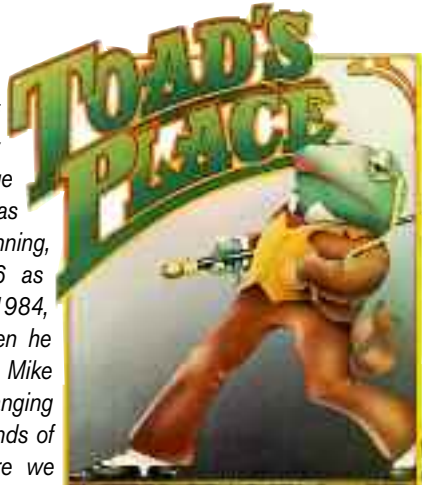


# What These Walls Have Heard!

By Mary M. Donohue

As my interview with club owner Brian Phelps began, the story of Toad's Place and other small, gritty clubs in countless American college towns unfolded. Phelps, who has been there almost since the beginning, joined Toad's in October 1976 as manager, becoming part owner in 1984, and gaining control in 1995, when he bought out founder and co-owner Mike Spoerndle, has booked bands ranging from jazz and blues greats to legends of rock to today's emo bands. Here we present a short history in pictures.



The bright green awning in the middle of a New Haven retail block announces Toad's Place with a depiction of a green toad dressed in a three-piece suit "trucking" down the sidewalk. The original owners chose a toad (who looks more like a frog) to represent the French restaurant they had opened on the site in 1975. A tiny toad ornaments the club's first menu.

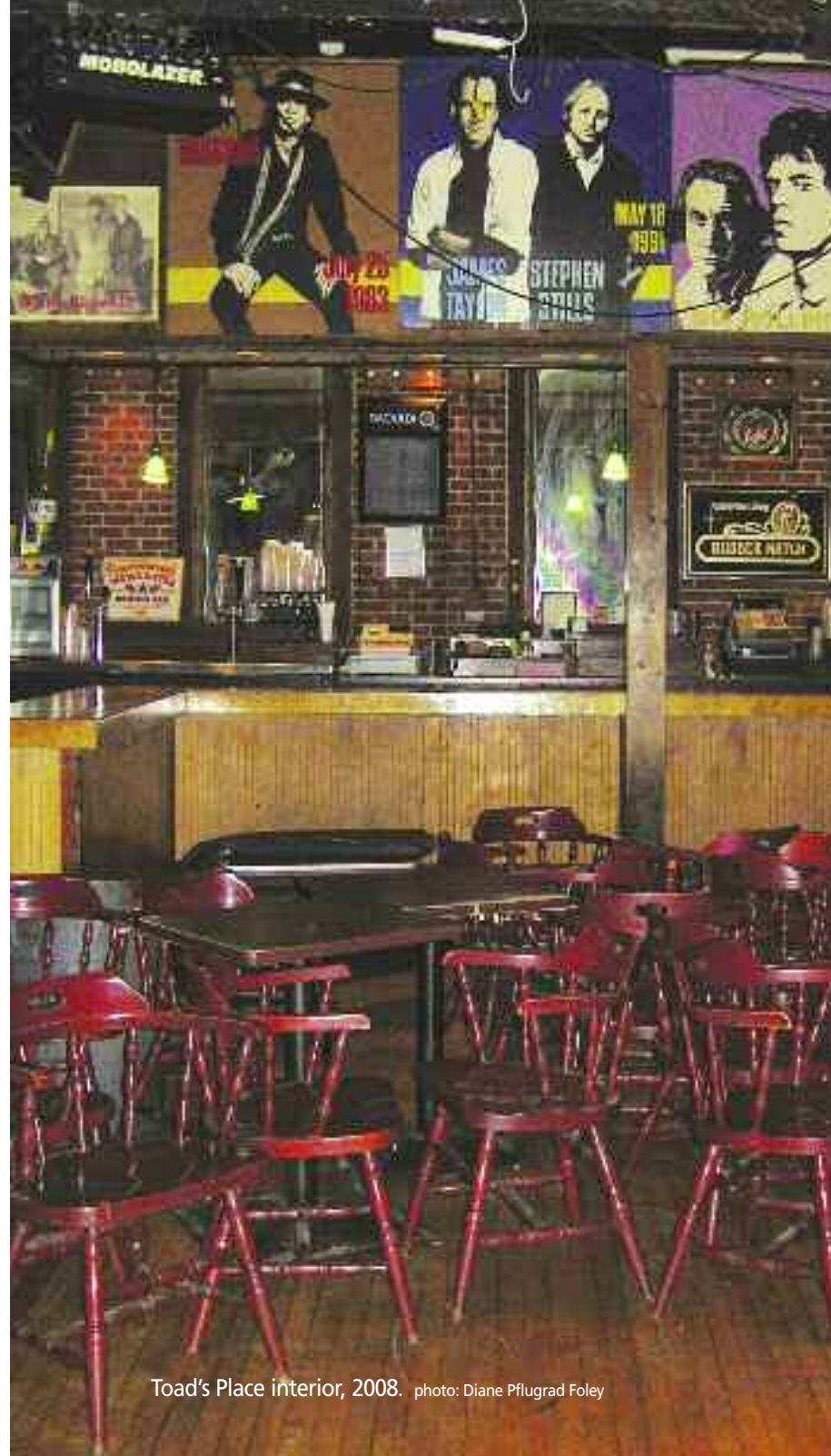
Inside the club, the walls are covered with a vintage patina of posters promoting the hundreds of acts that have performed there, autographed photos, beer signs, and dust. The performance space is tight, with a large, square bar in the center, hardwood floors, and a small main stage. For many years, a chain link fence separated the over-21 set (allowed to drink, so sequestered by the rear bar) from the younger patrons. A second bar area off the main stage has a rainforest theme. Because there's no stage door in the back, bands must unload their equipment on the street and wheel it through the front door. Very simple, Spartan dressing rooms are in the basement—within spitting distance of some of the most rustic restrooms on record.

Toad's longevity is based largely on its embrace of a huge range of live-music genres. Opened only two years after the legendary nightclub CBGB's in New York City, Toad's (like CBGB's) looked for touring legends and unsigned bands playing original music. Toad's relies on a booking agent in Providence, Rhode Island that books acts for four clubs (including the second Toad's, in Richmond, Virginia, that opened in 2007). Local bands are booked on-site by a Toad's staff member.

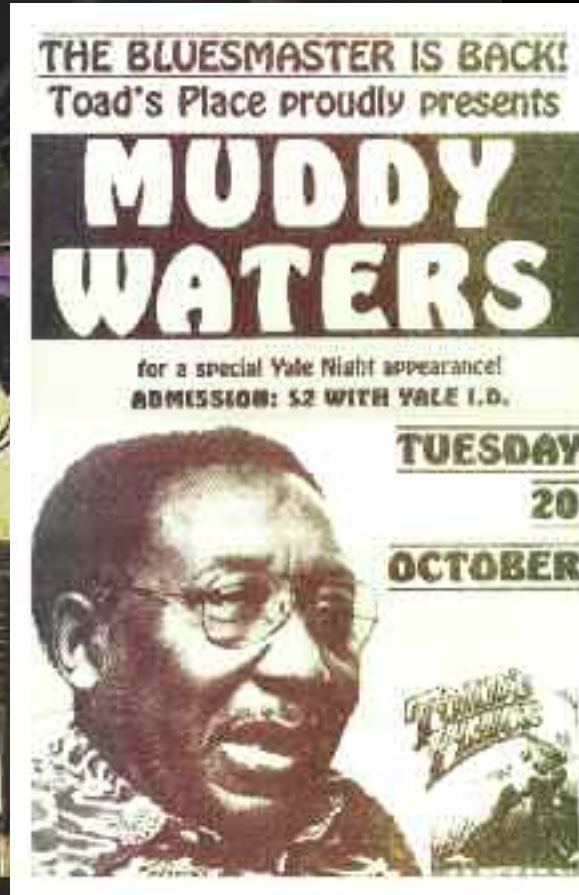
Small clubs face a tough market, including competition from large venues and the casinos with their multiple concert settings. CBGB's, despite its loyal following and legend status, closed in 2006. But authenticity can't be faked. Toad's proud track record, its wall-to-wall posters, sticky floors, and stale-beer smell give this rock shrine its enduring character.

**Special thanks to Brian Phelps, who unscrewed the Plexiglas that protects the vintage posters and signed photos that decorate the walls at Toad's to let us choose images for this photo essay.**

left: Toad's Place logo. In 1975, three partners opened a French restaurant on York Street in New Haven, but within a year they began booking bluegrass music with bands like the Helium Brothers. The restaurant was soon replaced by a nightclub called "Toad's Place." Squeezed into the front part of the building, the club shared the location with an architect's office in the back.



Toad's Place interior, 2008. photo: Diane Pflugrad Foley



above: The legendary Toad's Place in New Haven.

left: Early menu. In the early years, when beer sold for 10 cents a glass, Toad's featured all the blues greats:

B.B. King, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Buddy Guy. An empty lot at the end of the block offered plenty of parking, and Toad's attracted mature blues and jazz audiences. When Yale's campus expansion claimed the lot, it grew harder to lure older audiences. Toad's shifted its offerings to rock, metal, and hip hop to appeal to younger audiences.

left: Poster for Muddy Waters's appearance, 1981. Currently holding 750 standing patrons, Toad's hosts blues, jazz, metal, reggae, dance, house, techno, punk, folk, country, rock, alt, and emo groups. Saturday night dance parties, begun in 1981, are packed with an endless supply of students from area colleges and universities including Yale, Southern Connecticut State, Quinnipiac, and Albertus Magnus.

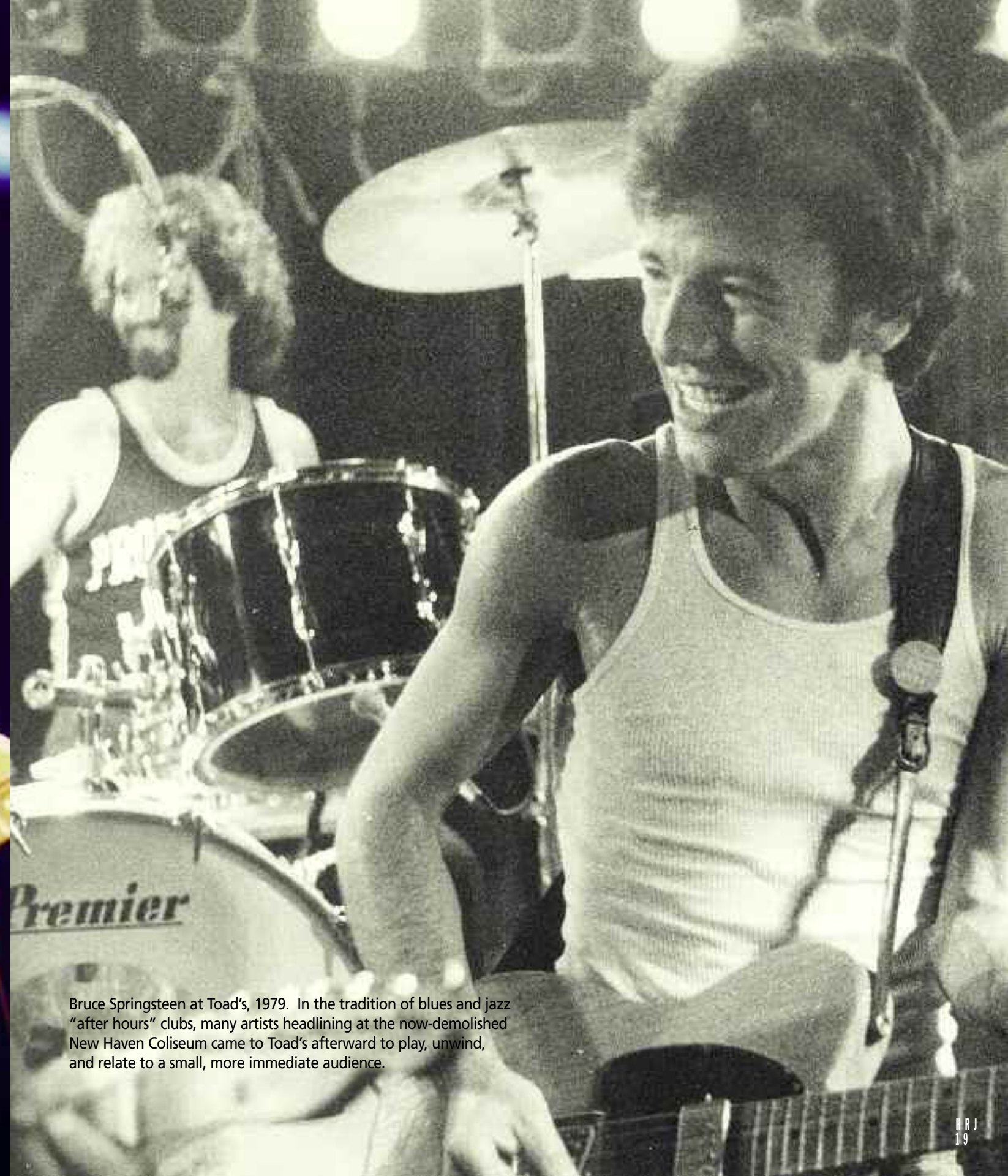


above: On August 13, 1989, without tipping off fans or the press, the Rolling Stones kicked off their "Steel Wheels" tour on the Toad's stage to fans who just happened to be there. Phelps says this is the kind of contact with the artists and unpredictable "anything can happen" atmosphere he cherishes.

right: Trying out new material, Bob Dylan took the stage for six hours on June 12, 1990, sometimes playing the same song twice. This show, perhaps the longest in Dylan's career and his first nightclub gig in 25 years, was named by Roger Catlin, music critic of *The Hartford Courant*, as one of the "10 Unforgettable Concerts by Bob Dylan."

inset below: U2, a new band on the scene in 1980 (note Toad's t-shirt on band member at left). During their first set on December 14, 1980, the band is said to have gotten into a fight with another opening act leaving the stage after only a few songs. However, they were back twice in 1981.

inset lower right: Toad's Place's Brian Phelps with the Ramones, regarded as America's first punk rock group. Photo taken before 1988.



Bruce Springsteen at Toad's, 1979. In the tradition of blues and jazz "after hours" clubs, many artists headlining at the now-demolished New Haven Coliseum came to Toad's afterward to play, unwind, and relate to a small, more immediate audience.



right: Queen Latifa, 1990s. Supported by New Haven's own hip hop community, as early as the 1980s rap pioneers DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince (better known today as actor Will Smith), Grandmaster Flash, Public Enemy, Ice T, Naughty by Nature, and Queen Latifah played at Toads. Performances were raw, with rappers counting on the ability to "flow," inventing lyrics as they went. The intimate setting allowed rappers to literally reach out and high-five their fans, connect with them, take requests, and do "call-and-response" with the audience.



above: In his first club date after releasing his 1977 "Bat Out of Hell" album, Meatloaf fell off the Toad's stage, leaving him with a permanent scar on his leg. Clubs were vital to promoting new releases, a function now largely filled by the Internet.



left: Bob Seger played the club in 1980.

Toad's Place, 300 York Street, New Haven.  
For information on upcoming concerts call (203)562-5589,  
e-mail [toadsplac@aol.com](mailto:toadsplac@aol.com), or visit [www.toadsplace.com](http://www.toadsplace.com).