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AP Associated Press

Spotlight Unnerves Montreal's Music Scene

By ARI BENDERSKY, For The Associated Press *Thu Jul 28, 12:01 PM ET*

To find the heart and soul of the Montreal music scene on a recent evening, all one had to do was head to the Mile End neighborhood, walk into a quaint coffee shop and pop into the intimate back room.

About 11 p.m., Former Hot Hot Heat member Dante DeCaro stepped up to the mic at Pharmacie Esperanza. With his guitar slung over one shoulder and harmonica fastened around his neck, DeCaro projected a voice that sounded like pure Dylan — whiny, melodic, captivating.

Standing around were many of DeCaro's friends and fans, including Nick Robinson, an organizer of the influential Pop Montreal International Music Festival; Olga Goreas of the experimental ambient group Besnard Lakes; Nick Diamonds and Jamie Thompson from the now-defunct, once-hopeful Unicorns; and electronic artist Tim Hecker, also known as the techno rebel Jetone. Backing DeCaro on drums was Arlen Thompson of the indie buzz group Wolf Parade, which is scheduled to drop its Sub Pop Records debut, "Apologies to the Queen Mary," in September.

In many cities, this would qualify as a see-and-be-seen crowd. But in Montreal, it's the status quo. This is one cosmopolitan city where celebrity and pretense don't exist — just a strong community of musicians and artists dedicated to their craft.

They don't necessarily need approval from the outside world, despite the onslaught of international media attention. But now that it has arrived — making Montreal a successor to former musical "hotbeds" like Seattle; Austin, Texas; Omaha, Neb.; and the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn — many here have mixed feelings.

"There is a kind of knee-jerk fear reaction among certain people that this is all bad that people are going to come here and rape and pillage the pure underground scene," said Dan Seligman, co-founder and creative director of Pop Montreal.

"If the attention goes away, then A&R people ("artist and repertoire" executives from music labels) won't swoop in, allowing bands to grow in the proper fashion," said Pop Montreal's Robinson. "We're just musicians trying to do our own thing. Then we got thrust into the spotlight — we banded together to protect ourselves."

Protection from what, exactly, is unclear. Protection from allowing clever musicians and talented artists to gain more attention than if the media hadn't started poking around? Protection from letting some of the quality music get out?

"I don't agree with wanting (the spotlight) to go away," said Gary Worsley, co-owner of Montreal-based indie label Alien8 Recordings, which has put out albums by the Unicorns, Merzbow and Kiss Me Deadly, which recently toured with uber-hot group Bloc Party. "It's good for the city. Bands like Pony Up have been able to get a lot of hype on one EP, which would not have happened if we didn't have this attention."

What initially brought on this attention can be pegged, in part, to the explosion of one group: the Arcade Fire.

Last fall, indie music fans and bloggers sent the Arcade Fire's MP3s around the Internet at breakneck speed. Eventually the band shipped 220,000 copies of its debut, "Funeral," on independent label Merge Records — something fairly uncommon for an indie release without a large distribution partner. This prompted media outlets like Rolling Stone to dub Montreal the "next big scene."

But years before the Arcade Fire blew up, many bands were already creating a stir up north. In the mid-1990s, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, an experimental post-rock orchestra, gained international prominence without major label backing, and enjoyed some financial success.

Where Godspeed's members could have taken their money and ran, they chose to remain immersed in Montreal's music community.

"People reinvested themselves and their money into studios and opened clubs and cafes that gave back to the artists and the community," Seligman said. "The idea of reinvesting your cultural enterprises into the city is important."

Godspeed guitarist and current A Silver Mt. Zion member Efrim Menuck, along with local producer Howard Bilerman and Godspeed member Thierry Amar, opened the influential Hotel2Tango recording studio, where the likes of Wolf Parade, Arcade Fire, the Dears, all-girl rock outfit Pony Up! and the psychedelic noise-rock group Et Sans have all laid down tracks.

Godspeed bassist Mauro Pezzente and his girlfriend/partner Kiva Stimac gave those artists a few venues to put on shows. The pair run three newer music venues in the now-trendy Plateau Mont-Royal area — Casa Del Popolo, El Salon and Sala Rossa — that also double as either a bar, restaurant or cafe.

"When I first moved here, there were only like three venues to play in," said Jonathan Cummins, founder of the hard rock band Bionic and a Montreal Mirror columnist. "Today there are so many venues, you can see five different shows a night."

Even without big financial success, people give back to the community in other ways. Andre Gu  rette, member of the psychedelic noise rock outfit AIDS Wolf, teamed with friend Matt Miller to form Mandatory Moustache, a music promotions company that launched a popular biweekly Tuesday night music series at restaurant/club Le Divan Orange.

The bands that play these nights are always local but not necessarily known, a strong reason why Mandatory Moustache picks them for the bill. The evening has built a reputation for showcasing emerging talent across many genres including country, folk, pop and electro.

"A lot of times people won't know who the bands are, but will go just because it's a Mandatory Moustache night," Cummins said. "They're young and they think it's wicked and the place to be."

Nights like this have been able to thrive for several reasons, including government subsidies for some bands, Montreal's low rent — Besnard Lakes member and Breakglass Studio founder Jace Lasek pays about \$1,800 per month for his 5,000-square-foot studio, and his four-bedroom apartment costs \$720 — and an attitude of "if you want to do something, do it."

There's a strong experimental music scene, lead by the likes of AIDS Wolf, The Besnard Lakes and Sam Shalabi, who all play music in disparate genres: noise rock, avant garde ambient and psychedelic experimental with Middle Eastern influences, respectively. Even alt-country artists like The Adam Brown and neo-folkies like John Lennox have filled particular musical voids.

But Montreal wouldn't be Montreal without its majority French community. While much of the spotlight is currently on English-speaking bands, Montreal has a thriving Francophone scene — and many musicians in Anglo bands are of French descent, like Arcade Fire's R  gine Chassagne and all the members of the cartoonish post-punk rock outfit Les Georges Leningrad.

But Montreal music always seems to come back to the notion of community.

After Wolf Parade — which had never worked with a producer — returned from troubled recording sessions in Portland, Ore., for "Apologies to the Queen Mary," singer Dan Boeckner turned to his friend Lasek to remix the songs, resulting in a solid alt-rock effort.

When asked about the demise of Unicorns, no one felt comfortable discussing the situation — because it was their friends' business. But whatever happened behind closed doors must have caused a creative spark because Nick Diamonds and Jamie Thompson are now working on not one, but two new projects together: Th' Corn Gangg, a hip-hop outfit with Los Angeles underground rappers Bus Driver and Subtitle; and Islands, a straight-up pop group.

So whenever the press attention fades away, it's likely the buzz will pick up somewhere else.

"(The spotlight) isn't going to be here forever," said Alien8's Worsley. "There's another scene ready to explode around the corner."

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