

MONTANA KAIMIN

seeking the stage



STORY BY KATE WIDMER
PHOTOS BY RACHEL YEAGER

AS THE MISSOULA MUSIC SCENE
OPENS THE DOOR TO LARGER
SHOWS, SMALLER ARTISTS ARE
SEARCHING FOR WAYS TO MAKE
THEIR MUSIC HEARD.



6 College voting restrictions

Cover design by Fiona Davia

13 Scar stories

15 B-ball seniors say goodbye

March 13, 2025 | Volume 127 | Issue No. 22

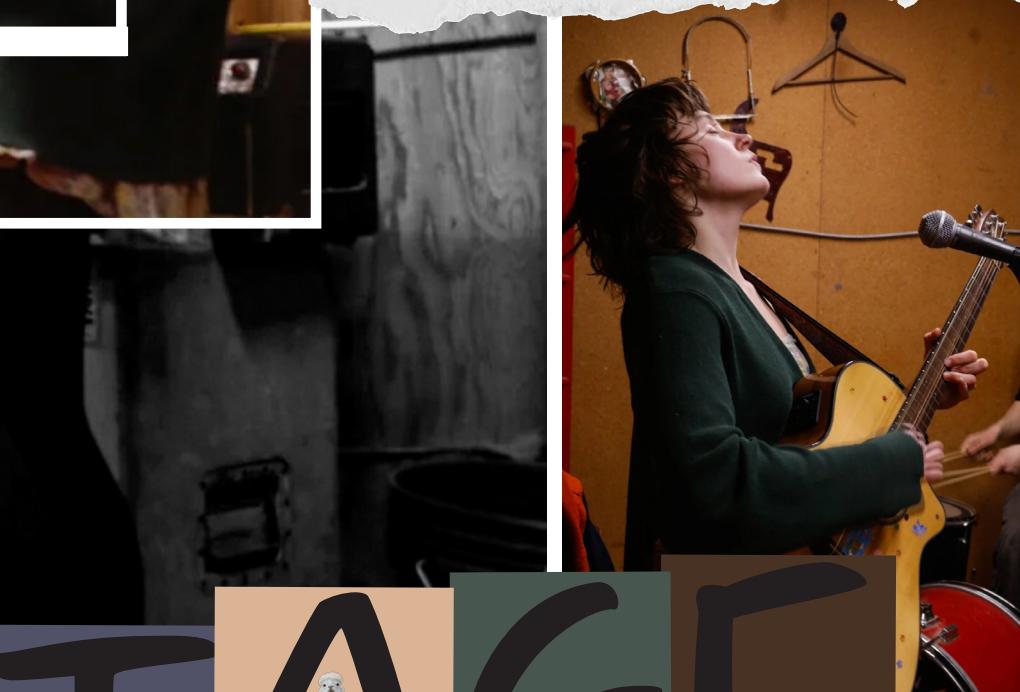


SEEKING THE S

Story by Kate Wigmer



FOR LESSER-KNOWN ARTISTS HOPING TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES, MISSOULA'S SMALLER VENUES ARE THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY TO BE SEEN AND HEARD. BUT THOSE VENUES ARE VANISHING AND MUSICIANS ARE FORCED TO TAKE WHAT THEY CAN GET.



STAGE

Photos by Rachel Yeager

ABOVE: Desmond Smith leans over and gives Pecos the alpaca a kiss before they head into the shed to practice.

LEFT: Sophie Bell leans back with the music as the band plays its song "Swimming" to get ready for its next show at the ZACC.

FAR LEFT: Inside a small shed behind a farmhouse, Duncan Honea, Desmond Smith and Sophie Bell practice as a band. On the other side of the wall are pigs and other animals.

ON A MARCH evening, the frantic pounding of drums, wail of a guitar and cheers of concert attendees pierced the calm, peaceful atmosphere of a typically quiet Missoula neighborhood. But the noise wasn't coming from a show at the Washington-Grizzly Stadium, the Kettle-House Amphitheater or even The Wilma.

This show was bursting from a two-car garage. Most attendees wore dark colors, some had on heavy makeup or patches on their clothes and others sported uneven haircuts. The night ended with two smoking electrical outlets, mosh pit-inflicted bruises and the occasional exposed ceiling nail, a reminder of how the space — aptly titled Tetanus Shed — got its name.

The Saturday's lineup included local bands such as Man Leash, a punk group who described their music as "bondage thrash," a garage rock favorite, Senterline, and Folding Chair, a new band playing self-described "backyard wrestle punk."

Each performance took place in the corner of the garage while concertgoers crammed into every inch of space. Uni-

versity of Montana student Sophie Bell attends as many of these local do-it-yourself, or DIY, shows and plays in them whenever she can with her own band, Sardines.

"Music was just kind of an excuse to hang out, at first. And then it became actual music," Bell said.

Like most non-professional Missoula bands, Sardines typically plays at the VFW #209, a small veteran's bar with a backroom often used for shows, or at the Zootown Arts Community Center. The two venues are across the street from each other on Main Street in downtown Missoula.

The band mainly secures gigs through word of mouth. People looking to book musicians for smaller, one-time shows often reach out to them on Instagram. If they're hired professionally, it's usually for a weeknight show at the ZACC. Those typically get booked through Daina Grand, the ZACC's staff showroom manager. Shows at the VFW are usually booked through Daisy Chain Presents, an event production company founded in 2023.

However, as Missoula grows its regional reputation through a host of stadium tours, including the 2024 summer concert series at the Washington-Grizzly Stadium, which



Duncan Honea, Sophie Bell and Desmond Smith hangout outside for a bit before they head into practice.

brought in an estimated \$1 million for the University, smaller artists are struggling to consistently find and book shows at low-key performance spaces.

Until more spaces become available, or the ones already around offer more opportunities, bands, such as Sardines, can only hope to take what they can get. For locals hoping to create community, whether they get paid for their concerts or not, it isn't enough.

MEET THE SARDINES

Sardines formed in October 2023 after singer-songwriter Bell asked Desmond Smith, a fellow student, to play drums for her band at the UM Art Collective's Punk-In Fest on the Oval.

They got their name from a summer day eating spicy sardines from Winco. The band's music is raggedy and heartfelt, inspired by music from artists like Kimya Dawson, Neutral Milk Hotel and Alex G. Smith's drumming style is reminiscent of choppy, classic punk, like that of Minutemen. Lyrically, their songs are often about small moments, big emotions and nature.

Bell transferred to UM after a year of attending Montana State University, Billings in her hometown. She had never talked to Smith before. She didn't know if he played drums, but she wanted an excuse to get his number. Smith had only played drums in marching band at Big Sky High School and didn't have experience with a traditional drum set, but he wanted to know her better too, so he said yes. Bell and Smith, both 21, have been dating ever since.

In the following year and a half, the pair, along with the band's bassist, Duncan Ho-

nea, 20, have become close friends. Playing in Sardines serves as a musical outlet while the trio work toward their degrees — Bell and Smith are pursuing environmental studies and Honea is working toward a fine arts degree with a focus in ceramics.

Bell and Honea met at age 3 while attending preschool.

Bell picked up her dad's old guitar and Honea learned bass after being inspired by the popular Cartoon Network show, "Adventure Time."

While in middle and high school, Bell and Honea posted their songs on SoundCloud and played the occasional show together. Bell released a solo album in 2022, a collection of lo-fi songs titled "Sweet Chlorine." Sardines often includes songs off the album during its live sets, but otherwise plays new music they wrote together.

Smith grew up in Austin, Texas, and moved to Missoula around age 12. He was familiar with venue settings after growing up watching his father, a bassist, play shows in bluegrass bands.

When Bell asked Smith if he played drums, he agreed, partially because it was true — just not in the way she was thinking. After realizing what he'd gotten himself into, he resolved to finally learn to play on a drum set. "I think I just wanted to impress [Bell and Honea]," he said.

Smith bought a children's drum set on a trip to Goodwill. He attached an empty detergent bottle to the side to make up for the lack of a snare. Smith's height, of over six feet, made it difficult to play. But the kit gave him enough of an idea of the mechanics. "It was awesome," he said.

Forming a band, writing songs and practicing them was one thing, but gaining



Duncan Honea strums away on his bass during a practice session.

experience as live performers would prove to be another feat entirely.

BOOKED AND BUSY

Daisy Chain Events, an event production group, was founded by Donal Lakatua, Colin Merrick and Julia Battisti in 2023 as a response to the lack of spaces for local artists to play, along with the increased commercialization of the remaining venues.

"The schism between the ethics for stuff like this was made more apparent by the continual shifts in the culture," Lakatua said. "Even just things like the pandemic, where we've had to step away and reapproach the same set of spaces and what-not."

Merrick and Lakatua met at GILD, a local Missoula bar, after Lakatua finished a meeting he hoped would help jump-start a DIY event production company. The meeting didn't end with a partnership, but Merrick overheard them talking at the bar and wanted to know more. "It was kind of a meet-cute," Lakatua said.

Lakatua wanted to start a festival, citing Missoula's Camp Daze, Billings' Julia Louis Dreyfest and Boise's Treefort Music Festival as inspiration. The inaugural Daisy Chain Festival in August 2023 was called Power Strip. It featured bands from all over Montana and the greater western region of the U.S., as well as an art market run by Battisti.

Lakatua became known locally for his photography: his Instagram account documents nearly eight years of Missoula DIY shows. His photos are easily recognized for their trademark vibrancy. He was intro-

duced to the Missoula music scene through the pre-pandemic house-show circuit.

Merrick, born and raised in Nashville, thrived on the local DIY garage rock and punk scenes growing up. They said the inclusive punk scene in Philadelphia gave them the experience and confidence to put on DIY shows.

Merrick is able to help bridge the gap between their former home cities and Missoula. Bleary Eyed, a Philly-based band, played at the VFW in September 2024.

Daisy Chain books mostly alternative rock. Musicians that play hardcore, a frantic mix of punk and metal, can turn to Dead Eye Productions. Cameron Spooner-Smith took over Dead Eye just before the pandemic, after the original founder Shane Stange moved away.

Daisy Chain Presents and Dead Eye Productions both book most of their shows at the VFW or ZACC, which has limited their ability to create new experiences. Even though they try to prioritize access to the shows, the amount of money needed to sustain operations often makes concerts cost around \$10 per ticket.

"[Daisy Chain Presents] will never turn anyone away for a lack of funds," Merrick said. "I want people to show up and be there. That said, your \$10, 90% of that is going to the bands. The rest of that is going to the person running sound [or] running door."

Both production groups said the money goes back into their community efforts, and as of late, that means toward potential venue spaces.

"There's a want, not necessarily ... just for the quantity aspect, but to me, it's more for a qualitative aspect. Which is part of

our goal, to an extent, is trying to find a regular spot where that can be possible," Lakatua said.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In addition to the closing of venues throughout the 2010s, such as Elk's Lodge and an upstairs space in the Union, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench into the local music scene.

"It made a problem that was already existing worse, because I feel like [now] there's a greater disparity and disconnect between the professional big stages like the Top Hat and The Wilma and DIY, local music," Lakatua said.

The Missoula bar scene, along with venues like Top Hat, The Wilma and KettleHouse Amphitheatre often prioritize touring acts. Venues operated by Logjam Presents, a subsidiary of Live Nation, recently hosted large-name acts like the Pixies, boygenius and Pearl Jam, among others. However, Daisy Chain co-founder Lakatua doesn't think commercial venues accomplish the point of a show.

"Making [music] about bar culture and drink sales is counterintuitive to me, [and] to the core of why live music is so beautiful," Lakatua said. "It's a community-generating event, and I think that everybody should have access to that."

The entertainment trade publication, Pollstar, listed Logjam as #26 of the top 100 promoters worldwide. The Kaimin reached out to Logjam for comment but did not hear back.

The advent of the upcoming Zootown Festival also reflects the rise in Missoula's professional music scene. Started under the vision of co-founder and director Scott Osburn, a 2010 graduate of UM's entertainment management program, the festival

will take place from July 4-5 at the Missoula County Fairgrounds.

The festival will feature popular acts, including headliners Hozier and Kasey Musgraves, who have 48 million and 17 million monthly listeners on Spotify, respectively. Additionally, the festival lineup boasts musicians from Los Angeles, Boston and London.

"[The festival wants to] use this opportunity as a launchpad to bring in national touring artists," Osburn said. "But at the same time, we also want [Zootown Festival] to be a platform for local, regional and statewide artists to be able to perform and grow on the festival as well."

It previously included Give It To 'Em Florabelle, a blues-influenced local band, but it was removed from the lineup around the time it received community backlash for frontwoman Cara Schulz's appropriation of Indigenous art and regalia in her performances.

Representatives for Zootown Festival declined to comment on the decision to remove the band from the lineup. Without Give It To 'Em Florabelle, the festival now includes performances from only two Montana-based groups, The Dead & Down and Cole & The Thorns, and only one Missoula-based group, Why We Went West, out of a lineup featuring 23 acts.

Without large spaces to play, local artists have turned to smaller and smaller spots. But even when artists find smaller venues, these spaces aren't always available for long.

SPATIAL AWARENESS

The Tetanus Shed show received a noise complaint from the cops. After they arrived, the tenants were told to either shut down the concert or they would get



Tricia Opstad sits inside her office, gallery and dance space that used to be a venue for local bands.

a citation. Too many citations could mean eviction from the property.

While this isn't unusual, risk of eviction is harder to justify during Missoula's housing crisis. The Organization of Realtors reported the median rental cost for a studio apartment in Missoula at around \$1,000 a month, while four bedrooms or more surpassed \$2,000 a month in 2024. However, people willing to put their finances on the line to create a DIY space have helped keep the Missoula music scene alive for decades.

Squish was one such space. Located in a warehouse on Johnson Street, Squish was an art space rented by Tricia Opstad from the summer of 2022 until February 2023.

A dancer and visual artist originally from Grand Forks, North Dakota, Opstad moved to Missoula just over 20 years ago to be closer to nature. She began hosting art events as a way to find like-minded performers. "It was really difficult to find other dancers with the kind of mindset [I have], an improvisational, experimental performance based [approach]," she said.

Her introduction to the music community came from attending Free Sessions, a recurring gathering of musicians that played experimental music together at Imagination Brewing Company. "That was groundbreaking for me, because I met my people. I [found] a place where I belong, even if it was [in] music," she said.

But just as Opstad was experiencing this progression in her artistry, the pandemic hit. Feeling claustrophobic from months spent inside, Opstad searched for a bigger, more secluded space than her office in the Higgins Building and found the warehouse.

"An artist has a vision of what a space should feel like. There's a feeling [of] grit and character and [an] experimenting feeling, and that permission to sort of be messy too," she said. "Not to feel too uptight and for all ages."

Squish shows were kinetic. Colorful lighting and Opstad's commitment to booking acts she felt were interesting made the venue a hot spot overnight. While the venue has now been closed for almost two years, its impact on the music scene remains significant. Its closure was one of the major inspirations for the formation of Daisy Chain Presents.

Opstad said going over curfew was mainly why the venue was shut down. But paying for the space by herself would have likely caused its end anyway.

"It does take somebody who has an income, other means to pay the rent. And [rent now], it's double," Opstad said. "[Squish] was 1,000 square feet for \$1,000, now it's \$2,000. So it's important, the money part of it."

The loss of space doesn't only happen because of city involvement or financial

issues. The most recent venue that was shut down was Flavortown. Its final show was July 27, 2024. The house venue, located next to Kiwanis Park, was taken back by the landlord after six years of shows featuring bands from all over the country and internationally.

Sebastian Cardozo, the longest tenant of Flavortown and the main contact for booking the space, said the Missoula community was the reason the venue was able to be around for so long. Cardozo made a point to inform neighbors and soundproof as much as possible. The floors were reinforced by Stu Bar, a fan of the venue and its frequent sound guy. He also installed support beams in the crawlspace under the house to accommodate the weight of a mosh pit.

While the loss of venues like Squish and Flavortown limited opportunities, there's still a lot to look forward to as the Missoula music community continually adapts to the city's changes.

THE SHOWS GO ON

As artists search for their own venues in Missoula, the ZACC and VFW #209 still provide invaluable space for artists and audiences to experience live music made with the Missoula community in mind.

For University of Montana students, the new stage located outside of the Gallagher Business Building is going to be used by the UM Entertainment Management program, to help students gain experience in booking and promoting live events, as well as contributing to the school's music culture.

The stage was funded by an anonymous donor. The program's director, Margaret Keiper, stated in an email that the stage "is meant to include everyone/align with our overall mission as an institution, which is inclusive prosperity."

Logistics regarding scheduling and equipment usage are still being figured out, but having a performance space on campus will allow business students and student-musicians alike to gain experience.

With summer coming up, Daisy Chain is currently in the process of making selections for the third Daisy Chain Festival, scheduled for Aug. 15 and 16.

As for Sardines, the band hopes to release a full-length album by the end of the year. In the meantime, they're likely to be found riding their bikes around Missoula, picking up new ideas to put in their songs.

Kate Widmer is an arts reporter for the Montana Kaimin and can be contacted at kate.widmer@umontana.edu. For more stories from Widmer and other reporters, visit online at montanakaimin.com.