

A place unlike any other

Nurturing a thriving music culture in Olympia

Dave Harris

When I moved to Olympia in the spring of 2000 the musical landscape was considerably more active than we find it today. Local labels K Records and Kill Rock Stars were at the height of their power and influence; the musical culture that took shape in our town was a crucial voice in the national independent music conversation.

Seminal independent acts like Bikini Kill, Beat Happening, Sleater-Kinney, Nirvana and countless others spent formative years developing their sound here. People traveled from all over the world to participate in festivals held at the Capitol Theater including the International Pop Underground Convention (1991), Ladyfest (2000), and multiple iterations of Yoyo-A-Go-Go between 1994 and 2001.

The energetic resonance of the riot grrl movement was still in the air and Olympia was an established stop for touring independent musicians. Live performances took place frequently in a variety of locations ranging from bars and established venues to punk house basements.

It was a place unlike any other where a magical confluence of unlikely factors converged to create a place capable of nurturing the type of sensitive, introspective freaks that would have a much more difficult time finding their voices in more traditional settings.

Olympia remains an important outpost for punk and independent music. We still possess more than our fair share of musical luminaries. You would be hard-pressed to find another city of this size that can match the quality of artistic output produced here.

Sadly, the volume of activity has diminished considerably across the board due to a number of factors including but not limited to the effects of the ever-evolving global pandemic.

To understand where we are now, it's necessary to examine the factors that created a space for the Olympia music scene to develop and mature; and how changes in these conditions have contributed to its steady decline over the last decade.

One of the primary ingredients in the Olympia music cocktail has been The Evergreen State College. A progressive liberal arts college serves to provide a continuous influx of intelligent, curious and creative young people, some of whom end up staying in town after graduating. They contribute to the strength of the community and serve as mentors to new arrivals.

The next major part of the recipe was the relative affordability and ease of existence here. I spent my first 15 years in town sampling widely from a nearly endless buffet of punk living arrangements. These included a parked RV, a pantry just big enough to fit a twin mattress, plenty of basements, a garage or two and rooms in apartments and shared houses with rent ranging from \$85 to \$350 a month.

Cheap living is crucial. Being in a weirdo rock band has never paid very well for the majority of players of the game. Throw in a food stamp card, a student loan check, some sort of basic job, or even a couple friends with jobs in a restaurant or bar where you can occasionally scam a free meal or drink... Suddenly you find yourself rich in the kind of unstructured free time necessary to achieve a rudimentary command of a cheap musical instrument and find some like-minded psychos to join forces with.

Chances were good that if you were all even halfway competent, you could quickly develop the ability to drive an old van to other places along the I-5 corridor and beyond to make shitty money and sleep on exotic floors.

Combine the draw of artistically-minded people to Evergreen with the low cost of living and add a pinch of the kind of artistic co-mingling that comes with proximity to Seattle and Portland and we have the necessary pre-conditions for the formation of a vital musical community.

When we consider the fact that this is a small town where young people have to make their own fun we can start to understand why so many bands formed and why kids throw shows in basements and dorm rooms. This sheds light on



how a small town can—after thousands of repetitions of these creative events involving countless combinations of hundreds of people—generate a web of relationships, experiences and recorded artifacts rich enough to alter the very trajectory of rock music.

The constellation of factors necessary to support an independent music scene like the one we had is rare and tenuous. Enrollment at Evergreen is in decline. In an attempt to secure funding, the administration appears to be sacrificing the very things that made the school an attractive alternative to outside-the-box thinkers.

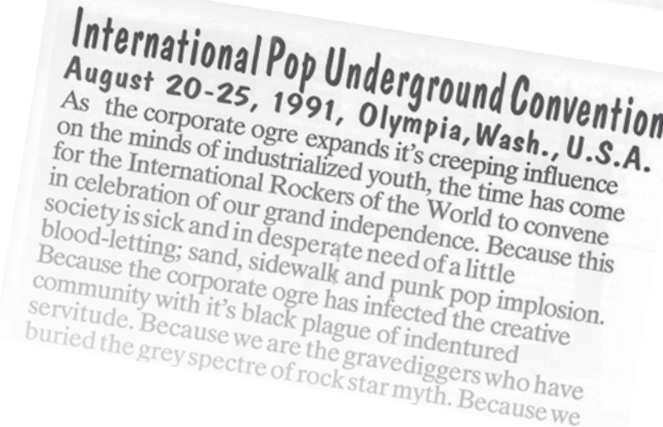
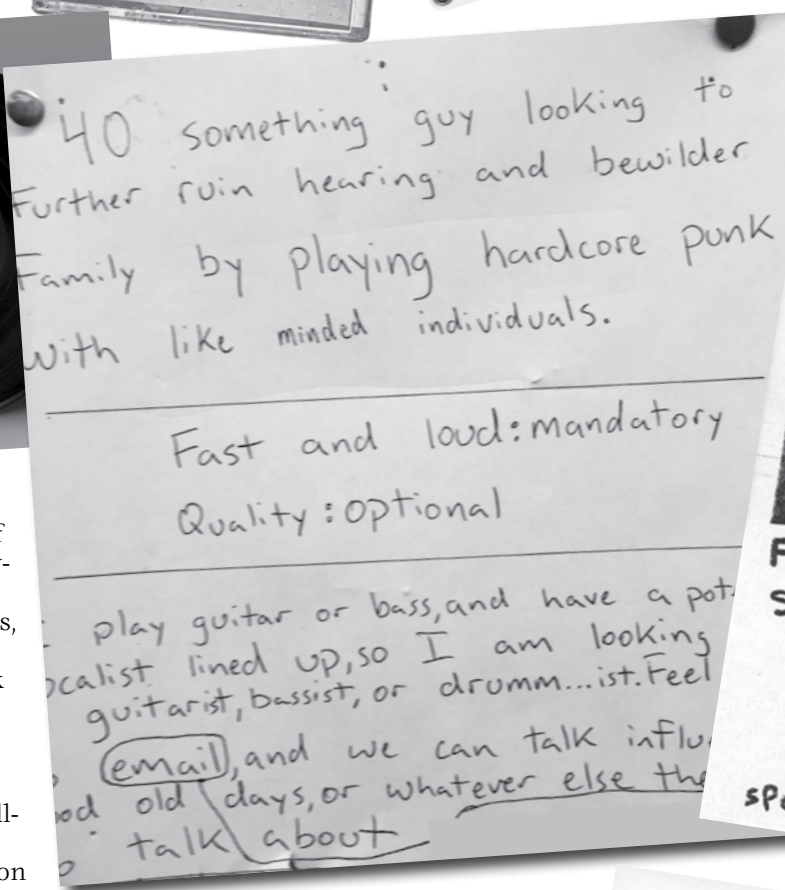
A quick look at the housing section on Craigslist will show that you'd be hard-pressed to find a cheap place to live. There are still affordable rooms to be found in town but they are closer to miraculous than commonplace. Without affordable housing options there will never be a thriving artistic community.

Our elected officials have shown themselves to be far more likely to roll out the red carpet for big developers building market-rate housing than to invest in anything that supports our city's cultural legacy. It would be a huge step forward if the city would refrain from actively opposing an all-ages venue downtown.

Despite the gloom, there are places today where light still shines. I'm continually inspired by local artists creating and expressing themselves despite the uphill nature of the battle. The sidebar will direct you to some bright spots that stand out in these dark times.

With the Omicron variant of Covid racing across the planet, it is apparent that the strategies we employ to control this pandemic are insufficient at best. With no end in sight, it has become clear that the show must go on. Risk assessment is now a required tool in the live music enthusiast's belt.

Outdoor performances seem to be on



the lower end of the risk spectrum, but until warmer and drier weather returns, venues like Cryptatropa and The Brotherhood are hosting live performances indoors. Proof of vaccination is required for entry, providing a safer place for those willing to venture out in search of joy.

Good luck out there friends, may you safely find the sweetest of sounds.

Dave Harris is a musician, a photographer and cook who has lived and observed the scene in Olympia for more than two decades.

And on the bright side...

Jokers Got a Posse (www.jokersgotaposse.com) puts out music by local artists TransFX and Daisies on a pay-what-you-can basis and organized a summer-ending outdoor rave called Earthstoppers that brought talent from over all the west coast to an all-night outdoor dance party.

Yard Sale for World Peace (www.yardsaleforworldpeace.org) is a cassette label featuring an eclectic roster of esoteric local sound explorers. "100% of label proceeds [are] reinvested towards global inter-species aid programs and peace-aligned systems..." such as EGYHOP and EarthRights International.

Local raging punk maniacs Electric Chair haven't missed a step, releasing their second EP Social Capital this year and were one of the first acts to return to live performance amidst the plague.

The Mona Reels, longtime project of Peter David Connelly, released the brilliant pop masterpiece Without Love.

K records (kreccs.com) continues to document local talent releasing the excellent EP My Favorite Shrine by Ribbon Stage and co-releasing, along with Perennial, the minimalist dream-pop LP Fake Books by The Moving Pictures.

Newcomers Fugitive Bubble released a self titled cassette on Impotent Fetus and blew me away when I caught them live. Rik and the Pigs went out with a bang, posthumously releasing the appropriately titled The Last Laugh on Lumpy (lumpyrecords.com).

In no particular order: early performance photos of Sleater-Kinney and Bikini Kill, a Daisies disc on the local Jokers Got a Posse label, Milk Music band members from a 2013 article in Interview magazine (article author Dave Harris is third from left), a 1990 show flier featuring Nirvana, The Melvins and Beat Happening, the marquis at Capitol Theater promoting Yoyo aGogo, a snippet from a flier-manifesto about the International Pop Festival, and a notice posted recently at the West Side Food Coop.