*Live at the Commodore: The Story of Vancouver's Historic Commodore Ballroom*

Aaron Chapman

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014. 206 pp. Large Format. $28.95 / images and text.

From the beginning, Aaron Chapman is clear about his intentions for *Live at the Commodore: The Story of Vancouver's Historical Commodore Ballroom*. The renowned Granville Street concert venue is a place where "The history of the room is the history of how Vancouver has entertained itself" (11). Chapman's large format book is full of pictures of the ballroom's past, present, and future; scattered concert ephemera and paraphernalia accompany the in-depth historical record. The anecdotes and materials Chapman collects speak loudly to the cultural history that has passed through the doors of this venerable Vancouver institution.

Beginning with a brief history of Vancouver itself, Chapman sets the historical scene of 1920s Vancouver into which the Commodore was born. Referencing the shifting landscape of Granville Street, Chapman moves chronologically through the Commodore's early cabaret days through to its current status as a live music and entertainment venue.

More than simply a musical history, Chapman's book combines the visual scope and presentation qualities of a good coffee table book with an in-depth cultural history. Numerous images of Commodore ephemera — floor-plans, tickets, menus, concert bills — help the text work through key junctures in both the ballroom's history, and Vancouver's. The text never lingers too long, moving quickly to the next representative figure, cultural scene, or musical act that might serve as an exemplar of the Commodore's significant historical value.

The book might be accused of relying too heavily on anecdote and reportage after it leaves the confines of a well-documented pre-1950s cabaret history and moves into a prolonged survey of arguably the Commodore's high-water mark as a concert venue in the 1970s through to the early 1990s. That said, some of the book's more colourful tales come at precisely this juncture and provide counterpoint to the established history. We move briskly through the eclectic musical acts representing movements such as the Blues Revival, Punk, New Wave, and Grunge. Pictures of Kiss, playing with all their makeup, attitude, and high-booted style, to an audience of less than a thousand, and Nirvana's debut as an opening act for another less-iconic band, are both representative examples of how Chapman's book underscores the role cultural institutions such as the Commodore play in anointing, supporting, and facilitating shifting cultural moments.

There is a prevailing sense of loss in the book. A tone that suggests things are not the same as they used to be and that the Commodore's days are numbered even as its doors remain open. To this end, the book is a wonderful example of the odd dichotomy that permeates histories of buildings: there is a tendency to lament the loss of something that is still there. The ephemera the book collects, both through text and image, while certainly referencing the ballroom, speak more to the different socio-cultural eras hosted by the Commodore's uniquely sprung dance floor. To that end, Chapman undoubtedly accomplishes what he sets out to do: the stories about the entertainment history of Vancouver are indeed etched in the walls of the Commodore Ballroom.