

Hope and glory

IT'S NOT ALL TWANG AND YODEL IN TEXAS. ONCE A YEAR BANDS FROM EVERY SHORE – INCLUDING OURS – GET THE COWBOYS ROCKING TO EVERY CONCEIVABLE KIND OF MUSIC. **JESSE WRIGHT NODS ALONG**

The music is loud and the energy intense. Hopes run high as a nuclear concentrate of the music business explodes across half-a-dozen blocks in the Texas capital of Austin. This is South by Southwest (SXSW). Austin bills itself as the live-music capital of the world, and SXSW is that title's biggest defender. Although the annual conference features films and filmmakers as well as musicians and music industry professionals, SXSW is still known first and foremost as a music event. From noon until the wee hours, young bands fill the bars and play their music, one show after another. No matter the music type, no matter the performer, the shows are fervent with hope.

Maybe this'll be the one?

This March, 13 New Zealand acts were among the nearly 2000 bands from around the world to gather in Austin. Over the past few years, the Kiwi contingent has grown steadily, and the critics have taken notice. Recently and most famously (to American audiences) the 2006 SXSW saw the United States debut of New Zealand comedy duo

Flight of the Conchords. Their star turn helped cast an American eye towards the New Zealand music scene. In short, Americans expect Kiwis to entertain – and our 2009 batch of bands did not disappoint.

Being unknown is the common denominator among SXSW performers. Many have never signed a record contract, let alone released a commercial album. But SXSW can change all that, with a good show often turning a hobby into a profession. Not that it's easy. The numbers alone testify to the difficulty of getting noticed: 1958 bands and 12,650 attendees in four days.

To draw attention bands play on rooftops and outdoor patios. They play loud and they play in costume. When they're not on stage, often costumed band members are on the streets handing out CDs, business cards and flyers. In their spare time bands meet with other bands and record reps for advice, and attend workshops and conferences. In short, it's hectic. A member of the Australian group The Boat People said he hadn't slept since he landed in Austin – and, he assured me, his insomnia was not due to partying.

With the whirlwind of events and shows, it is easy for a band to slip through unnoticed and walk away with nothing; out of pocket by thousands of dollars with nowhere to go but back home. For the New Zealanders a wasted trip to SXSW could sideline a career and waste any savings they may have had. So what do our bands do to get noticed? They work hard. Bloody hard.

"We're very focused on giving it as much of a shot as we can," says Jeremy Redmore, singer for New Zealand band Midnight Youth. "We could have stayed out until four in the morning last night, but we said, 'No, we're going to bed at 11.'"

Redmore says his band expect to release their debut album, *The Brave Don't Run*, this month. While in the United States, Midnight Youth hope to repeat their New Zealand successes – where they scored two hits with the singles *The Letter* and *A New Day*. But first the band needs some exposure. SXSW is a great place to do that – every major music reporter (and quite a few minor ones) attends SXSW. And many of them make a point of visiting the Kiwi Tent.



Graphic: John Harford. SXSW photos: Jesse Wright

He is sober and he means it when he says, "Those guys were just outstanding." Scholes will tell his friends about them when he gets back home.

Scholes was not alone; everyone wanted more. What happened inside that tent was just what the New Zealand band needed.

Speaking before his set, Zach Doney, the young, frantic lead singer of Bang Bang Eche, says his band is not after a record deal; rather, they came to get noticed by fans like Scholes.

"When you're from New Zealand the amount of exposure isn't so great because there's only so many people there," Doney says. But Australia isn't much better.

PHIL TRIPP is the SXSW rep in charge of New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii. He is American by birth, but he is based in Sydney and has worked with SXSW as their Pacific region point man for six years. Tripp says even if a New Zealand band makes it in Australia it is hard to make a living. Australia has only 20 million people and a handful of major cities spread far apart. It is a hard country in which to make a music career. Even when Kiwi bands move to Australia – as many do – and make it there, America is still a necessary next step.

It is a step New Zealand singer/songwriter Ladyhawke is negotiating now. Formerly from Wellington, Ladyhawke (nee Pip Brown) moved to Australia to jumpstart her music career. With her single

Paris is Burning, Ladyhawke charted in Australia's Triple J Hottest 100, and her self-titled debut album snagged her a nomination in January as British pop magazine NME's Best Solo Artist (she lost to Pete Doherty). But before March she had never played in the United States.

Her SXSW set was not her debut American appearance (that was in LA en route to SXSW), yet it was one of her most important appearances for its press potential. Tripp says she came for exposure and if her SXSW set was a test, she passed. Ladyhawke closed the New Zealand showcase to raucous applause and got good mention in Rolling Stone's online edition the next day.

If America is ready for New Zealand bands like Bang Bang Eche and Ladyhawke, the bands are ready for the States. That the combination should seem so serendipitous is no accident. Tripp says Kiwi bands are "export ready".

"We sing in English, that's really important," Tripp says. "We're born and bred to perform in the most awful sorts of places you can imagine, with a crash barrier between the

band and the audience." In other words, Kiwi bands can get a crowd moving.

Tripp says that too often American and British bands go directly from the garage to the studio, meaning they never learn how to work a crowd or develop into a cohesive performing unit. Meanwhile their New Zealand counterparts tour and perform to make a living. It is not glamorous work, but Tripp believes it is elemental for any band and it is probably one of the biggest reasons the New Zealand tent is packed: they don't know who they will see, but they know it will be good.

"Longevity means long work," Tripp says. "Generally you just have to pull the umbilical cord and go out there and work your arse off."

Aaron Rose and Daniel Walton, two Christchurch natives, know the score. While half their band waits in Australia, this half of Phyllasoma is on a mission. They expect to come back next year with the rest of the band and perform, and when they do, they want few missteps. Is an out-of-pocket research trip to the States expensive? Yes. But these two say it's worth it.

"They're smart," Tripp says of Rose and Walton. "Like a few bands, they're over here the year before [the one they intend to play at] to suss everything out and see where to play."

Rose, Phyllasoma's singer, guitarist and founder, says he also wants the band to be at its best – and to get there he wanted to talk to the sort of industry people unavailable in New Zealand or Australia. "We need to be in an environment that lets us interact with people," he says. "This is a good place to network and meet people you could possibly work with. You need to be a better businessman to be a better artist."

Rose believes it takes money to make a good product, and that a good debut album and a solid management team can make the difference between a career and a fluke (or a bad showing). Rose and Walton agree that without a top product, their band should wait to play SXSW.

"Everyone's jostling to get seen and jostling to get known, but we're after the longevity," Rose says. "We want to support ourselves and our families." Longevity – or the pursuit thereof – is common ground for musicians.

Musically Phyllasoma, Bang Bang Eche, Ladyhawke and all the rest have little in common, but they do share common ground. They are Kiwi musicians on the same path towards longevity and the Kiwi Tent at SXSW is the launch pad.

Ladyhawke is taking off while Phyllasoma is gearing up. The band moved from the South Island to Sydney in 2007 and they hope to be ready for the tent next year. Inside the tent it is 30 minutes to an international fan base, a Rolling Stone review or, just maybe, a career. It's a high, hard goal for any band, but Kiwis have a good track record so far.

Maybe next year will be Phyllasoma's turn to shine. For Walton, the band's guitar player, a career in music would be a life's dream. "I don't want to do anything else," he says. **YW**

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