

Punk stages revival in L.A.: Festival highlights new crop of bands

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 30, 2009



Los Angeles band HEALTH will be coming to Sled Island as a representative from L.A.'s new noise rock scene. Courtesy, Renata Raksha

It's hard to imagine a better image to illustrate the youthful and recklessly rules-free atmosphere of Los Angeles' newest music scene.

A few years back at the now-defunct L.A. venue il Corral, evening shows would often end with under-aged and possibly liquor-lubricated fans grabbing a swing rope hanging down from the ceiling to escape the mass of tangled limbs on the dance floor.

The teens would then swing haphazardly about the club, smashing into peers in the process.

"It got really fun in there really quick.," reports John Famiglietti, bassist and general noisemaker for L.A.'s experimental band Health, a frequent performer at the il Corral. "Sometimes it got too much. I've gotten really hurt there so I can't say it was always a good thing. But it was a golden time in the scene."

That golden time, Famiglietti reckons, began in 2006 or 2007 when both the il Corral and a bustling warehouse charmingly named The Smell became gathering places for fans and musicians keen on experimenting with new sounds in the often maligned City of Angeles.

Some say these bands and venues are helping to chip away at the stigma that the city's entertainers are shallow dolts waiting for their close ups and tending to heavily hair-sprayed coifs. Los Angeles, it seems, is cool again thanks to an anything-goes creative spirit from a new breed of bands populating the city's underground.

But according to some, it's been a fairly recent development.

Famiglietti was 17 when he arrived from San Diego in 2003. He immediately feared he had made a mistake.

"It was really dead," he says. "Nothing special was going on in L.A. and it was pretty reviled by the indie music world or whatever. All these awesome bands were coming out of New York and we had nothing going on here . . . It was like I moved to the wrong f---ing city. Around 2005, it really started changing. The stuff going on in LA. was really based out of the Smell."

Health is among the bands to benefit from the downtown venue, which borders L.A.'s Skid Row and is run in a communal spirit by an army of volunteers. While it's been open since 1998, The Smell's reputation as a hub for punk, experimental and noise rock bands hit its peak in the past couple of years. Unlike il Corral, which closed in 2008, The Smell continues to house a thriving scene, perhaps partly because it bans alcohol from its events.

Health, who may be best known north of the border for its 2007 7-inch split with Toronto's Crystal Castles, will be ambassadors for the scene at this year's forward-looking Sled Island Festival, which last year brought similarly weaned bands Abe Vigoda and No Age to Calgary.

Like those two bands, Health have managed to travel beyond the confines of L.A. and reach an international audience while remaining inextricably linked to its home. While still an underground phenomenon, the scene is helping change many people's views of the city.

Los Angeles musicians, despite their hometown's might in the entertainment industry, have historically

struggled to prove their authenticity. The varied music scenes that have sprang up throughout its history have often suffered from outsider scorn. The cocaine-cowboy country rockers of the 1970s were seen as corporate shills and posers. The hardcore scene that galvanized in the Reagan years were initially dismissed as spoiled rich kids playing at punk. The poodle-haired metal bands that pranced about the Sunset Strip were seen as being more preoccupied with hairspray and Spandex than music.

Unfair as these characterizations may have been, the new crop of L.A. bands take great pride in a fierce DIY esthetic and rejection of the mainstream, whether it be the noise rockers and goofy experimental artists of the Smell or a new line of acts picking up the once-bright flame of the city's hardcore scene.

"I always thought L.A. was one of the most incredible places for music," says Matt Caughthran, lead singer of hardcore punkers The Bronx. "The thing about L.A. that is so great is the way each side feeds each other. You have the outsider opinion of L.A. as a bunch of actors and Disneyland where everything is fake. That side is so far to the right that it creates a great underbelly for people who ride against it and live against it."

Still, the lifelong Los Angeles resident — who will be bringing The Bronx to Calgary for Sled Island — says this seemingly sudden burst of creativity in the air may simply mirror a new feeling that has swept the entire nation. Complaining about Bush has run its course,

"The whole President Bush thing, I think that creative mentality reached a ceiling a number of years ago and it was just becoming the same sh—t regurgitated over and over again," he says. "There's much more of a positive, creative change going on that is much more inspiring than the last couple of years of the Bush era."

Louis Pattison, a U.K.-based journalist who has covered the new L.A. scene for the Guardian newspaper, describes the bands that have come from The Smell as possessing a "hazy sort of positivity." Although he won't go so far as to entirely credit the regime change at the White House for this attitude, he does acknowledge that it strays from some of the angrier punk and noise bands that thrive on raging against conservative powers.

"I think there's definitely the intention to make people dance, to have a good time," he says. "They sort of embody the positivity in a way that earlier punk bands were maybe loathe to do, perhaps for fear of watering down their message. Things have changed in that respect, maybe. It's kind of unfashionable to be a lyrical polemicist these days, and maybe it's unnecessary."

This is not to say that the new crop of bands are shallow.

Nor are they ignorant about their city's past contributions to modern music.

Famiglietti names both pioneering punkers Black Flag and the Doors as influences. According to Chris Ziegler, editor and co-founder of the DIY monthly music publication L.A. RECORD, this "new wave" of bands sticks out from the crowd because of a refusal to be filed under the usual categories that have defined California rock.

"We've always had great music here, even if it didn't get the recognition it deserved," Ziegler says. "But what's new and different in L.A. now is the degree of access to and cross-pollination between those different musical communities. Everyone listens to everything now. The psychedelic hip-hop producers love '60s folk, the Bronx loves and play mariachi, the punks love dub and the noiseniks love psychedelic hip-hop."

"They're all working without fear or limits. When a few people start doing that, it inspires the people around them, and when whole communities begin working that way, you get the kind of explosion we're having now. I've said it before, but I think Los Angeles has the best music in America right now."

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