 17:07  
 The early to mid seventies 70s were amazing there...saw many great bands including an old Chicago blues one armed harmonica named VBig John Wrencher who we rescued after his band deserted him and went off to party. he was in a bad way with gout and we took him to the accident hospital to be looked at. He needed a week of bed rest so he came and stayed at ours. Sadly he died about a decade later, but we had kept in touch on and off over that time period.  
[Reply](#)
- Damian Sullivan** 25 May 2015 at 10:41  
 Went a few times. Saw the Members, City Boy I think, Fashion and the Merton Parkas. Kicked off that night bottles flying got chased up to the canal near Bobby Browns. madness. I could at least run in them days. Met Martin Degville in the 1oo. Saw Khan and Bell there - beautiful and unobtainable woman to a teenager. Know Steve Gibbons was married to one of these lovely ladies - happy days - a life time ago.  
[Reply](#)
- mike davies** 26 May 2015 at 09:59  
 I used to review there regularly for melody maker and sounds. I remember seeing the first UK tour by Talking Heads there. Also AC/DC, which was the first time I'd seen someone play guitar without it being plugged in to an amp. Initially, we thought he was miming! I remember the Spizz Energy gig when he overran and they cut the power, he carried on singing I've been switched off. Of course the crowd could be harsh. Remember Suicide being booted off amid a hail of disapprovals. I also remember going backstage to see the Ramones on their first appearance and Joey having a tantrum because he couldn't find shampoo to wash his hair. Also, remember the chess playing 'bouncer', anyone?  
[Reply](#)

**Anonymous** 26 May 2015 at 18:50  
 Many happy memories of Barbarellas. First gig I saw there was The Fatback Band supported by Heatwave – as a chilled out follower of English folkies, I remember being amazed at the energy generated on the stage! Then a year or two later, having to persuade the bouncer to let us into the "Private Function" room where the punk bands had started playing, as we looked too straight to be let in (even after I'd abandoned the flared jeans!). Then there was the night the management upped the entry price to £3 from the standard £2.50, and regular visitors XTC couldn't work out why they received such a negative response from a normally enthusiastic crowd). And the night that The Clash played a surprise gig there after the council pulled the plug on their planned show at The Rag Market ... great times!!  
[Reply](#)

**John Slater** 26 May 2015 at 22:53  
 Boy George told me that, when he was working in Oasis indoor market, he used to sneak into Barbarellas by climbing through the toilet windows. He also had a story about consoling a girl he found sitting, crying outside Barbs; it was Annie Lennox. When it closed down, the DJ booth and sound equipment, including all the mirror-covered woodwork, was shipped out to Polyannas in Newhall Street.  
[Reply](#)

**Anonymous** 29 May 2015 at 01:33  
 John Slater? Mike Davies? Robin Valk?  
 All in one place? Am I dreaming?  
 I never got to Barbarella's, but those folk were my substitute (in a good way). Happy days.  
 Where are they now...  
[Reply](#)

To leave a comment, click the button below to sign in with Google.

[Load more](#)