

OP-ED: Why Alton's local music scene may be at its best in modern times

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ALTON - Over the weekend, I had the pleasure of seeing two homes in Alton decide to host the same impromptu underground punk rock show - and it hit me: I'm witnessing a cultural renaissance.

I've been noticing it for the last few years, and it's never always just one thing. Alton has been increasing its culture- its brand - for the last few years in a very Alton sense. When Maeva's Coffee Shop opened, everyone was excited such a hip place existed in little ol' Alton. When Old Bakery Beer Company opened, we thought the same thing. We felt like we won a new era for Alton when Chris Hinkle was able to open Grand Piasa Body Art on Broadway. Now, when Germania opens, we all think it's awesome and cool, but that's to be expected in Alton. If you ask me - a reporter who has been working here for the better part of six years - that is a sign of greatness swelling from Alton's grassroots.

Even weirder (as is Alton's way), it's hard to pinpoint the heroes from this groundswell. There are the business owners like Meredith from Maeva's, the Rogalskies from Old Bakery, Donna and Dave from It's Raining Zen and Chris Hinkle who put his reputation and business on the line while fighting the establishment's wishes.

But, there's also the volunteer groups like Alton Main Street, which is championed by Sara McGibany - a name everyone in Alton should know, and a face they know whether they realize it or not. It was they who brought us our iconic farmers' and artisans' market at its current level of impressive sprawl.

Also, Drew and Hope Mader, a couple who once wanted to leave this place (like so many other young, hip couples), until they realized Alton was where they wanted to raise a family. Now, they are putting together another Rock the Hops Aug. 19. They are also two of the driving forces behind the improvements on North Side Park off Rozier Street. Thanks to them and their efforts, I was able to see my two-year-old little cousin play in that park without worry of tall grass or rusty equipment.

Another level below that, getting closer to the grass roots are the two homes hosting punk shows in their basements. While they may not be city-sanctioned (and are often ended by noise complaints), or dedicated to the improvement of a specific area of the community, these basement shows are indicative of both a need for another "hip and cool" establishment in Alton and the current niche of underground culture and community being filled to its brim.

One house, located down the street from historic Haskell Park goes by the name "Metal Gear," after the espionage video game series. It recently celebrated its second anniversary, and has an average attendance of 50-70 people - even on weekdays. Local favorites such as Lifewithout and Scribble attained their notoriety from that dusty basement with too low of a ceiling.

The other basement is located in a quiet, hard-to-find neighborhood off Main Street is reluctantly referred to as "The Fox Hole." That basement, which is completely covered

in posters and vinyl records, has an impressive display of lights and a much taller ceiling. It gave birth to local punk rock band Walloper, and has hosted a diverse line of talent from across the country, including female-led bands Candy Ambulance and Some Kind of Nightmare.

That's right. Bands from across the country are coming to Alton to play people's basements. This is another symptom of the spread of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) scene, but these bands could pick other towns in the St. Louis Metro Area to play. After each show, the same thoughts are expressed by the touring bands in both basements, and it so often includes the following sentiments:

"This place is awesome. We've never had so many strangers get into our shows like that."

"We've never been shown this much hospitality. This place is special."

"We're definitely coming back next time we're on tour."

Even if basement punk shows are not someone's preferred way to spend a Saturday (or Wednesday) night, the people of Alton should be proud people from San Diego, Louisville, Chicago, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma City and even New York are so happy with their experiences in Alton they want to spend hours in a van just to return to it. The next day, on their social media pages, they have pictures of themselves at Maeva's, Old Bakery, It's Raining Zen, enjoying our Great River Road and paying homage to our beloved Piasa Bird.

What Alton needs to do next is open a music venue. Of course we have an amphitheater dedicated to Air Supply, barbecue festivals and the return of the Alton Expo. We have several bars who allow live music and even encourage it. I saw a few of my friends' bands play at Fireball (formerly Chubby's) a few weekends ago, and it was great. But, we need a place dedicated to Alton's grassroots DIY scene and the touring bands they bring.

As an economic driver, it would be amazing. The St. Louis venues have a major problem with equipment being stolen. Alton would not have a problem of nearly that magnitude. If such a place could be established downtown *cough, cough maybe in front of the Ragin' Cajun cough, cough*, people from across the St. Louis Area could hop from the shows to some of Alton's most noteworthy establishments, creating even more commerce.

But, Alton still has many empty buildings. I sincerely believe there are more good ideas than vacant storefronts in this area, and a renewed focus on creative incubators and

entrepreneurs should occur. I'm aware it is ongoing, and that entrepreneurial spirit is strong in Alton, but let's reach it out to the artists and punk rockers. Let's as a city, as a strong, vibrant and growing community, assist our grassroots to the level of our businesses, community groups and politicians.

Finally, I have to say there is a lot of reason to hope for this growth to continue. This weekend, I am hosting a large music festival at the north side of Gordon Moore Park for the Sam Biggs Memorial Foundation, and the City of Alton, Mayor Brant Walker and Alton Parks and Recreation Director Mike Haynes have been extremely accommodating, as have local businesses and community volunteers. In fact, I have never seen such a showing of community in my 12 years of hosting "Snixfest." It is humbling and hopeful.

I haven't even touched on other aspects of Alton's culture such as open mic nights at Jacoby beginning, which will connect all sorts of creatives for new projects, Old Bakery brewing beer with native edible plants from The Nature Institute, which will connect this already environmentally conscious area more to its natural beauty, or the untold other community events of which I have yet to see or attend.

I'll leave you with links to local bands to see around. Many of these videos were shot at Lighthouse Sounds, a local recording studio on Market Street whose first year's worth of success is another aspect of proving Alton has a very creative and uplifting future.

[Polyshades](#)

[The Bonbon Plot](#)

[Royal Vessels](#)

[Biff K'narly and the Reptilians](#)

[Scribble](#)

[Healthy Fears](#)

[Lifewithout](#)

You can see all those bands and more at Snixfest this Saturday at the north side of Gordon Moore Park, across from the rest of the park. Tickets are \$10, and go toward The Sam Biggs Memorial Foundation, a local charity dedicated to assisting kids and their families as they cope with the devastating and grossly underfunded nightmare of childhood cancer.

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