

Colin Newman has big ambitions for Sled Island festival

Wire guitarist curating 2009 edition of Calgary music festival

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Githead band members, from left, Max Franken, Malka Spigel, Colin Newman and Robin Rimbaud. (Frank Lievaart/Githead) Colin Newman, guitarist and vocalist with the seminal British rock band Wire, had a few suggestions for organizers of Calgary's Sled Island music festival after playing there in 2008.

During a barbecue following his performance, he relayed his comments to one of last year's organizers, who suggested he might make a good organizer himself.

He didn't take that offer seriously, until he got the invitation to return as curator of the 2009 festival, which runs June 24-27.

Since then, Newman has put his heart into studying Calgary's cultural scene and has become an unabashed booster of both the city and the three-year-old festival.

"If you talk to any Calgarian who's serious about the city, the city is still in the process of being made. I'm not talking about the building; I'm talking about the background," Newman told CBC Radio's *Q* cultural affairs show on Wednesday, a day after the opening of this year's Sled Island festival.

"You feel that somehow you can have an impact," he said.

Newman took to his role as curator. He and his wife, Malka Spigel, started investigating the Calgary music scene earlier this year, meeting with local people to get ideas for the festival.

"There is no job description for this," Newman said. "What a lot of artists who organize festivals do is sit in the front room and make a list of bands the festival can't afford — and then turn up at the festival and wave."

But Newman soon had big ambitions for Sled Island, which combines music with visual art and film.

"This festival is developing into one of the premiere festivals, if not the premiere festival, in Canada," he said.

"Because it's not a rock festival, it's a culture festival which has a lot of elements of music in it ... It's the way in which basically every hole you can stick something downtown has something in it."

Sled Island extends to this Sunday, with 200 bands on the roster, including the Breeders, Anvil and Holy F---, the Toronto outfit who drew controversy last week because a poster for the festival spelled out their name.

Newman called Holy F--- a brilliant band and is also looking forward to a performance by Calgary band Women and L.A. band Health. He himself will be playing in a project called Githead — a collaboration with his wife and electronic wizard Robin Rimbaud.

He admits that 10 years ago, he had never heard of Calgary, but he believes the festival is filling a need.

"I think what I'd like to say about Calgary is: don't come with any expectation of what you think it's like," he said, rejecting both the Cowtown and buckets-of-oil-money stereotypes that cling to the city.

"There are lots of people here who have an interesting and unique perspective on things. There's a really open audience for the arts; there is a lot of culture here."

The festival this year has 120 Alberta bands, more than 100 from the rest of Canada and 32 international bands, among them New York's Japanther and Seattle's These Arms are Snakes.

"I would love if people looked back in a few years' time and said, 'That year that Colin was guest curator, that's the year it turned'," Newman said.

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