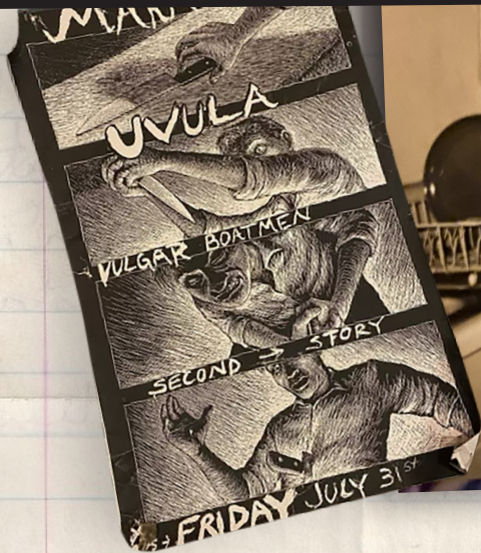
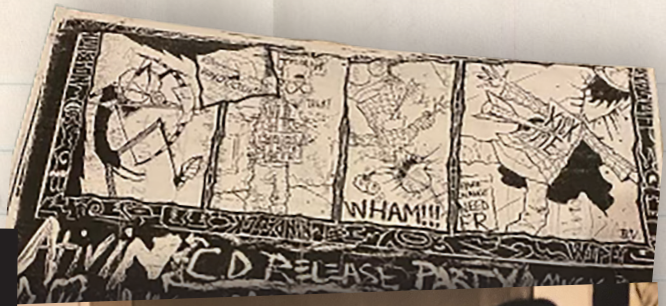


STORIES FROM

BLOOMINGTON'S

MUSIC SCENE



by Alex Cappelli

a 90s perspective

“There would literally be just hundreds and hundreds of kids milling about on the streets and getting away with lots of things they wouldn’t normally [laughs]. They would have a bunch of bands play and it was a rad time.”

Kenny Childers reminisces fondly on these pre-noise ordinance gatherings – “streetdances” of decades past. A frequent streetdance location was the intersection of Fourth Street and Indiana Avenue, where traffic would be blocked off and the music

and raucousness would encompass the entire street corner. Childers was heavily involved in Bloomington’s music scene in the 1990s as a member of Tangleweed, the touring and signed bands The Mysteries of Life and Velo Deluxe, with which he toured Europe, and his current project Gentleman Caller. He grew up in Bloomington and attended IU, and first became acquainted with the scene by going to local shows in high school. After picking up instruments and beginning to write his own music, the same people he watched at

these streetdances eventually became his musical peers.

Chris Kupersmith, now an English teacher at Bloomington High School North, also plays in Gentleman Caller with Childers. In the 90s, he was axa member of the popular cover band Situation Grey, getting deeper into the local original music scene in the mid-90s with his bands Fabric and Uvula. Kupermish had come to Bloomington from Wichita, Kansas, where he had previously played music and was looking for fellow musi-

cians after starting college at IU.

“It was the days where you would tear the little phone number off flyers. I tore off one of those and tried out for a band. It was an original band, but we ended up playing cover songs. I played like 80s covers for several years but then went on my way into the original music scene.”

While there was a definite house show and basement scene at the time — Kupersmith named one venue called the Roach Motel that was across from Dunn Meadow — he and Childers both cite Second Story Nightclub as the prime venue for acts performing their own music. Located on the second floor of the building that currently houses the Serendipity Martini Bar, Second Story was “the club for weirdos which was right where I belonged,” according to Childers. “It became my home venue and that’s where I spent way too much of my time. Second Story was really the home base for bands that were writing their own songs and it forced all kinds of eclectic bands to have to play together because there was only one venue for that.” Kupersmith adds that it showcased a lot of up-and-coming national acts in the time he and Childers were in the music scene. “There’s often a town that’s the hot music town — in America it was Athens because R.E.M. was from there, then it was Boston, Seattle for grunge... They kept trying to see if Bloomington was that, and there actually was a time in the mid- to later 90s when a bunch of bands started getting signed on major labels here.” The 90s marked a heavy focus on the music “scene”: as Childers saw it, “I think that because there had been this Seattle explosion with Nirvana, all the sudden everything became about scenes — different scenes in different cities and towns. I think

that we became very protective of it and very conscious of the fact that we had one and that made it feel more special... It made us not just protective of what we ourselves were doing, but what our friends were doing too. It was a good feeling.”

The signed bands out of Bloomington included Antenna, Old Pike, El Niño, and Childer’s band The Mysteries of Life. Kupersmith finds this surge interesting to look back on in the age of online music-streaming services such as Spotify and Soundcloud; before these sites, artists shared their music through cassette releases without the Internet to aid in their exposure. Tapes, cassettes, CDs, word of mouth, and flyers were the primary source of spreading what Bloomington’s music scene had to offer. While today’s flyers for shows are commonly created and shared digitally, physical flyers were a central aspect of the 90s scene. As Childers puts it, “The flyer game was hot. People put so much work into them — you would go to your friend that was the artist and have them make something cool... You’d have these terribly photocopied pieces, but the original art was so beautiful.” Word of mouth was also key in band formation. Kupersmith met one of his bandmates as he passed him playing acoustic guitar on the street, and it was common for musicians to meet each other while living in the same apartment building or at shows.

Childers and Kupersmith both share the sentiment of a certain angst being present at the time.

“I do think there’s some-

thing to the fact that people talk about a ‘Midwestern sadness.’ I do think that’s part of what intersects for all the different bands that were clawing away during that time.”

“I’m in Generation X, and the idea that we’re supposed to be nihilistic is kind of true. It was pretty hardcore... It wasn’t a bad scene, but it was a major crazy party scene. I’ve definitely noticed that when I’ve gone to shows over time, it’s become a little tamer and not as insane.”

But what has endured through the decades is the sense of belonging the music scene has provided for many in Bloomington. Childers shares, “I felt so at home, probably like the most at home I’ve ever felt was in that set of peers. That’s something that I probably didn’t appreciate enough at the time. It was just such a neat place to feel connected.”

As hundreds of musicians come and go through the scene, it embraces those within its bubble with a sense of shelter from the Midwestern sadness that Childers describes.

