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## Passion fuels Sled Island

By **LISA WILTON**

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Zak Pashak isn't trying to get rich off of Sled Island.

He'll be lucky if the annual music and arts festival breaks even this year.

But the festival director and founder isn't particularly concerned about that. All he wants to do is develop Sled Island into one of North America's premier destination music festivals.

"It's a total labour of love for everybody involved," says Pashak during an interview on the rooftop patio of his inner-city bar, Broken City.

"It's a festival that's driven by people's passion for music and their love for their local community. We've had no government funding but we're still able to exist because the volunteers love it and the fans love it and the bands love it."

Aside from Pashak, the festival operates with a skeleton staff of five people, only one of whom is a full-time, year-round employee. He admits the festival's infrastructure needs some improvements if it is going to grow into an internationally renowned event.

"We're not always great at getting bands the exact rider that they want," Pashak explains. "It's not clockwork. But at the same time I think bands appreciate that our hearts are into it."

Now in its third year, Sled Island kicks off June 24 and runs through June 27 at various venues around town. The festival has received media attention from all over North America and Europe, putting a long overdue spotlight on Calgary's thriving music scene.

"Our focus on western Canadian music is a big thing," says Pashak, who got involved in Alberta's independent music scene 10 years ago as a campus radio DJ in Edmonton. "It's tough for western Canadian bands to get recognition anywhere else in the world because it's so hard to tour out of western Canada and it's so hard for bands to tour into western Canada. So we're unique in that it has a western focus. It's nice that these local bands have this kind of opportunity to reach an international audience. There are no other festivals in western Canada that get this kind of press in say, England."

Dozens of local acts, including Agnostic Mountain Gospel Choir, The Sub-linguals, Woodpigeon, Women, Bob Quashnick and Dragon Fli Empire, are featured in this year's lineup alongside such popular Canadian indie bands as Novillero, Japandroids, Malajube and the recently reformed Tricky Woo.

This year's headliners include hip-hop pioneer Biz Markie, Canadian metalheads Anvil, hard-partying rocker Andrew W.K., New York art band Liars and The Breeders, who are best known for their huge '90s hit, Cannonball.

Past Sled Island acts have included Cat Power, Jonathan Richman, Tegan & Sara, Mogwai and Wire.

Wire singer-guitarist Colin Newman was so impressed by the band's well-attended shows at last year's fest he agreed to curate the 2009 edition.

"The festival really touched him," Pashak says.

"He loved it. He loved being recognized on the streets of Calgary as being the guy from Wire. They don't often get that recognition in a general public kind of way and at Sled Island they saw that. They were the hit of the festival. They had 1,000 people scaling the walls trying to see them. Colin was just so touched by that. He loves Calgary and wanted to be a part of it."

While not as big as Pop Montreal or Austin's SXSW, Pashak says he hopes Sled Island will one day rival these more established festivals.

"Bands have been really blown away," he says. It's a really band-friendly festival because we have so little corporate sponsorship and it's not about selling someone a cellphone or a new drink product. They know they're there not to sell something but just to put on a great show."

Sled Island passes can be purchased for \$99 or \$199 for VIP passes at Broken City or at [www.sledisland.com](http://www.sledisland.com)

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