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KC bands, promoters and performers prepare to invade South by Southwest

By TIMOTHY FINN
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Joshua Martinez sits in a booth at the RecordBar, discussing the logistics of an immense project.

It has nothing to do with the bars he and his partners operate in the 3800 block of Broadway, the Gusto Lounge and its sibling, the Topshelf. In fact, this job isn't even in Kansas City, although it has everything to do with raising the city's profile.

Martinez is talking about wrapping a two-story building in Austin, Texas, in a sheet of vinyl.

The sheet will be covered with sponsors' logos and bands' names and show schedules, then shipped south, in pieces, to be wrapped around the Canvas Bar & Gallery on Fifth Street in downtown Austin.

The Canvas Bar is the site of the "Midwestland Takeover," which is what he and his cohorts are calling the Kansas City music showcase that begins Thursday afternoon and ends in the wee hours of Sunday morning.

Martinez has big hopes for Takeover, which will take place during the annual South by Southwest Music Conference (SXSW). Takeover is not an official festival showcase; it's still on the fringe of this huge indie music fest.

But if things go as planned and the 40 or so bands enlisted for the Takeover execute the three-day, 36-hour game plan — *and* the rest of the local community that's in tow does its part — the Takeover ought to generate enough of a hubbub to persuade the SXSW committees that this KC group deserves to move up to Sixth Street to join the official festivities in 2011.

But first, Martinez and his large crew have lots of work to do — more than they expected, it turns out.

Networking in Austin

The Midwestland Takeover won't be Martinez's first SXSW bash. A graduate of the University of Texas and former Austin resident, he has attended every SXSW but two since 1998. A few years ago, he started organizing unofficial parties, including 2009's Lose Control Party at the Canvas. That party featured four local acts: the ACBs, Max Justus, the Nomathematics and Adrienne "Dri" Verhoeven.

"That ended up being a great success," he said. "But I decided I wanted to do another party that focused on Kansas City bands and the music scene here and in the Midwest. So I called Billy and Steve and pitched the idea, and they were excited about it. Then I talked to the Midwest Music Foundation, and they wanted to get involved, too."

Billy Smith books bands for the Czar Bar; Steve Tulipana co-owns the RecordBar. Both are in a few local bands, including the Roman Numerals, which is part of both the Takeover and the official SXSW festival. Both concede that the Takeover has grown beyond their expectations.

"I figured we'd get about 15 bands who wanted to go," Tulipana said. "But as more bands signed on, others wanted to join, too."

"I didn't really think this many bands would want to drive all that way for one 30-minute spot," Smith said, sitting at the Czar Bar's bar, staring at his laptop with the names of dozens of bands he is trying to schedule from 2 p.m. to 2 a.m., three days in a row.

What makes his job even more complicated is the fluidity of the situation: bands backing out of, or dropping in to, the party. Tuesday afternoon, for example, the schedule for Thursday night still showed a 6:30 p.m. opening.

In addition to overseeing the schedule, Smith will play with three bands: Olympic Size, Thee Water Moccasins and the Roman Numerals. Some of those gigs are at other showcases, including one for the local Anodyne Records label.

But any musician who has performed in the festival knows it typically means a long drive and big effort for a brief moment on stage, so the more times you can play the better, up to a point.

"It's a lot of work," Tulipana said. "You can't just drive up to the venue, so you're usually lugging your gear two or three blocks. It can be a pain in the butt, but it's a lot of fun, too."

"Three or four gigs is probably a good number," Martinez said. "After that, a band is getting itself into a lot of work it might not be ready for."

It's all about exposure

Once upon a time, unsigned bands applied to perform at SXSW hoping to be "discovered" and signed by a record label. That theorem has been turned upside down in the last decade. Now major artists use the festival as a way to promote their new records. Last year, for example, Metallica performed at SXSW. Two years ago, Van Morrison played two showcases to promote his "Keep It Simple" album.

The growing prevalence of large, signed bands in the official schedule was another reason for organizing the Takeover, Martinez said.

"We wanted to bring it back to that stage, where the focus is on talented unsigned bands, not bands who are already popular and have label contracts," he said.

Nathan Reusch owns the local and independent Record Machine label, home to several talented bands, including Copybara, which will perform at least four times in Austin. He said the opportunity is all about exposure.

"For labels like Record Machine that have smaller bands, SXSW can mean more exposure than a whole self-booked tour," he said. "The more shows you have down there, the more opportunity to get in front of someone that might open up a door to get to the next level. Last year, we had one band playing one show. This year, we have six bands playing 14 shows and still have more opportunities coming in a week before the fest."

Martinez said he has seen the exposure thing do its magic, even on bands who attended one of his unofficial shindigs.

"Delta Fiasco was already big when they played a Lose Control party (in 2008)," he said. "But a lot was written about that show, and it added to their buzz."

Tulipana, though, said it's best for any unsigned band that goes to Austin during SXSW to keep expectations realistic and use the opportunity to network.

"The entire music industry is down there," he said. "It's a great time to see what other bands are doing and what's starting another buzz. And you never know who's going to be standing next to you at a show or a party."

Martinez said the 2008 Lose Control party is where members of the Austin band Neon Indian met one another.

"Now they're big — in the blogosphere, anyway," he said. "They're selling out midsize venues and playing around the world."

Making a scene

Another local group involved with the showcase is the Midwest Music Foundation, which was founded in 2009 to promote the local music scene as one large, collaborative community.

"Thirty bands going down to Texas — all genres, all sorts," said Abigail Henderson, a co-founder of the group. "There's a sense of community in that ... like some giant, traveling musical circus."

"The level of talent here is amazing," she said. "It needs to be heard. That's the MMF's greatest hope in all of this: to help make it as easy as possible for more people to hear what's happening in Kansas City."

Kansas City will be represented by more than just its music scene.

Carman Stalker will be present with fashions and services from her WearHaus boutique. Jake Cardwell of C&C Drum Co. will show off his wares. So will Patrick Deveny, who co-owns the Jaykco Guitar Strap company. Gnarly Enterprises, a local video-production and promotion enterprise, will be there, projecting videos of each performance on a wall outside the venue and otherwise stirring up hype and commotion.

All the Takeover bands will eat well in Austin, thanks to John McClure, the owner and chef at Starker's on the Plaza, who is bringing a feast to Austin along with Craig Adcock from Belly Up Bar-B-Que.

"I'm friends with some people in local bands, like Abigail," he said. "They asked if I could help out with serving food. I

said, 'Absolutely.' I'll be feeding the bands and also selling food to the public."

His menu will include atypical road cuisine for the average local band: braised pork sliders, smoked-beef sandwiches, gumbo z'herbs and beignets.

The showcase also will distribute an 18-track Kansas City music sampler that was put together by Smith, sequenced by Robert Moore, the host of "Sonic Spectrum," and mastered by local sound ace Duane Trower.

Martinez said that \$1,000 of the \$1,600 it cost to make 2,000 copies of the music sampler will be covered by Pabst, a showcase sponsor. Also present will be local beer maker Boulevard Brewery, which is now available in Austin. Boulevard will give the bands "liquid courage" if needed, Martinez said.

"You never know when someone might have to get up and play for 30 minutes to an empty room," he said.

He is doing all he can to avoid that, he said, using "guerrilla-marketing" techniques to get the word out. He has also tapped into a database of 8,000 or so industry types who connected with the Lose Control Web site the last two years.

"We've been plugging away, hitting people one-by-one on blogs and the Web," he said. "And once we roll down there, the zoo that is Gnarly Enterprises will be out in front of the Canvas making a spectacle and getting people to notice."

Anyone who stops randomly and pops inside to see what's going on will get a taste of the diverse sounds of the local music scene, which will showcase everything from country, hard-rock, punk and indie-rock to hip-hop and folk.

"When I first visited here about five years ago, I didn't expect to give Kansas City a second thought," Martinez said. "But I saw the Ssion perform at the Pistol, and I witnessed some energy and enthusiasm for a music scene and arts scene. And when I moved here a year later, I was blown away.

"Living in Austin, you get to see all kinds of music. But what's going on here — the scene is so tight. It's a very live community, and it's blossoming right now."

And this week, he and a large entourage of local musicians and artisans will spend three long, full days trying to show the music world that their scene is as major-league as anyone's.

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