



# **Last weekend proves Alton is experiencing a cultural renaissance**

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**ALTON** - On Saturday, people from across the **St. Louis Metro Area** flocked to Alton to sample a bit of beer, music and art for two annual events.

**Rock the Hops** took place throughout Downtown Alton along Third and State Street with a shuttle connecting it to **Old Bakery Beer Company**. It was put together by **Drew and Hope Mader** with the help of many volunteers and sponsors. This was the second year for the event, which featured artists, bands and brews unique to each bar. St. Louis area musicians and breweries set up shop in several bars, including **Big Muddy Pub, 300 State Street, Chez Marilyn's, Morrisson's Irish Pub** and **Elijah P's**.

"Tickets" sold out for Rock the Hops in early in the day, the Maders said. Those tickets included a hot pink wristband and a small souvenir glass, used to sample each brew. The \$25 price tag included free shuttles and samples until they ran out. Brewers such as **Recess** from **Edwardsville** and **Four Hands** from St. Louis provided some special batches as well as their regular favorites.

Without a ticket, people were still able to peruse the (sometimes yarn-bombed) bars of downtown on foot without cover charges to go enjoy each band. Bands such as **Caveofwords** traveled from St. Louis to play Alton for the second year in a row. Altonians such as **Polyshades** and the Maders' own band, **Hope and Therapy**, were able to rock their hometown.



Each stop on the downtown tour included local artists vending their creations. At Old Bakery Beer Company, **Sara Luck**, a local artist from **Bethalto** who studied at **SIUE**, presented several of her watercolors and etchings, including one she made of author Kurt Vonnegut. Her fellow classmate, **Sarah Walters**, had a booth near Luck, where she sold prints of photographs she had taken, the most popular of which was a wet piece of plastic wrap, which appeared iridescent with Walters's choice of lighting.

Luck's brother, **Nathan Luck**, is a part of the band, Polyshades, which played at Old Bakery as Sara Luck was vending. They also closed out another major cultural event taking place in Alton that evening - **Piasa Summer**.

Piasa Summer was the brainchild of Brooklyn-based art collective, **Loosey Goosey**. Before moving to **Brooklyn**, they were based in **Chicago**. Before being based in Chicago, the trio of **Jesse Lankford**, **Joeseeph Crawford** and **Kyle Lamble** were high school students in the **Wood River** area. Each year, they return to their hometown area to remind it of its artists.

This year's event, held at **Jacoby Center for the Arts** on Broadway, continued each year's trend of becoming better and better. The gallery space was full of work done by

local artists, including **Meredith Elliott**, owner of **Maeva's Coffee**, with an amazing Teddy Roosevelt box and a surreal bright sculpture of a flamingo. Local programmer and animator **Brandon Plummer** debuted a challenging video game he created featuring the adventures of a marshmallow in a world of s'mores. Local artist **Cory Sever** recently returned from studying abroad in Thailand to show some of his Piasa Bird-related art.

Besides three small paintings of the legendary beast resembling characters from Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming, Sever created a vibrant mask and wardrobe based on the creature. He wore this as he did a dance performance hailed by "woos" and applause from the audience.





While many may think having two such events in one day in Alton is a rarity, it is becoming more and more the norm. People such as the Maders are working throughout the community to better represent its blossoming music and art scene. Out-of-town

groups such as Loosey Goosey return to the area to tap into that growing scene. Groups operating within the area such as **Alton Main Street** are working toward fostering that culture more and more. The upcoming **Mississippi Earthtones Festival** on Sept. 17 is proof of that. That event is in its 10th incarnation, and has seen growing attendance each year.

While infrastructure like the **Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater** brings entertainment favorites from across the country, events such as Rock the Hops, Mississippi Earthtones, and last month's **Sounds of Downtown** show at the **Riverbender.com Community Center** showcases talent from the area. More and more people are attending events to see their friends, family and neighbors share their art.

Besides the established Jacoby Center for the Arts taking aim at a wider demographic, artists in Alton have much to anticipate. A grassroots group of people is trying to revive the work of the revered artist **Art Towata**. They are trying to salvage his old warehouse on Piasa Street with the lofty goal of converting it into another non-profit art gallery for up-and-coming artists, a resource Alton has in plenty.

Live music in Alton is also evolving beyond cover bands at bars. Open mic nights can be found across the area from Maeva's to Elijah P's to the **Ragin' Cajun**. Old Bakery Beer Company has allowed an entire room at its disposal for events such as concerts by both local and touring bands. **Lighthouse Sounds**, a professional-quality recording studio, has been working to establish itself in the area during its first year. Aspiring musicians no longer have to go to St. Louis to attain such recordings.

If fostered by a community which supports it, this emerging cultural renaissance will begin to flower and thrive. The artists and musicians are always searching for ways and places to display their talents. In fact, in case neighbors and noise complaints have not noticed it, there is even a growing scene of basement shows from places as far apart, yet connected, as Alton, **Shipman** and **Mt. Olive**.

To survive in a post-rust-belt economy, many communities are relying on their resources in an entirely different way. This past weekend becoming less and less of an anomaly is a sign Alton is beginning to rely on its creatives to spur this cultural revival. If history shows, cultural revivals are often immediately followed or concurrent with economic ones.

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