

From Revolution

to Rock'n' Roll



The old Commie headquarters parties on.



By CHRISTOPHER EVANS



Gene Burnworth and his fiance, Kristy Jenkins, have turned the former headquarters of the Communist Party of Ohio into Pit Cleveland, a music venue.

Lorain Avenue. When Nagin closed his office and the All Peoples Book Store, the only place in town where you could buy the complete works of Marx and Lenin, to move downtown four years ago, the need for a headquarters went with him.

"It appeared that we had this huge public presence, but what did it really mean?" Nagin asks rhetorically. "We had this enormous burden of taking care of the building and renting out space to tenants."

The building had belonged to the Hungarian-American Singing Society, a social club with such amenities as a

bar and a two-lane bowling alley, neither of which really fits the proletarian image of the party.

"We thought of using it as a youth center, but then we got some tenants," Nagin says. "There was a Puerto Rican social club, then a Palestinian guy had a club/restaurant in there. For a while, homeless people were running a job-referral agency on the first floor. That was probably the most meaningful social thing we did, but it fell apart."

Speak in Tongues, a radical arts and music collective, moved in about eight years ago. "They were a wild group of anarchists," says Nagin, and a good reason to get out of the real estate business.

"In the end, they trashed the place," Nagin says. "They pulled out wiring, plumbing. It was horrible."

It fell to Kaufman, a painter by trade, to maintain the building.

"It was too much for me," Kaufman says. "I'm 74. I'm retired. I live in Geneva. It's time somebody else takes responsibility for the building."

Speak in Tongues got the boot at the end of December, and in January a significant symbol of the working-class struggle quietly cut its physical ties to the capitalist system and disappeared from the urban landscape.

"It's a real relief not having a building," says Nagin, who still serves on the state and national boards of the Communist Party. "Now we can focus our time and energy on helping to build the movement against the ultra-right,

big-business Bush cabal."

As the party prepared to close its headquarters, it donated two van-loads of books, pamphlets and memorabilia, including an oil portrait of Lenin, to the George A. Meyers Collection at Frostburg State University in western Maryland. "George was one of the founders of the labor movement in this country," says Nagin. "He was someone who was really dear to us."

Meanwhile, the home of the former Hungarian-American Singing Society is once again a community entertainment center. Local artist Gene Burnworth, who bought the building for \$150,000, has been a tenant there since November 2000, operating a music venue on the third floor called Pit Cleveland. After Burnworth repairs the damage done by Speak in Tongues, he plans to open the Pit Cleveland Cafe and the Pit Cleveland VIP Club on the first floor. He has rented out the Pit Cleveland studio apartments on the second floor, and turned the basement into band rehearsal space.

"I wanna make everything nice and neat and clean," Burnworth says. "A lot of our business is kids from the suburbs and their parents."

Sunday Magazine staff writer Christopher Evans shakes his moneymaker to the revolutionary music of the Shanktronics, his son's band. He may be reached at 216-599-6139 or through magnail@plaind.com

There's enough history here to build the Hammer and Sickle Hall of Fame and Museum. Charles Ruthenberg, who was born and raised on the West Side, founded the Communist Party USA in 1919. He made headlines as "The most arrested man in America," and is one of only three Americans whose ashes are buried in the Kremlin. Gus Hall, national party chairman, four-time presidential contender and recipient of the Order of Lenin, the Soviet Union's highest honor, owned a gas station in Cleveland Heights during the late Fifties.

"This was one of the real strongholds of the early Communist Party," notes Rick Nagin, who stepped down as state party chair in 1998 to become Cleveland City Councilman Nelson Clinton Jr.'s go-to guy.

The upshot of that move is that today — for the first time in its 83-year history — the Communist Party of Ohio does not have a physical presence in a state so seminal to the fight for workers' rights that it was once known as "The Red State."

"We really don't have a need for a headquarters," says Wallace Kaufman, who replaced Nagin as state party chair. "We're able to stay in touch with e-mail and teleconferencing."

For three decades, the party has operated out of an appropriately red-brick, three-story building at 4309

Soundbites

BY JASON BRACELIN

Just past midnight on January 1, fireworks lit up 4311 Lorain Avenue. A similar scenario played out all across town. But at the art/music collective Speak in Tongues, things were different. The cherry bombs and ladyfingers were lit *inside* the building, as the ill-tempered thrash ensemble Nine Shocks Terror tore through a set nearly as combustible as any firecracker. It was a telling moment, as every aspect of Speak in Tongues has always stood against the norm.

It was also a sad moment. Less than a half-hour after Nine Shocks left the stage, the last of the 1,600 bands to play the space concluded a rushed set, putting an end to the venue's remarkable eight-year run. Just a week earlier, on Christmas Eve, members of the collective were abruptly notified that their building had been sold and they had but seven days to vacate the premises. Speak in Tongues was occupying the commercial property without a lease, and the new owner was required to give tenants only a three-day notice before eviction. With little recourse, the members were forced to cease operation of one of the most hospitable, forward-thinking spots in town.

"You could call it your own. You could truly call the space your own," says Nine Shocks Terror bassist and collective member Tony Erba. "You could say, 'I'm bring-

ing in my bands, I'm going to present this kind of music and this kind of art to people,' and be allowed to do it. It was a falling-apart, messy, dirty, smelly place, but it was ours, and it's got a reputation that's known worldwide."

Speak in Tongues, which never charged more than \$5 a show, was known for bringing in some of the most challenging and influential experimental artists.

"I think, just by sheer word of mouth, Speak in Tongues' reputation among experimental, avant-garde musicians really flourished," says Dave Segal, managing editor of *Alternative Press*, who performed at Speak in Tongues as DJ Veins. "When nobody else in the city gave a damn, you could count on Speak in Tongues to book the real obscure, great artists. A lot of these artists probably wouldn't play Cleveland unless there was a club like Speak in Tongues. You had Tomas Brinkman of Germany citing the club as one of his favorite places to play in the world.

"You got the sense at Speak in Tongues that it wasn't really about the money at all. As much as any place in the city, it was purely about artistic merit."

With cash ruling the music business, Speak in Tongues' eschewing profit was unique and necessary. In the end, though, the very chaos it embraced led to its downfall. Its building was bought by Gene Burnworth, owner of the metal club Pit Cleveland on the building's third floor. Burnworth had no taste for the bedlam at Speak in Tongues, he plans on turning the space into rehearsal rooms.

"I have nothing against any of those kids. I get along with them all fine, but they're sloppy, and I don't mean

sloppy as in not cleaning their room. I mean sloppy as in open underage drinking and drugs," Burnworth says. "It's been noted. You go down to the Second District, and there's a list of times where they've been shut for such things. I've sat in my window and watched someone selling drugs right in front of the building, literally pulling out pills from his pocket and selling it, right on the street. I'm not housing that. I'm not going to be irresponsible. It's just reckless behavior, oblivious to their surroundings. All you can smell is human feces and urine. It's a frickin' hole. I'm going to clean it up and do something good with it."

As Burnworth suggests, not everyone mourns Speak in Tongues' ouster.

"I actually see it as a good thing," says Matthew T., an indie filmmaker and longtime Speak in Tongues member. "There was some stagnancy in some regard, and there was a lot of attachment to the building itself. Something interesting to me that's coming out of this, I think, is the realization that the building was just a physical space, but the idealism of Speak in Tongues and the collective goes beyond a physical building."

Indeed, as it hunts for a new home, the collective plans on sponsoring shows at other venues in addition to keeping its website and phone number in operation. As Dave P., one of the founders, put it from the stage on closing night, "You can take the person out of Speak in Tongues, but you can't take Speak in Tongues out of the person."

Send your soundbites to jason.bracelin@clevelandscene.com



The Speak In Tongues collective: evicted but unbowed.

RIP, SIT

Collectively run nightclub Speak In Tongues closes abruptly

By Ryan Smith

On Friday, December 28, the West Side concert venue Speak In Tongues announced that within days it would be closing down forever — and in keeping with the club's collective, lo-fi spirit, the news was distributed by e-mail. The message, written by Speak In Tongues resident Brian Straw, did its best to clarify the details of this unfortunate situation.

"With one week's notice we are being forced out by the new owners, 'Fit Cleveland,' who have occupied the third floor [of the 4309 Lorain Avenue building] for the past year," wrote Straw. "Our last show will be New Year's Eve, after which the new owners take control of the building and by so ordering us to vacate."

Still, when any surprising event occurs, rational explanations never seem to compensate for the grief that soon follows. That grief was evident throughout the course of the space's final week, as the most significant club in Cleveland was, at least for the near future, relegated to a historical footnote.

When I asked co-founder Dave P. how Speak In Tongues came to fruition, he offered, "I had a desire to start a space that would be run by friends and would give us the freedom to have any kind of musical acts we wanted. There were scary times at the beginning, because we lived there as well. We just ensured bands that they wouldn't be taken advantage of."

Since October 1994, Speak In Tongues has been bringing in bands that few booking agents would ever risk money on. Over the years, the many people involved with the Speak In Tongues collective have taken pride in their experimental taste. But whether it was a punk, emo, metal, jazz or rock show, there was always an aura surrounding each performance — a spirit based in the fact

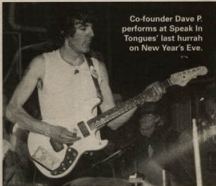
that most of the attendees showed up not because they wanted to be approved but because they wanted to support each other. It would be snobbish to pretend that other clubs in Cleveland do not draw the same kinds of bands and patrons, but the consistently great underground acts and DIY aesthetic evident in the \$5 fixed ticket price contributed to Speak In Tongues' long-lasting integrity.

Dave P. elaborates on the unique experience that SIT provided: "It's been a

Threat, performed a slap-happy set of folk rock on his 12-string, while the Cassettes, after months and months of hard work, showed they've finally begun to reach their lethal punk potential. But the best moments were undoubtedly provided by Sean & Ian, a duo challenging the notion of pop music with their demanding, yet ultimately rewarding, arrangements written for synthesizer and guitar. Monday night, other Tongue staples, like Nine Shocks Terror, the Unknown and Beckett & Friendz, performed memorable farewell sets of their own.

Despite the high quality of performances on display, the final evening never completely escaped the inevitable fate sticking in everyone's minds. Word of mouth spreads fast in Cleveland, so just about anyone who ever cared about Speak In Tongues was in attendance, contributing to the funereal mood. For most of the night, the crowd seemed partially devastated by the recent occurrences, yet they also found themselves caught up in blissful moments of reminiscence. I left around 3 am and a large group of people still was present. They simply did not want to go.

What happens next? Brian Straw's address insisted, "It is critical that we carry this spirit to another space. When this will happen is anybody's guess." The answer will not be a simple one, as was made evident at a collective meeting held on Sunday, December 30. Considering the short notice with which news of the closing was delivered, basic decisions — buying vs. renting, locating the optimal building, et cetera — are still being tangled over. The overall mood of the 30 or so in attendance, however, was one of optimism and renewal. And just to prove their dedication to the cause, a Speak In Tongues benefit show is already being planned for Valentine's Day, to ensure the spirit of Speak In Tongues stays alive in the hearts of its supporters.



Co-founder Dave P. performs at Speak In Tongues' last hurrah on New Year's Eve.

crossroad for creative geniuses to develop themselves artistically. The impromptu interaction between these different types of people leads to new ideas. If you're not a part of it, you might not see it going on, but I'd like to think it will continue [in a new space]. We need to make it a priority to advertise every show, keep up public visibility, and make sure we're more vigilant."

The final blastoff at Speak In Tongues was indicative of everything the club stood for. The all-local bills that were held throughout New Year's Eve weekend showcased some of Cleveland's most promising talent. On Friday, Stephe DK, erstwhile lead singer of Proletarian Art