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twitch: The Collective Good

Posted on [January 31, 2010](#) by [kaitj](#) [Leave a comment](#)



illustration by artist Sara Danae

Froese

The Collective Good

- Barbara Bruederlin

They don't have a secret handshake, and at least a few of the comrades don't sport communist revolutionary beards, but the members of London, Ontario's Open House Arts Collective are as committed to their cause as any manifesto-clutching radical. But rather than spouting slogans and marching with the Proletariat, this collective is more interested in supporting one another artistically and championing the local arts scene.

Collectives like Open House are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Canadian musical and artistic landscape. This trend is partly a reflection of the harsh political climate in this country, a climate that

is all about the bottom line and appeasing the status quo. The philosophy under this government seems to be the arts community be damned, they're not producing widgets and half of them have a swear word in their name anyway.

So rather than waste a tonne of time and energy on chasing elusive grant money, more and more independent musicians are pooling their energy and creativity to form a well of mutual support and promotion from which all their members can draw. And the resulting marriage can result in something quite sublime and larger than the sums of its parts. As Blair Whatmore, one of the founding members of the Open House Arts Collective describes the instant of the group's inception "once we came together, it was just a huge eureka moment for everybody".

"There are seven directing members of the collective," he explains. "We'd been friends and fans of each other's art and music long before we got together and gave ourselves a name and a mission statement". When it comes to producing independent art and music, there really is power in a union. In addition to supporting one another by backing each other in various bands, as members of collectives are apt to do, individual members bring unique strengths to the business end of the collective effort. "My main interest was releasing albums through our record label, while other members were more interested in web or poster design, or the packaging of albums we will be releasing", Blair recounts. "When you have seven creative people all working at what they do best, that support system all of a sudden has the power of 30 people".

Art and music collectives are hardly a new phenomenon, although they now seem have a wider scope than in previous incarnations. In Britain, that forward-thinking stronghold of warm beer and socialism, collectives have been commonplace for decades. In Canada, collectives first started making an impact on the music scene in 1983, when Montreal's Ambiances Magnétiques, now better known for the record label which it spawned, was formed. It was a collective born out of necessity, formed when the distinctly avant-garde jazz, folk, classical and rock tastes of the members made finding a distributor for their music next to impossible.

Not all collectives function solely as bastions of obscure music, however. Many well-known critical darlings of independent music have found a home in music collectives. The Elephant 6 Recording Company, founded in Denver in the 1990's, famously included Neutral Milk Hotel, Of Montreal, and the Apples in Stereo among its members, while Toronto's □□□□□ (Blocks) Recording Club, an artist owned workers' co-operative, seems to have a penchant for attracting musicians of Polaris Prize calibre.

Final Fantasy's groundbreaking album, "He Poos Clouds", which in 2006 scooped up the inaugural Polaris Prize, was produced at □□□□□□. In 2009, □□□□□□ Recording Club continued their flirtation with renown when the Polaris Prize was awarded to one of their alumni – Holy Fuck, while co-operative members One Hundred Dollars were also nominated.

A strong DIY mentality is a prerequisite for the success of any collective. The ease of tapping into the social media makes grassroots promotion a lot easier, and that's crucial when you are struggling to find resources for your members. Blair Whatmore pinpoints the lack of outlets for art and music in his hometown as one of the challenges that Open House is always struggling against. "In the last year, I can think of four major live music venues that have closed their doors in London. That's a huge blow for a city's arts scene," he tells me. "We're trying our best to think out of the box and hold events in non-traditional spaces. The opening night of Oh! Fest was held in a local church, we had four great bands and a wonderfully receptive crowd of all ages ... toddlers to people in their 60's, which was a big 'mission accomplished' moment".

Using the power of the collective to celebrate local talent, while a necessary and sensible way for musicians to support each other while promoting their own work, seems to also contain within it the seed of a backlash against rampant globalism. In the age of the shrinking global village, where kids in Tokyo sport the same hipster uniform as kids in Regina, and we fully expect to eat grapes from Chile during the winter, there is a flip-side – that of the local movement. In many ways, art and music collectives are the creative equivalent of the locavore ideal espoused by such movements as the 100 Mile Diet. Part of the momentum toward celebrating the local is, of course, based on environmental concerns, while some stems from the innate need to be included in a community, and the rest is a reaction against the ubiquity that globalism brings, which makes everything so boringly generic.

Collectives are at their most powerful when they promote a unique local sound diverse from anything that you will hear elsewhere. Since many music collectives also function as a record label, members can retain artistic control over the music they produce. The scheme for an Open House Arts Collective recording company was conceived one November night when a dozen or so local artists performed at a Beatles' White Album 40th anniversary celebration. Blair Whatmore recalls a moment of clarity of vision. "There was too much talent, too many amazing performances, and above all, too much love in that room to go unrecognized," he muses. "The only possible thing I could think of was to release a compilation album of London's local scene in order to raise awareness of how much great music the city has to offer."

Peruse the liner notes of the resulting compilation CD and you get a sense of the camaraderie and mutual respect amongst the musicians in Open House, with everyone playing in each others' bands or producing each others' music. Yet despite the free mingling of musicianship, the musicians maintain their diverse sounds. "The key to avoiding any sort of generic sound is the eclectic nature of the bands and artists that are a part of the Oh! Records family," Blair maintains. "We all love playing together, but I think we all have different directions for our own music, it just happens to be tied together by the same group of people."

Bound by that feeling of family and armed with the diversity of unique sounds, the Open House Arts Collective and Record Company are not resting on their laurels, since that compilation CD has become a collector's item. A Horse and His Boy has released a self-titled debut album, Sam Allen has released "Landscapes", Olenka and the Autumn Lovers have released an EP "Papillonette", and former Londoners Sick Friend have released "Sleep Late". As well, the collective are planning to incorporate a regular outdoor art ExpOh! into the now firmly established Oh!Fest, and are working to entice some bigger touring acts to the city.

With all that creativity and all that commitment within the enclave, these artists and musicians are proving that collectively they really are a revolutionary creative force. They've just got to work on that secret handshake.

****artist Sara Danae Froese also sings and plays violin with Olenka and The Autumn Lovers, as well as with The Whipping Winds*

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