

Arts and Entertainment

Local hip hop scene struggles to stay alive

by Natalie Ferrigno

The Lion's Jam 91, currently the only all-hip hop radio show in Centre County, is ranked only below Indie 500 among the top shows on station according to Staff Head Boshra Gheoprael.

Gheoprael said Jam 91 gets a lot of calls from locals, as well as people from out of the area, some from as far as New York and New Jersey. He added that they have a decent following from Rockview Prison in Bellefonte.

Yet, local artists are struggling to build and maintain a hip hop scene.

Artist and State College resident Neil Curtis remembered when Players (now Indigo) hosted hip hop artists and events nightly, including under-21 nights.

"It was the spot for all the kids," he said. "It was always packed."

Unfortunately, the club switched DJ companies and public interest decreased.

Curtis now often participates in the only

"There's no place else for hip hop. Nobody's into it, nobody's feeling it. They want to hear all these crappy beats they've been hearing for years."

--Neil Curtis

live, regular hip hop event at Jamaica Junction in State College. Two brothers who go by their stage names "LV" and "Avatar" host the monthly event.

The battle, however, is uphill, not only due the lack of venues, but lack of interest in local music.

Both he and his brother have had a hard time finding reliable artists to work with.

Avatar said most bars are concerned about business and know cover bands attract big crowds. In fact, many have pushed out original acts in favor of cover bands. One of the explanations they offered is that people don't want to be a part of something new in music anymore.

Curtis agreed.

"There's no place else for hip hop. Nobody's into it, nobody's feeling it. They want to hear all these crappy beats they've been hearing for years," he said, pointing out how other area clubs tend to play the same songs over and over again. He agreed that most people want to hear what's familiar, not original music by local artists, and suggested that was a new trend.

LV and Avatar also went to Players for rap battles and performances. However, the Crow Bar was the venue they remember best. Every night, musicians from all genres, from mainstream to local and including hip hop, would perform. But all that ended when the Cell Block bought out the Crow Bar.

Curtis also said local artists are making

their music at home and taking it out of the area due to the lack of interest and support here.

"The lack of diversity in any radio station around here is just ridiculous," he said, pointing out that local stations often play TLC's "Waterfalls" with Lisa "Left Eye" Lopez's rap edited out.

However, he has noticed Jam 91 occasionally playing older and more obscure hip hop.

Many at Penn State are trying to bring more live hip hop into the area, including organizing a battle of the bands, Gheoprael said. Two area festivals have already featured hip hop, including the local act Atlas Soundtrack at Moving On Festival last year.

"I'd love to see more and more artists, both students and locals, especially for hip hop," Gheoprael said. While most of the DJs play mainstream hip hop, they do some-

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Arlo Guthrie tour brings whole family along to perform

by Jill Gomez

Voices interviewed Arlo Guthrie while he was on break from his current tour with this family. The folk legend discussed politics, the spirit of family, and his early musical influences.

Voices: How's it going so far?

Arlo Guthrie: Well, so far it's just been fabulous, more than I imagined. I was a little hesitant because we've got some family with us that are not usually on stage, especially some of the young ones. They've been great, they've held up, and they get better every night, and I'm really excited about it.

V: It must be great for their confidence, the little ones.

A.G.: Well, it's changing, yeah. And my three daughters have not sung a whole lot together, and I was a little nervous about that, but they're beginning to sound great, I love it.

V: Politics and social issues have always played passionately in your music. What issue drives you now the most?

A.G.: Well, I think there are a lot of important things going on now. I think the one that interests me most is the redefining of the continuing struggle that humans seem to engage in. At this point in time it seems to be defined by the interests of the corporate world and the interests of the individual.

And I am fascinated by how that is playing out in a number of arenas, most importantly in the U.S. congress right now. It used to be that Democrats were different from Republicans, and now it seems that there are corporatists and individualists who are fighting it out, and I am fascinated with that.

V. Like with the health care reform issue?

A.G. Yes, exactly. Like with a lot of the

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Photo by Jill Gomez
Three generations of the Guthrie family performed on stage at The State Theatre in State College last month part of a national tour promoting the entire family's musical talent.

Acoustic Brew hosts Crowfoot at inspired venue

by Hannah Abelbeck

One of the better music venues in Centre County might be a yoga and massage studio. The Center for Well Being in Lemont was built as church in 1888, and in the mornings and evenings the former sanctuary fills with men and women who do headstands on their yoga mats. The center also rents the space to the Acoustic Brew, an all-volunteer, not-for-profit concert series, and the match is divine.

The nave cradles visiting musicians. The warm room with its wooden floor and plain walls has acoustics that would flatter either a small congregation singing hymns or the intricate harmonies of unplugged folk singers and their instruments.

Acoustic musicians have become accustomed to playing traditional music and traditional instruments amplified by microphones, mixers, monitors, and speakers in

venues that don't always flatter their sound. The Center for Well Being gives them the opportunity to be heard clearly by an intimate and appreciative audience. "You know you have a friendly crowd when you can look everybody in the eye," Adam Broome of Crowfoot told the Acoustic Brew audience when Crowfoot played there on Nov. 13. They had a crowd of about 85 in a venue that might be able to hold 100 comfortably and absolutely no more than 120.

Broome also got laughs when he asked the audience, in a joke apt for the venue and this issue of Voices, why the yogi didn't want any novacaine on his visit to the dentist. The answer: "He wanted to transcend dental medication."

Popular on the contra dance circuit, Crowfoot plays toe-tapping, danceable music. The trio stopped in to play two sets for the Acoustic Brew crowd on their way to the 2009 Pittsburgh Fall Dance weekend,



Photo by Hannah Abelbeck
Crowfoot performs for the Acoustic Brew at the Center for Well Being in Lemont on Nov. 13. Members (from left) are Nicholas Williams, Jaige Trudel, and Adam Broome.

where they headlined Saturday's contra dance on Nov. 14. Contra dance is a style of group folk dance with its origin in English country and French court dances and a long history in colonial America. While it hasn't been fashionable for 150 years, it has survived in pockets of New England, Appalachia, and the Maritime Provinces in Canada.

The music Crowfoot plays reflects this blended folk tradition, with arrangements of songs from England, Ireland, Quebec, and the Appalachians. And from these roots, they weave their own compositions.

Jaige Trudel is from Vermont, Broome is from rural England, and Nicholas Williams is from Ontario. The group met five or six years ago in Boston at NEFFA, the New England Folk Festival. Trudel claims Williams lured her and Broome to Quebec with the promise of musical collaboration and delicious croissants from a nearby bakery. In 2005, they released their first album Nadajai.

The first piece they played in Lemont was the Footpath set from their new album Footpath. The 11 minute instrumental blends Canadian, Scandinavian, and Irish influences. The haunting flute, plaintive

fiddle, and steady guitar create a piece that seems to have meandered out of a timeless Celtic mist into hilly country still fresh, green, and timeless.

In other pieces, the accordion and violin trade perfectly timed eighth-note licks as the musicians swayed on stage. With only three musicians, Crowfoot has an amazingly versatile sound. With Trudel able to play fiddle or cello, Williams with several flutes, recorders, and an accordion, Broome with guitar and cittern, and all of them able to sing, the group has options and uses them well. They change tonality, play variations, trade harmonies. Their compositions run from dense, peppy jigs to minimalist compositions that reflect Broome's "propensity for dark, brooding, and melancholy ballads." One unexpected and fantastic piece was Trudel's "Dragonflying," a Swedish couple's dance that sounds like a jagged and lilting lullaby played at a Parisian café by a street musician on a rainy night.

This eclectic combination suits the Acoustic Brew well. The all-volunteer, not-

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issues. I think we're in a time when we're beginning to see the veil drop and to take note of which of our leaders are bought by home. Which individuals represent their districts, and which are in the pockets of Big Money.

That's an interesting thing that's going on right now. And it's in both parties. And that's beside the normal political craziness that we have, with the system that we have. I'm just fascinated by it. I think the result of this battle between individual people and big vested interests is going to decide the fate of the country, as far as I'm concerned. I think that's what's going on. I'm not comfortable saying that we're winning [laughs]. I don't think so, not yet, but I remain steadfastly true to the idea that the nation is better served when it's not represented by vested interests.

V.: There is still hope for us, then?

A.G. I hope so. And that hope is important right now, because hope alone is not enough. We'll see what happens. I hope we'll see what happens [laughs].

V. You're making history with the Guthrie family tour, bringing your work and your father's work full circle. What do you hope your children and grandchildren will take away from these months on the road with you?

A.G. Well, we're not only doing my stuff and my father's stuff. We're doing my kids' songs, and some of the grandkids have written songs and they're singing 'em. And I think what we're really doing is continuing a spirit of family history, and it plays out differently with every one of them, according to, you know, their age and experience and temperaments and their personalities....and I love seeing it all happen at the same time.

My son, Abe, plays in his own band at times, my daughter Sarah Lee and her husband, Johnny, are off a lot doing shows on their own. They just came back from Europe. My daughter, Cathy, and her partner—her singing partner, Amy I elson, who's Willie I elson's daughter—are planning trips to Australia. It all is playing out in different arenas, but it's neat to see it all happen in one night.

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--Arlo Guthrie

V.: I can imagine, with all of their different styles coming together.

A.G. Yes, they all have their own styles, and yet there's something the same. And when you see it in one night, you see what that same thing is. There's a familial spirit there.

V.: What kinds of songs are featured in your family tour?

A.G.: We're focusing a lot of songs in this tour on new Woody Guthrie songs, some that have never been put to music, that were found among old archival materials. We're using music by artists like Billy Bragg.

V.: Tell me about Sarah Lee Guthrie's children's CD Go Waggaloo.

A.G.: It's doing really well, winning all kinds of awards. It's nice to see the tradition continue...not just entertainment, not just play songs. The music is skewed toward kids, but that's part of the fun of making an album like this.

V.: Didn't you put together a children's album at one point?

A.G.: Years ago I put one together for 2-5 year olds—*Woody's Funky Grow Big Songs*—and it was listed as one of the top four of children's records of all time.

The songs have a long shelf life. They were my father's songs—I had to put music to them, as they were only lyrics. He personally mimeographed them, painted them, probably in the '40s, '47 or '48. He had made these little books, and they had been lost, no one knew about them. Someone told my mom, "I found all of these materials." [My mother's friend] must have been given copies. These were found 15 to 20 years ago.

V.: What has been the most surprising thing or funniest thing that has happened on the tour so far?

A.G.: Oh, lots of funny things have happened, every day. We were stuck in Cortland [I ew York] during Halloween, and had to take over the ballroom of the hotel, with all of the little kids running around. It was a funny picture—everyone in costume.

The kids are having their schooling on the road, things like that that are not usual, on the tour. My wife, Jackie, is making a lot of videos and putting them up on YouTube.

V.: What impact did playing with the likes of Bill Monroe have on you as a young performer? I read that you played with him in a park in New York City when you were



Arlo Guthrie

a teenager.

A.G.: I got to meet some incredible people. Yes, he was just standing around in Washington Square Park, in the Village in I ew York. Musicians would do that every Sunday...they were mostly amateurs, like me...just standing around in the park, playing, with twenty others. The amazing thing is that no one else knew who he was.

V. And when you told your friends, "I just played with Bill Monroe in the park," they didn't know who he was, right?

A.G. Right!

When I was ten, my family and I made a "mecca" to Stockbridge, MA to see if we could find Alice, the restaurant and the church. We found all three...and discovered that by then (in 1977), Alice owned a large white resort on a hill...and we met her!

Yes, her place was called Alice at Avaloc. It was right across from Tanglewood. She is still around, living in Provincetown, and she's still an artist, drawing.

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Local entrepreneur grows legal music downloading venture

by Natalie Ferrigno

The locally-based Web site TreeTunes.com is introducing a new model for legal music downloading. Founded and run by Mo Stroemel, the company aims to provide music for free through advertising tacked onto the beginnings of the songs it sells. Money generated through ad sales will allow the site to pay artists for their work.

Consumers need not worry that all of their music will be permanently cluttered by

ads, Stroemel said. The Web site will soon feature a MP3 trimmer which will allow users to remove the ads after listening to them a couple of times. There is a patent pending for this model of downloading.

Stroemel said he came up with the idea in 2001 and launched the site about two and a half years ago. However, it wasn't until recently that he had all the programming and software in place. Now, with the help of his family, Stroemel is uploading more music everyday. The song count is up to 18,000 songs, mostly from independent and

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for-profit concert series has booked blues and bluegrass musicians, contemporary singer/songwriters, celtic combos, old-timey music, and vintage swing. The biggest requirement is that the musicians be acoustic, be talented, and have stage presence.

"We want them to beam," said Holly Foy, the group's treasurer and opening act coordinator. Foy said Acoustic Brew members saw Crowfoot at I EFFA two years ago and have worked to book them since.

Acoustic Brew artists, while regionally and sometimes even nationally known in folk and acoustic circles, may not have instant name recognition for a mainstream audience. But the Acoustic Brew only brings in acts the board has heard and seen. For audiences who don't listen to acoustic music as their usual fare, this screening process makes Acoustic Brew a safe bet.

Crowfoot's performance was Karen

Serago's first time at an Acoustic Brew concert, even though she had "heard about it for years." Since somebody had an extra ticket and her kids were busy, she decided to go. Her usual musical tastes include the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Bob Dylan, and David Bowie, but Crowfoot impressed her. "They're great!" she said.

Another audience member who has trouble staying up late on Friday nights said she sometimes has trouble choosing between the Acoustic Brew and church in the morning.

Foy said that audience members drove in from as far as DuBois for the performance, and one couple gave up basketball tickets. Others chip by helping stack chairs after the event or volunteer to bake cookies for a treat during intermission.

Recent Acoustic Brew acts include Rustical Quality String Band, Beth Patterson, Pau Rishell and Annie Raines, and DALA.

Crowfoot will be playing at contra dances in Maryland and West Virginia Dec. 4-6.

"I'm a little bit older, so I remember records. I really honestly believe where the cost is concerned, digital downloading is going to take over,"

--Mo Stroemel

local artists.

"I'm not sure what the final count will be, but probably in the tens of thousands," he said.

Right now, Tree Tunes' main goal is to help independent musicians. Stroemel said. It's "probably stuff you've never heard of but they're actually pretty good...I'm just amazed at some of the independent artists out there. They're as good as anything from a major label." The site lists Scott Mangene, Dennis Fallon, Enemy Love, Blank Pages, and High Luxe and said the site covers genres as wide-ranging as Hip Hop, R&B, Christian, Rock, kids, folk, country, and even spoken word.

He added that digital downloads save new and independent artists a lot of money since no CDs are printed. Many artists sell their music by giving fans code cards that allow them to download directly.

"I'm a little bit older, so I remember records. I really honestly believe where the cost is concerned, digital downloading is going to take over," Stroemel said, noting

the prevalence of popularity of MP3 players.

Stroemel said many artists have gathered national followings through the Internet, including through legal digital downloading.

To promote the company locally, Stroemel has a music showcase every Monday night at the Brewery in downtown State College. He said Tree Tunes is starting to grow.

"We're having a lot of fun down there," he said, noting the relaxed atmosphere of the Brewery and the relative lack of pressure on new artists as a result. "Right now, we just see who shows up, take turns playing, sometimes sit together and play and share new material and cover songs."

Stroemel said that as far as he knows, Tree Tunes is the only digital downloading company based in Centre County.

"We could be anywhere really because we're not tied to a storefront," he said, something that is convenient for him since he travels a lot. Stroemel is the head coach of the Penn State women's ice hockey team and teaches theatre technology at the university.

"I started the Web site as a branch off from my musical hobbies and while I believe it has a lot of potential, I do consider it a side job right now," Stroemel said. "What the future may bring...who knows? That's the fun of the adventure."

Songs are currently available from Tree Tunes for 74 cents to 83 cents each, depending on the number of credits a customer purchases. Songs from some featured artists are available for free.

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times pull older and rare tracks out of the vault, he said.

The band Audio Imagery, made up of Penn State and South Hills graduates, has been featured on Jam 91.

Guitarist George Webster said he thinks the scene here has always been lacking. "There hasn't been a huge hip hop scene," he said, pointing out that it is hard to tell sometimes, especially since his band has been at the forefront of Centre County hip hop in recent years.

Vocalist Jason Browne said the hip hop scene consisted of Hip Hop Anonymous, an open mic night that used to happen in State College around the time Audio Imagery was forming in 2005.

"That was when you had a community of people constantly getting together and collaborating and talking about different things and arguing about who was the best rapper or the best producer. [It was] back packers and gangster rappers alike. It was like a self-help hip hop session."

Audio Imagery tried to start it up again, but had trouble drawing an audience. Browne found this odd, considering that H.H.A. events could be spread out over weeks and huge crowds would show up every time. Webster suggested that H.H.A. couldn't be revived because many of the artists that made it happen graduated from Penn State and moved on.

He said it might be time to bring H.H.A. back.

"The market's here, we just need a place," Webster said.

The challenge for Audio Imagery comes

from being an actual band, something that is unusual in the genre.

"[Rappers and hip hop artists] have a harder time succeeding than, say, an original rock band because as soon as hip hop comes on they want to here a regular beat, they want the DJ to play a song," said Browne. "People don't follow hip hop groups like they follow rock groups."

Audio Imagery is one of the few hip hop bands around along with Roots and Gym Class Heroes.

"We're sort of in a league of our own, we have to kind of pave our own way," Webster said. "We do some of what the rappers do and kind of what the rock people do. We try to mash that up and grab both crowds."

While artists like L.V. seem more focused on building the local scene, Audio Imagery has its sights set on stardom.

"Ideally and honestly, this [State College] is a stepping stone to someplace else," said Browne. He said Audio Imagery has played just about every place and at every festival they could in State College.

They also intend to leave a legacy behind "Find Tomorrow," a song they wrote for THON and released Nov. 15 with the help of producer Johnny Montagnese, known for his work with Destiny's Child, Diana Ross, and Donna Summers.

Local Hip Hop Acts Explain their Art

Both LV and Curtis take a less conventional, more artistic approach to their work.

"It's deep to me. It's more than just music," said LV. "It's self-expression and a way to get out my message, my beliefs, what I stand for."

LV said he likes to blend different genres of music into his music besides hip hop. His

"[Rappers and hip hop artists] have a harder time succeeding than, say, an original rock band."

--Jason Browne

work also features social and political messages.

"It's like a pedestal or a stage [for me]," he said.

His brother, Avatar, more of a producer, doesn't see his work as any less artistic than writing and performing music. "It's my life. It's who I am," he said.

Curtis, trained in classical vocals, takes a less conventional and expected approach to his work. He also doesn't stick to what's expected of hip hop artists, often skipping on requests to freestyle.

"I can't, my brain doesn't work like that. It doesn't follow a straight path," he said.

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