**[ArtAwake: The happiest people in Rochester](http://blogs.democratandchronicle.com/rocart/?p=1450)**

Posted by [Jeff Spevak](http://blogs.democratandchronicle.com/rocart/?author=113) • April 12, 2010 • 1:40 pm

Silent for a dozen years, the imposing former First National Bank Building on State Street exploded Saturday night with sound and light and the chatter of thousands of vibrant young people. A handmade orange banner roped between two of the huge Corinthian columns at the front of the building proclaimed in black lettering that this was ArtAwake.

“If it wasn’t for Snoop Dogg, this place would be packed,” said one of the guys in the Ginger Faye Bakers, a rock band playing the main stage. The rapper was playing at Rochester Institute of Technology that night, but the conflict hardly seemed to have impacted ArtAwake. It was actually quite packed. Organized by University of Rochester students, the third-year event was conceived as a way to integrate UR students and the city, while utilizing abandoned spaces. It was meticulously organized. Shuttle buses carried students from the UR campus, stopping by the Eastman School of Music student housing downtown. A bus even made its way up from SUNY Geneseo.

They came for the musical acts – 21, drawn from a wide range of genres. They came for the art – 171 pieces, from paintings and collages hung on the walls to bulky installations that took up small rooms where bankers had once pushed numbers. They came for the food stations – free cupcakes! They came for the bank vault, its massive, seven-footwide door hanging open, with the space inside converted into a wine and beer bar, decorated with tiny Christmas lights. They came for the microphone dangling from the ceiling of the music interactive room, where musicians of all skill levels could bang on PVC pipes cut to different lengths, or glass soft-drink bottles filled to different levels, all producing different tones. “Hit us!” someone had written on the frame supporting the bottles. The noise created in the room went into a laptop computer, where it was placed in a file, allowing the brilliance to be e-mailed directly to the musician of that moment. “We just had this awesome jam session,” said Steve Eckenrode, who was monitoring the laptop. “African tribal music.”

By 5:15 p.m., just 15 minutes into the official start of the evening, a line was forming outside the door. Midway through the nine-hour event, the local band Velux was playing in the main lobby, the atmospheric guitar indie rock spiraling to the ceiling three or four stories overhead. A dozen murals by Erza Winter, depicting burly men swinging tools and building America, were up there in the gloom somewhere. Since you couldn’t make out the murals, ArtAwake had posted photos of them in the lobby, with a biography of Winter, who also did the Eastman Theater mural: Illuminating the city’s treasures was also a goal of the evening.

Primarly young, slim hipped and toting messenger bags, this trendsetter crowd used a laser-pointing device to scrawl temporary graffitti images on the marble walls. People respected the tool. “One or two questionable images, but that’s about it,” said Alex Kurland, who was monitoring the activity. One floor down, an unlabeled art installation featured an old Turbanator hair dryer decorated with Christmas lights, poised over a folding lawn chair.

Anorher small room was a pile of rusted automotive wreckage, turf and broken cement called “The Grass Will Grow Over Your Cities.” Hanna Abrams was in charge of this space. “One person asked me what it was,” she said, with kind of a shrug that suggested she hadn’t been let in on the secret. Its creator, Oreen Cohen, expained it in her artistic statement as, “The combination of resources suggests the blurring of the natural and manufactured world.” In a nearby room, Faeeza Masood’s “Flutter By Butterfly” consisted of coral-colored walls covered with small, butterfly-like, black post-it notes, on which each she had written that day’s date and her daily worries since Jan. 28. “The missed opportunities are accumulating,” was one such concern of the studio art major from Pittsford. “I wish I would take them instead of disappointing myself.” A few slots had been left blank, with Saturday’s date, and ArtAwake visitors were encouraged to inscribe their own troubles. “I worry he won’t love me when I come back…,” someone wrote.

On the sidewalk, a charming band that had played inside earlier in the evening, New Socks, was keeping the people in line entertained with an impromptu performance. The music was whimsically acoustic, with guitar and accordion, and a woman holding a small electronic keyboard at arm’s level, serving as a human stand so that her friend could play it. “This is the happiest group in Rochester,” one of the event’s main organizers, Ben Brown, was saying. He was talking about New Socks, but he may as well have been describing the folks waiting patiently to see and hear ArtAwake on this startlingly beautiful April evening in Rochester.

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