

Legend of the Brass Mug

The Brass Mug, which some call an institution, has been rocking Tampa for decades. It's alive and well, bringing live music to Fletcher Avenue with its own brand of volume and style

By Rory Crump

When the sun goes down on Fletcher Avenue, and the box stores and retail shops go to bed, the Brass Mug wakes up, summons the rock 'n' roll gods, and shakes Tampa with its timeless thunder.

Green Day, No Doubt, and a laundry list of local bands have cut their teeth at "the Mug." Variety spices the spartan stage, and Mug owner Heather Mullis plans to keep it that way.

"We book a mix of bands," says Mullis. "Metal, rock, punk, industrial, and doom bands all play here." She's even putting a luau together for female-fronted bands. "The mix of artists is what makes this place work."

The Mug's mystique is carried by generations of Tampa rockers. Metal moms support their metal-playing offspring, waving devil's horns at the stage like a ballpark mom celebrating a homerun. Underage band members become grown-up regulars, and street-level kids mix with suburban fugitives craving the same thing: loud music.

The Mug's design validates the democratic vibe. Minimalist brick and mortar, maximum efficiency, ensuring all patrons can taste the decibels.

Outside, the Mug's sharp awning hints at an Italian eatery. But once inside, things get raw. With exposed floors, dark trim, dark lights - dark everything - the place is built for speed. It's more communal than clubby, and the bar staff concurs. "It's like family here," they say.

The live-music business is both cruel and fickle. Bands, trends and crowds come and go, making the Mug's 35-year run of hosting local and breaking national acts an anomaly.

No Flash website, no tweets, and far removed from the orthodox Tampa music scene. What's the secret

sauce? What makes this place tick? Turns out, the Mug preaches traditional values, spinning hard work, respect and fraternity into a powerful credo that resonates with customers.

It also helps when every yet-to-be famous band that can spell “Tampa” wants to play the Mug.

“Tampa is a tough music town,” says Rick, the resident sound engineer. “If you can stir the pot here, you can play.” Rick has been dedicating his craft to the Mug for six years. He had driven out of Toledo, Ohio in 1995 with his band, searching for blistering rock ‘n’ roll.

About to quit and go back home, Rick was pointed to the Mug. And he’s never left.

He’s tasked to facilitate the audio wants and desires of four or five bands in one night. “I want the bands to be happy. We’re on this ride together.”

Like Rick, doorman Josh Rosado was a Mug fan, then an employee. “People come here for a reason, there’s a spirit in here,” Rosado says. “I can’t believe I’m getting paid to do this.”

On a recent Saturday night, hand \$7 to Josh and savor two local headliners. Mena Brinno, a Tampa band fronted by opera-trained Katy Decker, plays a tight set of originals to a buzzing crowd of regulars, Mena Brinno faithful, and a 30-something birthday party.

Marius Kozlowski, pumping precision guitar licks over Decker’s soaring vocals, nods to the Mug legend. “I just always wanted to play here.”

Decker: some Goth, and a lotta Gypsy, incites the crowd in billowing, black and gold silk. Her vocal range and stage presence pays back the 7-buck cover in the first few verses – striking a couple of metal poses for good measure.

Mena Brinno kills any perception the Mug is only fertile for death metal and hardcore. Although plenty heavy, the band’s arrangements are both artsy and thumping, blurring any categorical lines keeping more eclectic rockers at home.

“This is as close to the underground as you can get in Tampa,” says Decker.

Meanwhile, the debate rages on whether the Red Hot Chili Peppers once played here. Doesn’t really matter – the pipeline for precocious A-list talent never ends.

The second band, Bootlegger, are Tampa music veterans and half the guys work for Anheuser-Busch partner Pepin Distributing. As Bootlegger's crowd takes over, the Mug becomes a Budweiser commercial. This kind of grassroots alliance builds faith, sells tickets and advances the Mug brotherhood.

Mullis works the floor between sets, welcoming new faces and laughing with familiar ones.

Rick briefly escapes the sound booth and pauses, brushing the label of his black, metal tee. "I know it sounds cliché, but this place is real. It's just real, man."

He'll help Bootlegger summon the rock gods one more time tonight, and bring the thunder to its rightful place. The stage, at the Mug, which music-lovers hope will never die.