

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAX DOLBERG

Rock Globally, Think Locally

We spawn our share of national bands, but do we lack a distinct local sound? An insider's look into San Diego's music scene.

BY MAYA KROTH

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ACKSTAGE AT THE BELLY UP Tavern, Greg Laswell looks nervous. On the other side of the club's heavy black curtain is a scene very different from the one that awaited the songwriter last summer, at a tiny Normal Heights coffeehouse. There, he could sit at a Kurzweil keyboard and quietly unfurl his hushed melodies for a deferential crowd of 15 or 20 before retiring to the Ould Sod for a snifter of whiskey and a solitary smoke.

It's only Wednesday, but the Belly Up has Friday-night energy. The chatter, 600-strong audience is sardined shoulder-to-shoulder, eager to catch a glimpse of the guy whose mournful tunes have been slathered across the airwaves and MTV, and whose photo has turned up on celebrity gossip blogs (as the latest arm-candy of actress Mandy Moore). The atmosphere sizzles as Laswell emerges, squinting against the bright of the stage lights while the crowd erupts in hoots and whistles.



Tim Mays

It's artists like Laswell who have refocused the national spotlight on San Diego, and nights like these that have local music boosters crowing about the vitality of the city's music scene with a fervency reminiscent of the early '90s. That's when the phrase "the next Seattle" was being tossed around with perplexing frequency (thanks, *Los Angeles Times*).

"There's a ton of people in bands, a ton of people coming to see bands, a lot of places to play," Casbah owner Tim Mays says of the local scene. "I think it's very healthy."

Many insiders echo Mays' optimism, but exactly how that health should be measured is open to debate. Is it calculated in sheer numbers—of bands, venues, record sales, awards? Is it an aesthetic question, as when a city develops an unmistakable signature sound, like grunge or garage rock or hyphy (Bay Area hip-hop)? In an era when digital distribution has led some to declare record labels obsolete, does anyone still define success in terms of major-label signings? Or is vitality determined by a more ineffable quality, a certain *je ne sais quoi* they call "buzz"?

Numbers tell a story of a city teeming with aspiring next-big-things. A MySpace search yields nearly 1,000 bands based within 50 miles of the downtown ZIP code in genres as varied as soul, trance, indie-pop, Latin rap, emo, screamo, reggae, bluegrass, thrash metal and two-step. Plainly there's no consensus here about the essence of the "San Diego sound."

"I think the San Diego sound is that there *is* no specific sound," says John Rubeli, the A&R (artists and repertoire) talent scout who signed P.O.D. and sexed-up retro rockers Louis XIV to Atlantic Records. Over the last decade, the city's been identified variously as a punk town, spawning multi-platinum hitmakers like blink-182; a haven for sensitive songwriters like Jewel and Jason Mraz; and a hotbed of God-rock, as evidenced by Christian-influenced bands such as P.O.D. and Switchfoot.

Regardless of what barometer is used to gauge it, one thing is clear about today's local music landscape: It's decidedly different from the one 15 years ago that saw punk bands Rocket From the Crypt, Lucy's Fur Coat and Drive Like Jehu inking major-label contracts.

"The labels would create this feeding-frenzy mentality that would cause other people to get all excited," remembers Mays. "Now it's more organic; there's no labels bidding for [bands] and creating all this hype."

Grand Ole Party



The majors are still sniffing around, though. While Atlantic was busy adding Louis XIV to a roster that already included Jewel, Mraz, P.O.D and pop-punk quartet Unwritten Law, Virgin snapped up surfing songwriter Tristan Prettyman, and Epic nabbed modern rockers Augustana.

Established independent labels have also found gold in local area codes.

"We've had two big hits for the label come out of San Diego . . . so I watch it more now," says Stephen Brower, director of A&R for Vanguard Records, which recently signed Laswell, while sister imprint Sugar Hill has Carlsbad-based roots group Nickel Creek. Other respected labels with San Diego acts on their roster include Touch & Go (Pinback, The Black Heart Procession), Sub Pop (The Album Leaf) and Metal Blade (As I Lay Dying).

Landing a label deal is still a goal for Dustin Illingworth of Kite Flying Society, which has earned comparisons to successful indie-pop acts like the Shins since winning the 2006 San Diego Music Award for Best New Artist. "Getting signed," he says, "would lend a certain legitimacy to the band, thereby making it much easier to put together a solid tour with a like-minded band. But it is certainly not the carrot dangling in front of Kite Flying Society."

"I hear nothing but horror stories" about major-label deals, adds 3Against1 guitarist Arnaud Lemaire.

Consider Reeve Oliver. While "horror story" may be too harsh a description, the band's venture into major-label life hardly resulted in a happy ending. In 2006, as local radio stations were spinning the band's single, "I Want Burns," Reeve Oliver inked a deal with Capitol Records.

The trio spent months in an L.A. studio with sought-after producer Neal Avron (Fall Out Boy, Everclear), making a rec-



Dirty Sweet

JEFF WINT

ord that was slated for a summer '07 release. In January, however, Capitol's parent company announced plans to fold the label, along with Virgin Records, into a new entity called the Capitol Music Group. In the process, many Capitol acts, including Reeve Oliver and Australia's platinum-selling The Vines, got the ax.

"At first this was a total drag for all of us in the Reeve camp, as you can imagine," lead singer Sean O'Donnell wrote to fans on the band's MySpace page in June. "But the good news in all of this is that we ended up owning this record." The band expects to self-release the disc sometime this fall.

"It's not necessary to have those labels anymore," says Mays. "Bands can put out their own stuff and do just as well as those labels used to do, if not better."

IN LIEU OF COURTING THE MAJORS, bands are increasingly either starting their own labels or receiving support from other San Diego artists. Eric Howarth, owner of the Mission Hills record store M-Theory, recently launched a label called Hi-Speed Soul, which will release on vinyl the upcoming album by locals Sirhan Sirhan (the CD is being produced elsewhere). Songwriter A.J. Croce started his own Seedling Rec-



Greg Laswell with Brandon Walters on guitar and Tim Onan at the keyboard at the Belly Up Tavern.

MAX DOLEBERG



James Moody

That Jazz

IT MAY NOT BE OBVIOUS, but San Diego is actually quite a jazz town, at least if you consider the international talents residing in the area. Here are a few names to know:

- Renowned pianist **Mike Wofford**'s résumé includes stints with Ray Brown and Ella Fitzgerald. He now performs in a quartet with his wife, flutist Holly Hofmann, with whom he recorded 2007's *Live at Athenaeum Jazz*, Vol. 2.
- Sarah Vaughn was so impressed with **Bob Magnusson**'s bass chops she invited him to play at the 1971 Monterey Jazz Festival and many shows thereafter. The San Diego Symphony veteran, teacher and author recently released *Liquid Lines*, inspired by his love of surfing.
- Now in his '80s, saxophonist **James Moody** continues to tour the globe, showing off the style that made him a favorite of Dizzy Gillespie and Dinah Washington.
- **Jeannie Cheatham** carries on the Sweet Baby Blues Band, started with her late husband of 47 years, Jimmy Cheatham.
- Mississippi-born **Mundell Lowe** spent 17 years as a guitarist at NBC before turning to composing film scores in L.A. Recent years have found him touring and recording with the André Previn Trio.
- Since starting his professional career at 19, saxophonist **Charles McPherson** has toured five continents and recorded with the likes of Charlie Mingus, Toshiko Akiyoshi and Wynton Marsalis.
- Latin jazz guitarist **Jaime Valle** is nothing if not a local icon. Solo and with his group Equinox, Valle has no fewer than 13 San Diego Music Awards to his credit.
- Among the city's most tireless performers are bassist **Rob Thorsen**, guitarist **Peter Sprague** and trumpeter **Gilbert Castellanos**, who play so many shows in San Diego we're suspicious they've cloned themselves.

ords, to which he quickly signed the buzzed-about, Zeppelin-inspired local band Dirty Sweet.

The support offered by these smaller labels can range from strategic (distribution in record stores) to financial (paying for CD production expenses, studio time and other hard costs) to symbolic. Attorney Scott Pactor, the head of Golden Hill-based Cat Dirt Records, concedes that, apart from some legal perspective, he offers his tiny, two-band roster "pretty much nothing, except a flair for getting them in the local media."

Pactor does so via his blog, catdirtsez, which is among a handful of sites that have fast become required reading among local journalists and scenesters. Monitoring the music coverage of outlets including the *Reader*, *CityBeat* and *The Union-Tribune*, Pactor's sarcasm-heavy blog is a mix of media criticism and rah-rah enthusiasm for bands he likes, including (not surprisingly) those on his label.

Blog support has been so vital to Illingworth that he cites it as the most important element in Kite Flying Society's modest success to date. "We've been featured on several of the larger blogs in the indie music world," he says. "This has allowed us to reach a *much* larger group of listeners than we would have been able to gain by our own promotional efforts." He attributes Kite Flying Society's increased record sales, downloads and placement on TV shows to blog buzz, webcasts and college radio.

Though Kite Flying Society has certainly been a blog darling, another local act has ridden Internet chatter to the scene's upper echelons even more quickly. If there's one group that insiders nearly unanimously agree could be the breakout band of the year, it's a fiery little trio called Grand Ole Party.

The band's multitasking front woman, Kristin Gundred, is charisma strutting around in skinny jeans. She manages to simultaneously beat on the hi-hat and snare drum while wailing



Jason Mraz

JEFF WYANT



A.J. Croce

RICH COOK

lines like "I must be the devil's daughter / what a dark father to dwell in me." Both her possessed-sounding pipes and her dyed-black bowl cut seem on loan from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' firebrand of a singer, Karen O. Guitarist John Paul Labno and bassist Mike Krechnyak fill out the group's dirty-fingernails, garage-blues sound.

September was a big month for the trio, which celebrated not only an Artist of the Year nomination and the Best Alternative win at the San Diego Music Awards but also the release of its debut album, *Humanimals*, and the start of a six-week national tour with indie-rock favorites Rilo Kiley. Yet just 18 months ago, hardly anybody knew who Grand Ole Party was.

"Their rise to local stardom was pretty interesting," notes promoter and disc jockey Tim Pyles, whose locally focused radio show airs Sunday nights on FM 94/9. Relative newcomers

to San Diego, Grand Ole Party's members moved here from San Francisco and ignited a brushfire of buzz with their must-see live show. In addition to making scenesters swoon, Pyles says, Grand Ole Party elicits response from even the casual radio listener. He's already seen young girls copying Gundred's style, skinny headband and all. "Here's a band that's captured the hearts of a lot of people," he says.

GRAND OLE PARTY may not have trouble capturing hearts or fans, but the question remains: Is there a market to sustain the hundreds of other artists struggling to make a living in San Diego? Is there sufficient interest among audiences for the scene to sustain itself?

"Even though you have all these cool things going on, it's still kind of a yuppified tourist town,"

muses Pyles. "I'm curious if it's going to begin to spread people too thin."

"There've been plenty of people who've gone out of their way to push the local music scene and end up getting frustrated because the mainstream isn't quite clicking," says Al Guerra, whose long-running Sunday night local-music show on 91X was recently moved from prime time (6-8 p.m.) to the graveyard shift (1-3 a.m.).

"Outside of the city, we have this reputation for being a really mysterious market," offers House of Blues promotions staffer Jamal Dauda, who helped put San Diego talent in front of mainstream audiences by selecting the local acts to play this year's Street Scene.

"We're very erratic as far as what we support and don't support. We aren't going to be known for our hip-hop scene. And even some of the genres that we *are* known for—like reggae—some shows will do well, some shows won't."

The city may not be known for its hip-hop, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. According to Lil Al, host of Z90's local show, "There's a lot of rappers, a lot of good music." But the movement could be bigger, he says. "If there was an audience, we'd be as big as L.A., the San Francisco Bay Area or Houston or Chicago."

He attributes the scene's feeble momentum to a lack of persistence among the rappers themselves: "A lot of artists out here think it's going to happen overnight, and they give up, which is why the scene doesn't blow up like it's supposed to. Most of the top rappers in the game have been rapping for more than 10

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Al Guerra

years and finally got that break, because it takes that long to gain a fan base.”

JAZZ IS ANOTHER GENRE that often gets passed over, despite the many internationally renowned musicians living and working here (see sidebar). “There’s more jazz going on, and more *quality* jazz going on, than people may be aware of,” says Claudia Russell, program director for Jazz 88. She cites La Jolla Music Society, the Athenaeum and the San Diego Museum of Art among those offering superior programming. And she notes there’s an ongoing debate among promoters and musicians about whether or not a sufficient audience of hard-core jazz lovers exists in San Diego.

This perceived lack of an audience across genres has led performers to continue seeking opportunity outside city limits. Many area jazz artists spend months playing abroad and on the festival circuit. And the great northern migration is still in effect for up-and-coming performers such as hard-rock band 3Against1 and songwriter Saba, who both recently rode the I-5 Express to the

City of Angels in search of a break.

“We didn’t really feel like we could grow anymore in San Diego,” 3Against1’s Le-maire says. “The rock scene is thriving a lot more up here with the Sunset Strip, where you have five or six clubs all within walking distance. People respond to the music a lot better. At the venues we play in San Diego, people just want to get drunk and hook up and party, as opposed to being there for the music.”

“There isn’t a sense of urgency [in San Diego],” says Saba, a San Diego Music Award–nominated songwriter who moved to Los Angeles about a year ago. “In L.A. . . . you have more access and regular interaction with people that work on the local and national level. In turn, there are opportunities that you wouldn’t really have in San Diego.”

Despite the many artists San Diego may lose to Los Angeles, an increasing community of veterans are giving back to the scene that gave them their start. Mraz remains a resident of Oceanside and still cameos at the occasional Belly Up or Lestat’s show.

Pinback just played a live set in the Leucadia parking lot of Lou’s Records. Rocket From the Crypt’s John Reis stayed in the area and recently opened a live-music venue in North Park. Established names like A.J. Croce and Louis XIV’s Brian Karscig and Jason Hill are lending their support to younger bands by starting labels and recording studios in San Diego. Some of the aforementioned have also lent their expertise to informational “Music 101” panels offered by the newly formed San Diego Music Foundation, an outgrowth of the group that stages the Music Awards.

“This town’s really coming to fruition,” observes Pyles. “It’s probably got a ways to go, but something’s going on here now, and it’s only going to get better.”

“When you talk scenes, people think the scene has come and gone,” says Guerra. “But it’s usually the people that come and go. The scene’s always there.” ■

For a list of this year’s San Diego Music Award winners, click on the story link in the Features section of sandiegomagazine.com.