

SXSW Music Festival 2013—Part 2

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16 April 2013

This is the second of two articles on South by Southwest (SXSW) 2013. Part 1 was posted April 9.

When New Yorker Marnie Stern's first album, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, came out in 2007 the self-taught experimental guitar rocker was 31 years old. She had spent years learning speed techniques such as "fret tapping," and developing a unique style of singing and playing, at once chaotic and anthemic.

Over frantically moving guitar lines, she had sung—in fairly murky terms—about overcoming adversity, putting in hard work to achieve goals and dreams. It was motivational in spirit but short on insight. Subsequent albums would stick to this formula, with each release becoming more polished and appealing than the last.

Her fourth album, entitled *The Chronicles of Marnia*, came out a few days after this year's SXSW, where she and her three-piece band played at least seven shows. At first, she seems headed off down the same familiar path. The album's first track, and the song which opened her set in Austin, is called "The Year of the Glad."

But later songs showed an onset of doubt and dissatisfaction. She seems to have realized that hard work and a positive attitude still leave her wanting. "The plan was to do this forever. Can I still? ... Can instinct come and go?" she sang on *Chronicles*' cut "East Side Glory." "I am running out of energy/I'm searching but there's so much I can't see ... All my life is based on fantasy," she sighs on another.

At SXSW, many fans in the audience danced and sang along to the exciting parts. She and her band were well practiced and made it look easy.

On the other hand, and this was certainly on display at SXSW, the band's stage banter was childish and prurient. Frankly, it's embarrassing and even inappropriate, given the absence of any such content in any of the songs.

From the beginning, Stern has received high praise from critics. Record sales, however, have been dreadful. She revealed in a recent interview that she lives with her mother, can't afford health insurance, gives guitar lessons to get by and has had to make a choice between pursuing music and starting a family, for financial reasons.

Something is finding expression in the new material's more subdued moods, the occasionally garish and sparse arrangements, as well as lyrics like "I am nothing, I am no one. The work is never done, and that is all I have." The music is still downright theatrical, and quite effective, too, but the lyrics stop short of a compelling examination of life.

The music makes you want to root for her, but a deeper exploration of the processes underlying her conditions and emotions stands between Marnie Stern and a powerful artistic

statement.

Jad Fair

Michigan native Jad Fair founded the defiantly amateurish rock band Half Japanese in 1975 with his brother David. They released more than a dozen albums, and Jad has also released solo material and collaborated with other like-minded artists and bands, including R Stevie Moore, John Zorn and Yo La Tengo. At SXSW he played an afternoon solo set in a small garden tucked away behind a pub several blocks from the main festival grounds.

Jad sang and played in front of the stage, using a broken electric guitar that was not plugged in to anything. The performance was intimate and whimsical. A few dozen people attended.

Much of the audience knew his material, and when they would begin to sing along, Jad playfully tripped them up, by changed the rhyming words into non-rhyming synonyms on the fly, and other embellishments. The short set consisted of some of his well-known songs, including "Red Dress," and a cover of material by friend and collaborator Daniel Johnston.

Jad performed with a good-natured confidence that drew listeners in and warmed them. But he altogether avoided serious subject matter, and nothing he did indicated an awareness of or interest in contemporary life.

Troller

Troller is a three-piece from Austin, Texas, specializing in haunting, gothic dirges, played on bass guitar, synthesizer and drum machines, as well as heavily affected and obscure vocals. The songs were all slow, loud, bass-heavy washes of sound.

The band sounded good, and the sound system was large enough convey the music's lush textures to the outdoor audience. But the material was very limited, establishing only one kind of mood and providing nothing else for consideration.

Much modern music is good at conveying a widely felt mood of angst, yearning, fear and such; but artists often avoid—consciously or unconsciously—examining the source of those moods, or taking the plunge and exploring quite different moods.

UK DJs at SXSW

Many DJs and producers from the UK performed at SXSW.

The emergence of dubstep music in England in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with a critical moment in the growth of the Internet, and what in a previous era would have been a regional and underground style was exposed to a global audience.

Whatever was initially lost in translation—partly due to sharing low-quality copies of music intended to be played on very large professional sound systems—American dubstep artists went on to win Grammys, and London became the center of a mass Internet-enabled, crate-digging movement of producers and DJs who shared, combined and synthesized styles whose development had previously been isolated.

In an Austin basement club called Barcelona, DJs Jackmaster and Skream—the latter was one of the originators of dubstep—provided the type of eclectic mix that has become the norm. Falling back most often on recent tech-house tracks, they also included regional styles like Baltimore Club music and some left-field selections.

Manchester-based producer Andy Stott performed a mix of his own material, much of it from his critically acclaimed 2012 album *Luxury Problems*. Though emerging from very different stylistic influences, it shared many aesthetic points in common with Troller's music.

London-based producer The Bug performed his original Jamaican dancehall-inspired tracks, accompanied by two live MCs, Flowdan and Miss Red. It was hard to clock their rapid-fire lyrics during the live show, but one song's endlessly repeated refrain was "The rich get richer and the poor stay poor."

Interview with Chali 2na

Chali 2na (Charles Stewart) was a founding member of hip hop group Jurassic 5, to which he belonged from 1994-2007. He now performs solo. He has rapped at the last thirteen SXSW festivals. This reporter spoke to him in Austin.

Zac Corrigan: In 2002, one of your lyrics with Jurassic 5 said you were "sick of phony mobsters controlling the dance floor." What do you think about the kind of rap music that you've seen this week at SXSW?

Chali 2na: [Laughs] The phony mobsters are still taking over! But the youngsters really do respond to that music, which is relieving. Trap music gives them the same excitement that I felt when I saw Run DMC for the first time. I don't personally connect with it, but I can't knock it. When we wrote that song, gangster rap was taking a foothold, and we were one of the only groups taking a stand against it. But what I've realized in my older age is that there is enough room for all of us.

ZC: That's interesting. I think the fact that so many artists are expressing themselves this way, during the current period where society is becoming more and more militarized and unequal, is

indicative of problems in social consciousness generally. You don't think it's worth criticizing?

C2: No, it's worth criticizing. One thing I think is that kids have it really easy now, it's really easy to make music and for people to hear it. Now anyone with a laptop can record music, you don't have to pay for studio time like we had to.

Music is about emotion, being able to translate my feelings to people who don't speak my [cultural] language. Repetition is like magic, it makes you zone out, it hits the same nerves, and it makes you like it. Music gets under your skin. These kids can make amazing sounding music pretty easily, and they don't have to work hard. And then the message can seep past you because you liked the sound.

I don't want to have this parental view of it though. It's weird for me. My own mom used to tell me "that's not music!"

ZC: I think its important what people are rapping about, not just how it feels. Jay-Z loves to get in front of a camera and talk about how great Barack Obama is.

C2: He started rapping to get rich, and now he is rich. When Obama got elected, I wanted to look past this whole first black president thing, and wait to see what he would do when he got into power. He really showed who runs this country! The first thing he did was pay back the bankers. I thank him for showing people that it doesn't matter what color your skin is. When I was in Amsterdam they called him the Black Mask, which I agree with.

ZC: It would be good if artists took a crack at this kind of subject.

C2: Within the next four years, these trap kids are going to be more grown up. But they aren't paying attention now and they might be fooled once more, maybe by a woman next time. It's scary out there without being informed. If they could get a broader perspective on it, they could make a smarter choice. Young people don't remember life before hip hop music even. I want to transfer some of this history down to the youngsters. I have a series of EPs that I'm working on to do just that.

ZC: Tell me about them.

C2: Well, the first one is like an introduction to the whole project, but then I want to do an EP in each of a few different styles. The second one is going to be trap and dubstep, with amazing beats, but ironic lyrics about money and power. The next EP would be from a Caribbean perspective—there wouldn't be any be hip hop without dancehall. I'm going to play some of everything that inspired me to make hip hop. The last one is going to be all live music, recorded with my three-piece band.

Concluded



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