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Home backstage pass (live music) CMJ Music Marathon | 10.16-20.07

CMJ Music Marathon | 10.16-20.07

Written by Laura Hamlett
Sunday, 21 October 2007



Highlights from the 2007 edition of the annual music festival: As Tall as Lions, Kevin Devine, Semi Precious Weapons and more!



SEMI PRECIOUS WEAPONS, photo: Chris Owyong
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New York City

Honestly? I wasn't too excited by the lineup at this year's [CMJ Music Marathon](#), which is both a good and bad thing. There were no must-see shows, no camp-outs on grimy sidewalks in city drizzle.

For the most part, we were free to go on a whim. And so it was with very little pre-planning that we approached this year's festival, which resulted in the thrill of discovery and a lack of regret.

(Before I go any further, I should point out that I was pulling double duty this year, both as a press representative and artist promoter. That's right, kids: This year marked the first official Bigfatcat/PLAYBACK:stl CMJ Music Marathon showcase!)

So without further ado, here's what left an impression:

Bands

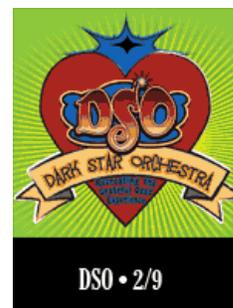
Top honors would have to go to [As Tall as Lions](#), whose self-titled release is a personal favorite. Live, the songs are immeasurably more dynamic, thanks in no small part to the elastic, impassioned dancing of the bassist and the exuberant (often unmiked) sing-along and multi-instrumental talents of the traveling keyboardist. The band members were a bunch of well-dressed hippies (two of the five were barefoot, one in flip-flops) playing amazingly



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rich, textured, high-energy indie rock. Songs from their forthcoming EP showed just as much promise as their last simmering full-length.

Brooklyn boy **Kevin Devine** gave an absolutely electric homecoming show in a packed house that sang along with every word. Returning from a tour with **Owen** and **Manchester Orchestra**'s Andy Hull (both of whom shared the bill this evening), Devine was in fine spirits and even finer voice. His sometimes reedy delivery was crystal clear and pointed, the carefully considered lyrics thankfully intelligible. Tracks from his Capitol Records debut *Put Your Ghost to Rest* (including "Just Stay," one of the greatest songs of the last decade) were as well received as the older, self-released material.



And, as just mentioned, stumbling onto **Andy Hull** was a gift. Going in, I didn't know the name but soon recognized the voice. Hearing Manchester Orchestra songs—and others—stripped down and stark only further proved Hull's lyrical genius and beautifully unique voice.

We managed two sets by Brooklyn's **Semi Precious Weapons**, who have made St. Louis a second home. As always, Justin Tranter and Co.—just named best rock band by NYC's *Village Voice*—didn't fail to fully captivate. Their sets were heavy on tracks from the soon-to-be-released (for free!) full length, *We Love You*, with plenty of preening and posturing by the dynamic frontman. Oh, and yes, there was something deliciously decadent in the way Tranter grabbed guitarist Aaron's hair as he played.

Ha Ha Tonka's music veers more Americana/folk/traditional than my usual tastes, but their live show had me sold. High energy, an easy rapport with the audience and four-part (!) harmonies—including a traditional a capella number that's also on their Bloodshot Records debut—made this Springfield, Mo. band a highlight of the fest.



With her sparse delivery and symphonic style, **Anna Ternheim** was another unexpected surprise. A reinterpretation of David Bowie's "China Girl" was absolutely amazing. Unfortunately, the fact that Ternheim played without band and with backing tracks—accompanying herself with acoustic guitar, piano or not at all—made her live show flat and uninteresting to watch.

Although I booked it, I've got to give a shout out to the **Bigfatcat** showcase bands, all of whom made me proud to be doing what I do. Todd Sarvies of **John Boy's Courage** gave an impassioned and emotionally raw solo acoustic performance; though I've seen the show countless times before, the NYC offering was truly memorable, and left the crowd visibly impressed.

With an upright cello in place of bass guitar, Brooklyn's **Skidmore Fountain** threw down a varied and delicious set. Randy Bergida's fluid vocals and dancing were but a part of the foursome's audiovisual appeal. The songs are political and philosophical yet still make you move. A couple new tracks bode well for next year's follow up to *Break*.

We here at the mag are all fans of Omaha's **Go Motion** who, as a retooled four-piece, owned the tiny stage space at **Banjo Jim**'s. Delivering a set that can only be described as energetic (guitarist James Luther's groove is always a sight to behold), the band's brand of dance-friendly, '80s-inspired beats is never anything less than fully entertaining.

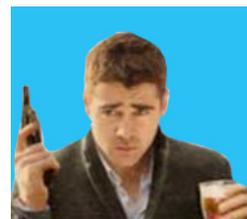
We like to think that we discovered **Loyal Divide**, who played the first annual PLAY:stl festival here in St. Louis last month. The small stage and short set time cramped the band's usually spread-out and instrumental free-for-all style, but the songs (helmed by two vocalists) still resonated. Always notable: Chris Sadek's falsetto, Adam Johnson's growls, and the way the latter fell to his knees to coax sounds from his guitar.

Other bands I saw and enjoyed: **Islands**, **Eskimo Joe**, **Brighton MA**, **The Section Quartet** and **The Scotland Yard Gospel Choir**.

Bands I wanted to catch but missed due to scheduling or, in one poor instance, my own inability to navigate the NYC Transit System: **Spouse**, **Zack Weber**, **So Many Dynamos**, **Jumbling Towers**, **Magnolia Summer** (hello to the STL!), **Robin Horlock**, **Second Dan**.

Panels

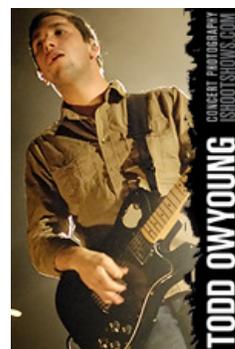
This year's CMJ panels were a vast improvement over 2006, which seemed to offer almost nothing of substance. Though we overslept and missed **Andy Rourke**, we still caught a handful of sessions and took home some ideas. Just for fun, I began compiling a list of catch phrases and words that kept popping up; in order of popularity, they include: **Radiohead**, **Madonna**, **MySpace**, **digital rights management**, **Facebook**, **livespace**, **community**, **2.0**, and **widget**. Fun fact of the fest? Ninety percent of the artists signed to



"A hilarious, twisted pleasure!"

Writer-Director Martin McDonagh is a genius."

-Karen Durbin, Elle

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major labels never achieve enough financial success to warrant the label putting out a second album. In other words, if you're lucky enough to land a deal, negotiate a shorter term.

And so ends another festival season. With aching feet and a desperate need for sleep, I recline in my airplane seat and dream of springtime in Austin...

| **Laura Hamlett**

Photos by **Christopher Owyong**. From top: Semi Precious Weapons, Skidmore Fountain, As Tall as Lions, John Boy's Courage, Go Motion.



Via BuzzFeed



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