

The Best of SXSW

Eric Blair

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The South-by-Southwest conference is a meeting of the world's hipsters and hipster wannabees. It used to just be for music acts, but the roster increasingly includes bloggers and other ground-up culture types.

This year, the conference put up a torrent file of 739 tracks by 739 bands. That's 3.1 GB, and about two straight days of music. Listening to all of that—especially given the well-known precept that 99% of everything is crap—is daunting.

And so as a service to you, dear reader, I threw all 739 of 'em on my playlist, and picked out the best.

You can find my faves at the gmail account *some.files*, password *caring*. I presume the copyright harpies will be silent on this copying of files, given that they are all are simply selections from the publicly available mass of demos above.

Now stop reading and go download.

Liner Notes The Explorer's Club, Forever: But it wasn't a Brian Wilson production like... Pet Sounds.

Balkan Beat Box, Bulgarian Chicks: Have you seen *Everything is Illuminated*? I thought it was hilarious.

Bande do Role, Gasolina: What if MIA were Brazilian?

Adam Carroll, All Right: As you can imagine, the guy with the guitar was also a crowded category.

Gavin Castleton, Women's Care in E Flat Major: The drum machine program isn't interesting, and I can't quite tell what's going on in the story, so why do I keep putting this on repeat?

The Crash, Pony ride: Catchy.

Daedelus, Sundown: I really can't tell what genre this counts as.

Rocky Dawuni, Wake the Town: Normally I hate Afropop, but this guy overcame that handicap. See the discussion of horns, below.

Electric Apricot featuring Les Claypool, Burning Man: Les Claypool was in Primus, which was known for its bass and basically novelty lyrics.

Johnossi, Man Must Dance: Dang—one-upped by a monkey.

Mike Jones, Green Mills Blues: I was actually surprised that it was a live track.

Mother Mother, Polynesia: Fun.

I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness, According to Plan: Eccentric band names usually backfire, but I like this one.

Junk Science, Do it easy: It was the line about JV basketball.

Kid Beyond, Mothership: Yup, beat boxing. Every instrument is vocals.

Bill Kirchen, Hammer of the Honky-Tonk gods: Yeah, yeah. You don't listen to Country. Whatever. Just play the darn song.

Oleg Kireyev and Exotic Band, East: This was the only throat-singing/electric guitar ensemble among all 739 demos. Can you believe it?

Ana Laan, Paradise: Girlfriend music. I.e., if you don't have a girlfriend, just put this song on repeat.

Nayrok, Cry Me a River: That's actually her name—she's in my extended network.

Eli Paperboy & The True Loves, Take my love with you: After a few hours of death metal and indie rock, *this* is the cutting edge. Excuse me while I bop.

Washington Social Club, Jarvis Cocker: This is one of the few bands I've actually heard of. They actually are from DC.

White Christian Romance, Waste: Aren't you guys proud of me for not filling this with twenty semiambient My Bloody Valentine pieces?

Michael Zapruder's Rain of Frogs, Red violins: Boyfriend music.

Notes on listening to 739 demos • Sound quality matters. I wish I could say that I hear the talent through the burlap bag, but I'm just not that good. I've known a couple of folks who have recorded stuff themselves—one left his Tascam four track in my basement—and they all had that day when they were beaming, “I just dropped several hundred dollars on a diaphragm mic, and I am delighted!!!” You could hear the exclamation points, the sound quality was that good.

- The first fifteen seconds are often filler, which is annoying. 750 songs, fifteen seconds listening to the drum play four bars before the song actually starts—that adds over three hours. Listen to The Crash up there: they attack right from the opening.

- With most songs, I really can tell whether I'll like the song in the first ten seconds or so (after the filler). Gavin Castleton's track felt warm from the first chord, so the lyrics didn't matter. I tried to eliminate observation bias by listening to every song at least halfway through, but I can't think of any exceptions where I changed my mind after being unimpressed. There were songs whose opening sound was great but didn't go anywhere, though.

- The band that named itself To Live and Die in LA just made me put the Wang Chung song on repeat for half an hour. That song is awesome. There was this brief period of 80s music that was all about how you're a creature of the night, wandering to survive. Did anybody see the eponymous movie?

- I did get pretty desperate for something different after a while. The people who were playing a mainstream format (like Indie) were taking a risk as far as I'm concerned. I suppose there are radio stations out there that have carefully picked a format and need to get something with just the right sound. I am so glad that's not me.

- Horns make every track better if there's actually a human playing them.

- You'd better love what you're doing. Wait, that merits an expletive: you'd fuck well better love what you're doing, because even if you're fab, the odds that you're gonna make it to the top one percent is, uh, one in a hundred, and is only loosely correlated to actual talent. [Yes, I am aware of how this applies to blogs. I gave up on the fantasies of being a famous blogger about two years ago.]

- I just do not understand any genre that ends in *metal*. I think this is the other extreme to having fun with what you're playing, since I think metal would be a blast to play, but almost goes out of its way to annoy the audience (e.g., the track named "Baiting the Public"). My apologies, Steaming Wolf Penis, but I just couldn't get into it. I almost put the Vegetarian song in just for its humor value.

- Music is *magical*. I have no idea what makes those tracks up there good. There's no formula, no unifying thread. They all create a different world.