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HOMETOWN HEROES - AUSTIN

Thursday, 05 October 2006

By Emily Strong

The world of independent music is vast, overwhelming, and totally muddled. In the constant, obsessive search for new music, it is sometimes easier to divide and conquer, as it were. And what better way to divide than to use good, old-fashioned geography? No band is an island; music affects its community, just as the community affects the music. Hometown Heroes is a monthly column devoted to discovering music in its local context. We will periodically look at the music community of a different city — its local legends, its up-and-coming talent, and the labels, record stores, magazines, resources, and organizations that contribute to the scene's health and vibrancy. And while a comprehensive overview is unfortunately impossible, we will hopefully get a good sampling of what makes each city so unique.

AUSTIN, TEXAS



I'm starting off this column with my own hometown: Austin, Texas. While its self-proclaimed title of "Live Music Capital of the World" might be a bit of an exaggeration, it is nevertheless a busy, sprawling, and diverse community. Although it is largely known for its blues, country, and rockabilly cultures, it actually boasts thriving communities of almost every conceivable genre. Home to South by Southwest (the largest music industry conference in the world), Austin City Limits (both the long-time television series and the annual three-day music festival), and numerous other smaller festivals and events, in Austin there is always music in the air.

Setting the Scene: bands you've probably already heard

- American Analog Set - [amanset.com](#)
- ...And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead - [trailofdead.com](#)
- The Black Angels - [theblackangels.com](#)
- Daniel Johnston - [hihowareyou.com](#)
- David Garza - [davidgarza.com](#)
- Explosions in the Sky - [explosionsinthesky.com](#)
- I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness - [chosendarkness.com](#)
- The Octopus Project - [theoctopusproject.com](#)
- Okkervil River - [okkervilriver.com](#)
- Shearwater - [shearwatermusic.com](#)
- SOUND team - [soundteam.net](#)
- Spoon - [spoontheband.com](#)
- Voxtro - [voxtrot.net](#)
- What Made Milwaukee Famous - [whatmademilwaukee famous.com](#)

Lay of the Land: bands you should also hear

Alpha Rev - [alpharev.com](#)

For many years, Casey McPherson bashed around Austin with a four-piece rock act that was equal parts Radiohead and Nirvana. That was all fine and good, but everyone who knew McPherson knew that something was missing. He wasn't in his element. Fast forward to a couple of years ago and the dissolve of his previous band: McPherson holed himself up for a little while, played some solo shows around town, and then, when the time was right, introduced the world to Alpha Rev. With sweeping, grandiose melodies backed by a violin, a cello, and lusty background vocals, McPherson's achingly sweet voice has finally found a musical context that does him justice, and the result is both exhilarating and sobering. Simply, undeniably, and overwhelmingly beautiful.

The Arm - [thearmtheband.com](#)

You know, all this talk of post-punk being overdone is ridiculous. I'm sorry, but what would people prefer? A grunge revival? Hell no! If you're going to go retro, go for the good stuff. And when you do, you'll find that there are bands that are actually making fresh, vital music using old techniques, like The Arm, for instance. Each song is an explosion of smart lyrics, jagged vocals, and searing melodies, all wrapped up in tidy, little four-minute packages. When lead singer Sean O'Neal defiantly shouts, "This song is structured like a poem/But it comes out like a bomb" in "Bright Young Men," he is basically describing his band in a nutshell. This is smart art-punk with an infectious, uncontainable energy and one raging attitude. They are aiming for world domination and you will be assimilated.

The Channel - [thechannelsounds.net](#)

Speaking of going retro, The Channel have mastered the concept of taking old sounds, mixing them together, and creating something new. They're the auditory version of found art, and they are masters of their craft. Behind the Hammond, lap steel, and jangling guitars, there is something innately artistic about their folk aesthetic, but not at the expense of coziness or accessibility. The fact that everyone in the band sings — sometimes in unison, sometimes breaking out into multi-part harmonies — re-enforces the intimate, communal vibe. Virginia might be for lovers, but The Channel is for friends.

Experimental Aircraft - [experimentalaircraft.com](#)

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Experimental Aircraft is any shoegaze fanatic's dream. Imagine the Cowboy Junkies' Margo Timmins performing vocal duties for My Bloody Valentine, and you're close to Experimental Aircraft. Playing music since 1997, probably the only reason they haven't already become an international buzz band is because of their lack of productivity; they're in the process of completing only their third album. Fortunately, this new album, being released on Chicago's Graveface Records, will give them a shot at the recognition they deserve.

Ghost of the Russian Empire - ghostoftherussianempire.com

If there is such a genre as historical fiction shoegaze pop, Ghost of the Russian Empire has cornered the market. These are pop hooks played as dense, swirling melodies with thoughtful, muted vocals and the occasional clarity of a trumpet piercing the fog. And believe it or not, they're only just getting started. Less than two years old, they recently released their first EP, *With Fiercest Demolition*, and with it have taken the local scene by storm. Sharing the stage with local and international greats, their music is turning heads wherever they go. It's only a matter of time before they form an empire of their own.

The Glass Family - theglassfamily.org

I knew I was going to like The Glass Family before I even heard them, because some of the members are formerly of The Gloria Record. As it happens, I was pleasantly surprised to find that they exceeded my expectations, which were obviously pretty high. Their simple but lush arrangements feel like springtime: abounding with life, warmth, busyness, and a fresh outlook on a familiar pattern. Their debut album, *Sleep Inside This Wheel*, is a glorious testament to their talent. I can only imagine what they'll do next.

Peter and the Wolf - whiskeyandapples.com

Peter and the Wolf consists of Red Hunter and his helter-skelter band of "junk" musicians. Don't ask me what that means, exactly; Hunter is the one who came up with the term, and he's very much the type of person who marches to the beat of his own drum. Actually, he doesn't even march, really. He invented his very own method of mobility and does that instead. When asked in a recent interview with the *Austinite* to describe Peter and the Wolf's music, he replied, "Ethiopian-style Halloween disco songs by R. Hunter and whoever's hanging around, with lots of 'aaawwwooooo's at the end." And, really, you're not going to get a much better description than that. Hunter employs whatever people, instruments, and non-instruments are available to make music that's all over the map. Then, he takes his circus act out to perform in graveyards, abandoned buses, and on secret islands. His next tour is going to be on a sailboat. After that, who knows?

Quien es, BOOM! - quienesboom.com

Quien es, BOOM! has many strengths. Dabney Dwell and Jason Butler make a powerful songwriting duo, writing and playing airy, intricate melodies and singing in whispery, unmistakable vocals. Kevin Fender's drumming is crisp, clean, and complex. Scott Shellhammer adds electronic touches that give that extra quirkiness and lightness needed to set them apart from the masses. Alec Padron plays the bass with a deft mastery that fills and rounds out the sound, without overpowering or weighing it down. And Nik Snell's work on synth and keys provides an added layer of loveliness and complexity that gives the music a sense of polish and completion. I can point to each member and describe how they are important, what they add to the overall sound. Yet, I cannot articulate what makes Quien es, BOOM! so damn special. This is one of those bands where, clearly, the sum is greater than its parts, and the results are mesmerizing.

The Shells - myspace.com/theshells

Heavily influenced by 1960s pop, the Shells are master craftsmen (and women) of bright, loping melodies that feel a little like finding out that there is an afterlife after all, and you've scored a guestlist spot to the never-ending party.

Single Frame - singleframe.net

Single Frame is a chaotic miasma of tweaked-out synths, fuzzed-out guitars, freaked-out shouts, bold drum work, and found object sound. And that's a very, very good thing. Just because it's chaotic doesn't mean this three-piece doesn't have a master plan; they do. Their music actually comes from a very intellectual place, as explained in the manifesto on their website — a place where art, creation, and invention are all highly valued and eagerly pursued. It's no wonder, then, that the music resonates with people on many different levels. From the people who analyze every piece of music based on its artistic merit to the kids who just want to dance their asses off, Single Frame fits the bill.

South San Gabriel - south-san-gabriel.com

I'm actually not sure whether South San Gabriel can technically be considered an Austin band, since Centro-matic is technically considered a Denton band. However, since Will Johnson sometimes lives in Austin, the South San Gabriel River actually runs just north of Austin, and I really, really like this band, I decided at the last minute to include it here. Apologies to those in the Denton scene who feel they are being robbed. At any rate, as you might have brilliantly observed, South San Gabriel is indeed a side-project of Centro-matic mastermind, Will Johnson. This less-alt-country manifestation of Johnson's genius boasts a rotating cast of members from the Undertow Records collective (which, in addition to Johnson's projects, includes: David Bazan of Pedro the Lion and Headphones, Mark Eitzel of American Music Club, the amazing Pilots, The Soft Drugs, Magnolia Summer, and about a million others). Their latest effort, *The Carlton Chronicles: Not Until the Operation's Through*, is written from the viewpoint of a cat. If that doesn't grab your attention, I don't know what will.

Sparrow House - sparrowhouse.org

Like Simon and Garfunkel, Cat Stevens, and Elliot Smith before him, Jared Van Fleet (Voxtrout, the Tonewheel collective) writes songs of breathtaking beauty that soothe the soul and quiet the nerves. Why he hasn't put out more solo stuff by now remains a mystery; but the good news is that Van Fleet is finally releasing his debut EP, *Falls*, sometime in the next month or so. One can only hope he'll take the next logical step and tour with it.

Zookeeper - www.zookeepersworld.com & myspace.com/zookeepersworld

Chris Simpson, formerly of Mineral and The Gloria Record, is back, and this time he's exploring his soulful, southern roots — something particularly suited to his plaintive, passionate vocals. One of those lucky bastards who never really loses his edge, but just changes the angle every now and again, Simpson's songs go from tender, wistful ballads to swaggering, exuberant anthems and back again with such ease and sincerity that the transition is barely noticeable. He hasn't released any albums under the new moniker yet, but tracks are available for download at his MySpace site.

Zykos - zykosmusic.com

Zykos' music ranges from the darkly brooding to the brightly buoyant, but there is one consistency throughout, and whatever it is, it's addicting. Between frontman Mike Booher's tremulant, gritty vocals and Catherine Davis' dizzying piano melodies, the music sticks in your head and refuses to leave... and you don't really want it to either.

There are countless other local bands in Austin who are worth mentioning, and I regret not having the time, space, or attention span to feature them all. However, the following resources will help you to go forth and discover more of what Austin has to offer. I encourage you to do so.

Local Labels

Australian Cattle God - australiancattlegod.com
C-Side Records - c-siderecords.com
Chicken Ranch Records - chickenranchrecords.com
I Eat Records - ieatrecords.com
Indirect - indirect.com
Instincto - instinctorecords.com

1. Interpol - Our Love to Ad...
2. Nick Drake - Fruit Tree B...
3. Innerpartysystem - The Do...
4. Jens Lekman - Night Fall...
5. American Steel - Destroy ...
6. The Jaguar Club - Ceci n...
7. Master/Slave - The Expens...
8. Georgie James - Places
9. The Antlers - In the Atli...
10. Steel Train - Trampoline
11. Cheyenne - The Whale
12. Radiohead - In Rainbows
13. Richard Youngs - Autumn ...
14. Kurt Cobain About a Son
15. Montag - Going Places
16. Phosphorescent - Pride
17. Paul Duncan - Above the T...
18. Film School - Hideout
19. David Shrigley's Worried ...
20. Various Artists - Turn 3
21. Uncut - Modern Currencies
22. Dust Galaxy - Dust Galaxy...
23. New Idea Society - The Wo...
24. Citoy - Little Kingdom
25. Uli Huh Her - See Red E...
26. Frightened Rabbit - Sing ...
27. Animal Collective - Straw...
28. Beirut - The Flying Club ...
29. The Octopus Project - Hel...
30. Okkervil River - The Stag...
31. Broken Social Scene Prese...
32. Zookeeper - Becoming All ...
33. New Pornographers - Chall...
34. Dirty Projectors - Rise A...
35. Simian Mobile Disco - Att...
36. The Fiery Furnaces - Wido...
37. Earimart - Mentor Tormen...
38. Rilo Kiley - Under the Bl...
39. Office - A Night at the R...
40. Dan Deacon - Spiderman of...

Misra - misrarecords.com
Peekaboo - peekaboorecords.com
Post Parlo - postparlo.com
SixGunLover - sixgunlover.com
Thirty Ghosts - thirtyghostsrecords.com
Tight Spot - tightspotrecords.com
Whiskey And Apples - whiskeyandapples.com

Scene Support

- Magazines

Austin Music Magazine - austinmusicmagazine.net
Pop Culture Press - popculturepress.com
Stage/Scene - myspace.com/stagescene
Whoopsy - whoopsmagazine.com

- Record stores

Antone's Records - antonesrecordshop.homestead.com
Backspin Records - backspinrecords.net
Cheapo Discs - cheapotexas.com
Encore Music - encore.austintx.com
End of An Ear - endofanear.com
Snake Eyes Vinyl - snakeeyesvinyl.com
Waterloo Records - waterloorecords.com

- Organizations/Community/Resources

Showlist Austin - showlistaustin.com
Austin Music Guide - michaelbluejay.com/music
Austin Music Links - austinlinks.com/Music
Austin Music Commission - austinmusiccommission.org
Austin Music Foundation - austinmusicfoundation.org
Austin Indie Alliance - austiniindiealliance.com
Tonewheel - tonewheel.org
Austin Music Co-op - austinmusiccoop.org
New Music Co-op - newmusiccoop.org
Health Alliance for Austin Musicians - austinmusicianshealth.org
SIMS - simsfoundation.org

- Events

SXSW - sxsw.com
Austin City Limits Festival - aclfestival.com
Eeyore's Birthday Party - eeyores.sexton.com
Kerville Folk Festival - kerville-music.com
Old Settler's Music Festival - oldsettlersmusicfest.org

For a more in-depth look at the scene, check out the Hometown Heroes music blog at myspace.com/hometownheroesblog.

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