

Oh so cool Midpoint Music Festival puts Cincinnati on music scene map

By Rick Bird
Post staff reporter

Look out, Cincinnati. We might actually be getting cool.

The sixth annual Midpoint Music Festival, Thursday to Saturday, has become something of an overnight sensation that has suddenly put Cincinnati on the hipness map. Only 6 years old, it has quietly grown into the largest music festival in the Midwest devoted to showcasing unsigned, independent bands and has turned into a festival that needs to be reckoned with by the national indie music community.

This year, the festival will bring more than 200 rock bands to town, playing at 16 venues downtown and in Over-the-Rhine. The weekend will feature a diversity of styles, from punky power pop to country-tinged roots rock, from traditional folkies to edgy electronica.

"Both the artists and the industry people say this is sort of a breath of fresh air," said Sean Rhiney, festival co-founder. The festival only accepts bands not signed to major record labels. "This is a chance to discover someone," he said. "To find a band that can go to the next level."

About a quarter of the 230 bands selected to play are from the immediate region, so it also serves as a significant local band showcase. They will come from around the country, especially the East Coast. And they are coming from Canada, Europe, Japan and Israel as the event has increased its reputation.

The festival has grown from 100 acts drawing 20,000 club-hoppers in 2001 to what is expected to be 40,000 attendees over the three-day event.

"I think Midpoint is a turning point for the city in that it helps to establish a heart and soul of Cincinnati," said Raymond Buse, spokesperson for the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. "We have a great vibrant music scene that is one of our great assets. That story has not been told."

Alternative arts event like Midpoint present city boosters with a different, but important, marketing tool outside the traditional mainstream offerings the city usually touts like Reds, Bengals, Taste of Cincinnati and Oktoberfest, Buse said.

No one's ever done a study on the economic impact of Midpoint, but Rhiney estimates it's probably under a \$1 million. That's not much compared to the big conventions and sports events. But Buse agrees an edgy music festival, and the music scene it highlights, has an impact in a very different way. It increases the area's "cool factor," helping the region's image in ways that can't be traditionally quantified.



ZOOM BRUCE CRIPPEN/The Post

Coletrain Motion from Chicago played at a 2005 Midpoint Music Festival pre-party. Bands from around the nation and the world will be at this year's musical gathering in Cincinnati of unsigned groups.

ABOUT MPMF

- **The Midpoint Music Festival** is Thursday-Saturday, with bands starting at 9 p.m. at 16 venues downtown and in Over-the-Rhine.
- **Admission is \$10** for single-day attendance; \$25 for a three-day wristband good for admission to all venues. Available at www.mpmf.com.
- **Kickoff concerts** are on Fountain Square Wednesday with several bands performing at noon and at 5:30 p.m.
- **The event** also represents a comeback for the Main Street club district in Over-the-Rhine, with four new clubs opening. They include: Speakeasy (formerly Japp's), 1134 Main; Pizza Bar (Harry's Pizza), 1207 Main; Cue (Rhythm and Blues Cafe), 1142 Main; Jardin Wine & Tapas Bar (Neon's), 208 E. 12th. Also opening is Buddakhan (formerly a Thai restaurant), 713 Vine.
- **For a complete band schedule**, visit www.mpmf.com.

ADVERTISEMENT

[Advertise Here](#)

[Ads by Google](#)

[Waltz Business Systems](#)

Serving Greater Cincinnati/N KY Get Sharp or Kyocera copiers here
www.waltzbusiness.com

"Cities we compete with for creative talent are known to have great music scenes, like Seattle, Nashville, Austin, Portland, Chicago," Buse said. "They are known for their nightlife and vibrancy."

Rhiney thinks Cincinnati is now getting a hipper reputation because of its alternative music and arts communities. He notes there are people outside the city who now know Cincinnati for things other than the Bengals or Reds, chili or Tall Stacks. "I think the things that have really energized the city are Midpoint, Scribble Jam and Fringe Fest," he said. "They are three very unique homegrown concept festivals that have made a mark nationally and have made us unique and define us."

National indie music promoters and local organizers cite several reasons Midpoint is now a destination festival:

It has stayed true to its independent music spirit. It has a policy of not booking any bands signed to major labels. The main nationally-noted band festivals, such as Austin's South By Southwest and New York's CMJ, feature a heavy dose of major label artists.

But the rock world is now decentralized, with major labels mainly distribution and marketing machines, not intent on developing or nurturing artists. The big labels look to the indie music petri dish for their new stars and those are the kind of bands that thrive at Midpoint, representing the best rock 'n' roll, do-it-yourself spirit.

"These are not quiet artists coming to town," Rhiney said. "The resumes are often impressive. They tour up and down the coasts, many are three albums into it. They sell 3,000 to 5,000 discs on their own."

Because of that, the event has become a destination for producers, band managers, even major label scouts, who are looking for "the next big thing."

Midpoint is the most compact of the music festivals centered on Main Street clubs. It is the only one where all the venues are within walking distance, which makes it an accessible orgy for music lovers.

However, it hasn't been easy for organizers to remain true to the Main Street club scene in Over-the-Rhine. In the last couple years, up to seven key venues have either gone out of business or moved from the neighborhood, including the Barrel House Brewery, Jefferson Hall, Japp's and RBC.

But this year represents something of a renaissance for Main Street, with five venues permanently reopening (Cue, Jardin, Pizza Bar and Speakeasy, all on Main; And Buddakhan on Vine and Seventh). The new venues plan a soft opening for Midpoint with grand openings in October.

"It's important for people who think Main Street's dead," said Bill Donabedian, Midpoint co-founder. "You can come down to the festival and check out five new venues downtown. That is unheard of."

Organizers have expanded outside the Over-the-Rhine core area, for the first time using the two stages at the Poison Room (Plum and Fifth), Arnold's, and the new Buddakhan.

Midpoint has become one of the top rock 'n' roll conventions for musicians. It features industry panels on a range of nuts-and-bolts topics Friday and Saturday at the festival headquarters at the Contemporary Arts Center. There are also keynote addresses from leading indie music icons.

This year speakers include John Davis of Nashville band Superdrag, who will give a speech and kick off a reunion tour with the '90s indie group, known for its Top 10 hit from 1996, "Sucked Out."

Another keynoter is John Presslar of Washington D.C.-based hardcore punk group Minor Threat, who will talk about his experience as a leader in indie bands controlling their own music.

In past years, the festival has featured Cincinnati music heroes as keynote speakers like funk legend Bootsy Collins and Afghan Whig's frontman Greg Dulli.

While the industry workshops and conference may not be on the radar of average Midpoint clubgoers, it is what's partly given the event a national reputation.

"I've been told by Sonic Bids (an Internet promotional community for indie bands) that Midpoint has crept into the bottom of the top five for music conferences. That's pretty weighty," said John DeLange of Tinderbox, a Minneapolis/Nashville band management firm. "It's not CMJ or South By Southwest, but it is on people's radar."

For example, DeLange will moderate a Midpoint panel that will feature heavyweight producers from Fox and MTV explaining to bands how to market music on TV shows, which are actively seeking indie music, since royalties are cheaper than using music from major label acts.

DeLange says the Midpoint panel should be one of the most impressive and informative for bands among the music festival conferences this year.

Midpoint is regarded as a well-run, band-friendly event with clubs staffed by mostly experienced soundboard operators and a dedicated volunteer staff.

One cool hook this year is a recording studio constructed in the lobby of the Contemporary Arts Center that bands can use for free for 30 minutes to record a song. The sessions will be piped into the lobby so fans can watch the bands at work in a quickie recording session. The bands get to keep their demo.

The festival is also hoping to get on the world stage radar by upping it's foreign contingent this year with an international stage at the Know Theater exclusively featuring bands that have traveled from outside the country.

The stage was organized by Dutch-born producer-engineer Erwin Musper, who settled in Highland Heights, Ky., three years ago and launched a recording studio. Musper has worked with several noted groups (Van Halen, Scorpions, Mick Jagger, Elton John) and used his European connections to lure a number of groups from Belgium, the Netherlands and other parts of Europe to come to the festival.

"I thought bringing in these bands will give it more of an international attention. This is a good start," said Musper. The former L.A. engineer said he has always been amazed since relocating here about the quality of the local music scene and how Cincinnati is wonderfully located. "It's not far to all the Midwest scenes," he said. "You have major music hubs like Chicago and Nashville. Cincinnati is quite a good place to be."

DeLange agrees that the Cincinnati scene is much better than most cities its size and continues to gain a national reputation.

"You are not going to be Austin or Nashville. But compared to towns like St. Louis, which is bigger, you guys got them smoked," said DeLange.