

New year new music

The city gets rocking with these great acts **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

BACK DOOR SLAM British power trio sings the blues

Three lads from the Isle of Man, the power trio Back Door Slam returns to the Mercury Lounge for the third time in less than a year. Their first show, the room was half empty. But when singer and guitarist Davy Knowles, bassist Adam Jones and drummer Ross Doyle took the stage for their second show, the crowd was twice as big, with seemingly everyone who came to the first show coming back with a friend in tow. So expect a jammed audience when they play Jan. 23 to promote their CD "Roll Away," with Knowles in particular showing the flashy fretwork of a young guitar god with a deep, bluesy voice.

For the amiable Knowles, it's just a chance to keep doing what he has been obsessed with ever since his dad played a Dire Straits album and Mark Knopfler led to Peter Green, Rory Gallagher and the treasure trove of American blues.

"I was playing all the time," says Knowles, who can't wait to turn 21. (In the U.S., he says it's annoying not to be able to buy a beer at the bars he's playing.) "Early morning I'd play before school, during school at breaks I'd play, on the bus on the way back home. I still do play all the time.

"Then my parents bought me a Spanish guitar," says Knowles. "It was three-quarters size. I had to play that for a year before they'd buy me an electric guitar. The electric guitar I got was a Stratocaster. I tried to patch it up like Rory Gallagher's. It looked terrible. In the end, me and my friend finished it with this metallic blue. I've taken much

better care of my guitars since then."

And now they're touring the world. New to the set list this time around might be a Willie Dixon cover, "Walking the World," and the Robert Cray song that gave the band its name. But whatever they rip into, Knowles has already proven he can strike fear into musicians twice his age: As a teen, he would sit in with a local blues band whose members were as old as his dad until the lead guitarist got a little irked and slowly edged the wunderkind out.

Was Knowles starting to play better than him? "Oh, I might have been," admits Knowles with a laugh. ♦

(Jan. 23, the Mercury Lounge; 212-260-4700.)



NICOLE ATKINS Jersey girl takes you on all the rides

Asbury Park denizen Nicole Atkins has an acclaimed major-label album — "Neptune City" — that sounds like the result of a lifetime of feverish listening to Phil Spector, Roy Orbison and other booming pop acts from the '50s and early '60s. But Atkins says that retro flavor was an accident.

"The girl group [sound] almost came by accident," says Atkins, who performs at the Bowery Ballroom Jan. 25. "When I was making my demo, neither I nor my friend David Muller were good lead guitar players at all. I sang all the guitar parts and harmonized it, and suddenly it morphed into a girl-group sound. But it was more out of necessity than out of intention."

Still, the 29-year-old composer of epic tunes like "The Way It Is" and "Brooklyn's on Fire" admits that the sound — think of a female Chris Isaak, modern but with one eye on the rear-view mirror — isn't entirely out of the blue.

"The songs I love are 30 or 40 years

old and have that big sound," says Atkins. "It's funny how everybody makes a fuss about the grandness of the sound. ... We're sick of music being made on computers. Let's make music with real instruments once in a while."

Not that Atkins isn't enamored with technology. A major fan of filmmaker David Lynch, it's clear how well she'd get along with the oddball director when she describes some ideas she has for her stage show.

"This is going to sound weird but if you saw it, it would look really cool: I want to film my twin cousins singing backup vocals and dressed up as ghosts," says Atkins. "They'd be projected onto two screens on each side of the stage and there would be a trigger so they would be singing prerecorded backup vocals. Between songs we'd interact with them — like if they're giggling I'd say, 'Shush!' and they would get quiet. ... But for now we would just be happy to get a lighting guy." ♦

(Jan. 25, Bowery Ballroom; 212-533-2111)

BELL X1 Irish superstars — U2.2? — set their sights on U.S.



Bands used to dream of getting their songs on the radio. But the Irish group Bell X1 is hoping to conquer the U.S. the new-fashioned way: TV. A huge act in their homeland (only U2 is a bigger concert draw), Bell X1 has seen its songs played on the Thanksgiving episode of "Grey's Anatomy" and on "The O.C."

But lead singer Paul Noonan hasn't given up on good old-fashioned touring yet, even though he knows European acts can tour the U.S. for ages and still feel like they've barely scratched the surface.

"Yeah, you can tour for a year and that's just the East Coast," says the 31-

year-old, whose group plays at Joe's Pub on Jan. 16 (and the Bowery Ballroom in March). "I'm really looking forward to the big square states like Wyoming. I have this romantic notion of traveling from coast to coast on a tour bus and stopping for pancakes in Idaho."

Originally the drummer in the band Juniper, Noonan stepped to the fore when that group's lead singer, Damien Rice, went solo and almost immediately became a massively successful artist worldwide.

With relentless touring of its own, Bell X1 built up a devoted fan base. The band's new CD "Flock" due Feb. 5, hit No. 1 in

Ireland and showed that their compelling pop music with sing-along choruses and sink-in-your-brain hooks was ready to explode worldwide. And the group's rousing live shows — viewed by obsessive fans in clips on YouTube — are the best place to see what Bell X1 is all about.

"Recorded music has been devalued due to the fact that you can get it for free," says Noonan. "So gigs have become more special. That collective experience of being at a gig — nothing can replace that." ♦

(Jan. 16, Joe's Pub, 212-539-8778; March 15, Bowery Ballroom, 212-533-2111)