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Alpha Rev's textured sound sets it apart from rest

By PUNCH SHAW

A pleasant little surprise emerged downtown Friday night -- and it didn't come out of a Main St. Arts Festival tent.

Alpha Rev, an Austin band that is starting to attract some attention, brought its unusual sound to the cozy confines of the McDavid Studio and made a positive first impression.

The most obvious difference between this band and its zillion competitors in Austin is the instrumentation. The sextet has the typical keyboards-drums-bass-rhythm guitar thing going, but there is very little lead guitar work and the band also features a cellist and violinist. The result is a more deeply textured, often orchestral sound that allowed the band to take a variety of approaches to its material.

The vocals were handled almost entirely by Casey McPherson, who is also the group's primary songwriter. His high, phrase-stretching stylings called to mind a band that has to be a huge influence for Alpha Rev -- Brit art rock act Radiohead.

Indeed, the band's CD *The Greatest Thing I've Ever Learned* is perhaps guilty of sounding a little too much like that better-known band. But in concert, Brian Batch's contributions on the violin and a few vocals by keyboardist Candy Sanders served to vary the overall sound. As did Batch's completely unexpected rap on one number -- which was done mostly in Italian.

The concert also satisfied by making good use of the venue. McDavid's management has said it wants the small room (capacity is about 250) to be an incubator for introducing new bands. This band certainly deserves to be heard, and it is hard to imagine a better showcase than it received Friday night before a crowd that was willing to ignore the temptations of the bands, art and corny dogs out on the street to try something a bit different.

GRADE: A