

Scritti Pollitti just sounds . . . well, you get the idea.

The solution is alternative music, which is not merely hard-core (no ballads, you slam—rather than dance—to it) stuff. It's any style, from folk to funk, as long as it's new and different. You aren't likely to find it on pop radio. Maybe someday a few new-music bands will hit the mainstream airwaves, because in one sense alternative music is something that's a bit ahead of its time. But most will stay in or close to its underground origins—*always* too weird to be generally accepted. At least, I hope so.

And unless you have a great local club or a record shop that stocks indie labels (recordings from small, independent companies), you'll probably have to travel to hear the alternative sound. Knowing this, I set out to find the best cities and venues for raw music of every kind. I came up with four towns that have, or are quickly acquiring, a reputation for music that is beyond new: New York City, Madison, Wisconsin; San Francisco; and Nashville.

One more thing. I'm from New Jersey. What does the spawning ground of Bruce Springsteen, Frank Sinatra, and Connie Francis have to do with alternative music? Nothing, of course. That's why I needed some locally famous alternative musicians as guides to the best clubs and bands in each city. As Hemingway was known as a real "writers' writer," this is a real musicians' music tour. Any complaints, take 'em up with them, not me.

The center of the musical—as well as the rest of the known—universe is here, as any New Yorker will tell you. You can find a staggering amount of free-to-five-bucks experimental sounds if you know where to look, says Dave Soldier, of the Soldier String Quartet. (His band is an acoustic ensemble with a few little differences, such as fuzz boxes, drums, and a Jim Hendrix cover or two.)

Soldier says the current hang-out for hearing "downtown music" (New Yorkers can't call it alternative like everyone else) is the Knitting Factory (47 E. Houston St., 212-219-3055; average cover \$7). Once you pass its slightly daunting bomb-cellar entrance, the club opens out into two spacious and oddly homey performance areas: the

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Knot Room and what's referred to only as "the big room." The Knot Room is brand-spanking-new and the cheaper of the two, but no less desirably demented. As the somewhat awed-looking guy standing next to me at a Soldier gig noted, "I don't think I've ever seen a classical violinist play while crawling around on his back before."

If you like what urban energy can do to country music, check out the Rodeo Bar (375 Third Ave., at 27th St., 212-683-6500; no cover), where there's live country-western every day. You could luck into the modern blues dementia of Barbeque Bob and the

Spareribs or the accordion-based Surreal McCoys.

Other good cheap thrills can be found at CBGB (315 Bowery, 212-473-7743; cover varies). The Ramones and Talking Heads started here, and you can catch five-band shows featuring Das Damen for seven bucks.

New York's Alternative-Music Must: The Times Square subway stop, at morning and evening rush hours. Ask any bag lady or commuter to direct you to Andinos, a five-piece Ecuadorian self-described "tango group." Actually, they don't play any tangos, but someone told them tango was hot this year.

Take-home alternative: The underground-record-store choices are great in the Big Apple. Try Venus Records in the East Village (13 St. Marks Place, 212-598-4459) for everything from hard-core to ska, and they'll special-order anything. Prices range from \$2 to \$50. If you want up-and-coming talent, look into (BGB's) Record Canteen (313 Bowery, 212-677-0455). Prices: \$1 to \$60.

Why Wisconsin? Well, "it isn't Cleveland," as my Madison tour guide Sigmund Snopek III rhapsodizes on his most recent album *Wisconsin Insane*. In "Thank God This Isn't Cleveland," two of his Violent Femmes bandmates sing a heartfelt "Thank God! Thank God!" as **MADISON** Snopek enthuses, "It's always so great to get back home to the Land of 1,000 Bars!"

Actually, for live alternative music, Madison only has four big venues (plus another half-dozen part-timers). But I heard more truly innovative music in those four places in a week than I'd heard in all the other clubs I'd been to, anywhere, in the last five years combined. "That's because it's easy for bands to live and develop here," Snopek says. "Rents are cheap. Clubs pay decently. We got lots of parking spaces. We got great dairy products!"

Because of the influx of great bands, Madison's clubs are holding up their end of the alternative-music deal. Not only do they let the strangest of the strange play, but they provide the right atmosphere to do it. One such venue, Club de Wash (636 W. Washington Ave., 608-256-3302; cover \$2 to \$3), is part of a 19th-century-looking, nouvelle-hippie complex that includes a former speak-easy and a gay bar. You must catch Club de Wash's weekly "Rock-O-Rama," hosted by high-decibel humor rockers the Gomers. The group is best known for their original tune "Jewish Rapper." "Uh uh oy! I got my shoes, I got my socks, I got my gefilte fish—uh—and lox." Each Rock-O-Rama has a theme—That Wacky Weather, Numerals, *Bill-*



Raw new music reverberates off the gritty walls at Club de Wash in Madison, Wisconsin.

board Top Ten—that the bands' covers are chosen to complement.

Next on the Madison list is O'Gayz Corral (504 E. Wilson St., 608-256-1348; cover as much as \$6). It's a classic dark hole with great acoustics. While I was there listening to hard-core cowpunk by the group