

# THE SHIRTS



## A NEW YORK ORIGINAL

Story & Photos by:  
**Robert Tuozzo**

They are back. The band that helped form the New York music scene. You know: the days when you went to CBGB's at 5:00 in the afternoon and left at 4:00 in the morning. The days when The Police, Blondie, The Ramones and The Talking Heads were just another band on the bill that night. When having a night out was fun. Well, those times are back.



The SHIRTS are a New York City based band and world-touring veterans. Back in 1975 the band was captured live at CBGB's on Atlantic Records. This "Live at CBGB's" compilation CD has three tracks by The SHIRTS: "Operetico", "Poe" and "A.V.M." The SHIRTS got their big break in the late 1970's when an A&R Rep from EMI Europe caught the act and signed them to a record deal. The SHIRTS line-up featured Annie Golden (vocals), Ronnie Ardito (guitar), Artie Lamonica (guitar), Bob Racioppo (bass), John Piccolo (keyboards) and John "Zeeek" Criscione (drums).

EMI introduced the band to Mike Thorne who produced their first album, entitled "The Shirts", recorded at such studios as Wessex and Abbey Road Studios. The SHIRTS had a number two hit in Holland "Tell Me Your Plans", and Capitol Records, being a subsidiary of EMI, followed suit and signed the band for an American release. The band's music was well received throughout Europe and on college stations in the States. Following soon after The SHIRTS toured Europe with Peter Gabriel. Then The SHIRTS released their second album, "Street Light Shine" with EMI and producer Mike Thorne. It received critical acclaim and some success throughout Europe. At this juncture, the record industry underwent major changes and The SHIRTS became affiliated with Capitol Records. Off they went to Capitol Records Studios in Hollywood, California to record their third album "Inner Sleeves" without Mike Thorne. The project was a luke-warm success and was the band's last album together for many years.

Continuing through the years various musical projects — sometimes with one another as well as separately, the band members stayed in varying stages of communication. In 1993, on their 20th anniversary, the band reunited at CBGB's where it all began. In 1999 they re-united again. Sometime in 2001, the guys started getting together and jamming regularly along with two new female members: Kathy McCloskey and Caren Messing. Bob Racioppo had been collaborating musically with Kathy McCloskey (keyboardist, accordion player and vocalist) over the years in his band "Walter." John Piccolo worked with Caren Messing (vocalist) in an a cappella singing group called "The Tsunami Tsingers". Due to Annie Golden's successfully multi-faceted career in the theater, film, television and music industries—the timing to commit to this incarnation was not viable.

The owner of CBGB's and former manager for The SHIRTS, Hilly Kristal, has enthusiastically welcomed their resurgence. The band has performed numerous times and has been amassing live recordings of all new material at the house that rock built. The SHIRTS have a new CD project underway with the producer of their first two albums, Mike Thorne. They are mixing and mastering as you read! ✂

*Members of The SHIRTS include: Arthur Lamonica - lead vocals, guitar; Ron Ardito - lead vocals, guitar; John Piccolo - keyboards; Bob Racioppo - lead vocals, bass; John (Zeeek) Criscione - drums; Kathy McCloskey - lead vocals, keyboards; and Caren Messing - lead vocals*

## The Shirts

CBGB, New York, NY

By Kristen Solee

Before I arrived at the venue I wasn't sure what kind of show The Shirts would put on. I had heard stock descriptions of the band as "classic CBGB group from the 70s" or "old school rock," and I was told I should get ready for a tight show, but I was still in the dark as to exactly what kind of music and scene I'd be surrounded by once I ventured into Hilly Kristal's (and the East Village's) venerable institution.

Once inside the club, I found a seat directly in front of the dingy stage and sat down to await the band. The Shirts were the first act of the night, and as soon as 9 o'clock rolled around, singer Caren Messing and keyboardist Kathy McCloskey started setting up. Soon after, guitarist Ron Ardito, bassist Bob Racioppo, 2nd keyboardist John Piccolo, and drummer John (Zeeek) Criscione were ready to go, and the show began. While it's often difficult to enjoy a band's performance without knowing their albums or songs beforehand, such is not the case with The Shirts.

Their distinct sound seems to be constructed from bits of Americana, punk rock, and classic rock, with a 60's girl group sensibility made manifest through Messing and McCloskey's soaring harmonies. I heard influences from The Clash to Springsteen to even the Mamas and the Papas as The Shirts made their way through their short (but sweet) set. And along with captivating music that kept my attention, The Shirts had a number of memorable lyrics as well. Too often at live shows, whether due to bad sound systems or out-of-control crowds, lyrics are completely lost in the din. My "plus one" and I laughed as The Shirts sang the line "only the dead know Brooklyn" in one of their songs, and I had to stop and write down the threat "I'm gonna make your halo fade" that Messing growled in repetition during the final number because it seemed too good to forget.

Of course the show wouldn't have been complete without some onstage banter: Messing told the others about a cute subway attendant she met that evening, whom she described in a mock heavy New York City accent. McCloskey then slowed it down with a passionate keyboard driven ode, but unfortunately The Shirts brought their set to a close soon after with a country rock-flavored number in the vein of Bonnie Raitt's "Something to Talk About," and another foot-stomping song following that.

Once the last note had stopped ringing throughout the club, I clapped loudly to show my appreciation for a show well played. It was even more impressive given the fact that one of their members, Artie Lamonica, was sick that evening, and they had to reconfigure the whole set to make up for his absence. The band exited the stage carrying their equipment with them, and as I got up to venture down to the infamous CBGB bathroom, the one description that my friend could muster to describe the entire show was simply, "Killer," and I'm pretty sure the rest of the crowd felt the same way.