

MoMA2

Interviewed by The Silver Age July 14th, 2024

MoMA2 is a DIY music venue located in South Philadelphia run by brothers Whit and Riggs, the latter of whom was selling original art in Rittenhouse Square at the time of interview. His paintings adorn the walls of the venue, making it a worthy sequel to the MoMA1 in New York. For information about upcoming shows at MoMA2, follow @moma2phl on Instagram.

ALICIA LOPEZ: What is your name?

WHIT: Whit.

A.L.: And is it just you that runs the venue, or somebody else too?

WHIT: It's Riggs as well, my brother.

A.L.: How old are you all?

WHIT: I'm 29, he's 25 today, it's his birthday.

A.L.: Are you guys affiliated with any bands, or do you just host?

WHIT: Yeah, my band's Divine, that's my songs, and then I'm in Bleary Eyed. I play bass in Bleary Eyed. And a couple of other things, but probably just those two is what I'd say.

A.L.: I guess the question "how did you two meet" doesn't really work... have you guys been living in Philly for a long time?

WHIT: Yeah, probably like 10 years maybe. Not quite 10 years, almost 10 years.

MICHAEL AUBLE: What first brought you here?

WHIT: I went to Temple and then just moved out here. I lived in West Chester for a couple of years, then moved out here when I wanted to pursue music.

COLE GABORIAULT: Are you originally from the area?

WHIT: Yeah, from Malvern.

A.L.: So when did you guys start the venue?

WHIT: I think we started it probably about a year and a half ago, it was February of '23 I think. Let me double check. There were a couple of people that kind of really started this place in a way. So the first show was February 23 of 2023. When we started out, I was a fan of Couple Ghouls and Julia's War, and one day Couple Ghouls posted that they were having trouble finding a spot. And I replied to them and said, "you can use my rehearsal space." And from there, Couple Ghouls did a few shows, and Julia's War got referred by Couple Ghouls. And it just kind of took off on its own. I didn't really do anything except say "yes" and have a space, a drum kit, and a PA.

A.L.: Why'd you want to make the venue? You just saw the post and were like, "cool?"

WHIT: Yeah, my brother and I looked around for a lot of places, because I really wanted to have a basement that I could have my band rehearse in my own house and not have to travel. So then a couple guys in my band lent me some gear, and I got some gear for cheap, and I set up a backline so that I could play in my basement. By the time that I saw – it was just kind of randomly, Ethan from Couple Ghouls was looking for a spot. I replied to his story and I said, "just use my rehearsal space." The reason I wanted to do it was to give more access to the community. Obviously – I think that's why everybody does it.

A.L.: I feel like I know why y'all came up with the name MoMA2...¹

WHIT: Right. Yeah, so my brother is the artist. He did all the art, but he's had a lot of different pieces cycle through because he literally goes to Rittenhouse, stands in the park and sells his art. He's managed to make that his job. It's pretty sweet. So a lot of the art that was here in the beginning got sold and isn't here, but he just keeps making new stuff.

C.G.: I don't know how much you know about your brother's inspiration...

WHIT: I mean, I see... he does a Picasso copy thing, He does like a Basquiat or a Pollock kind of thing. So it's those three. Like that's very – I'm not like a big art guy, but I forget if it's Van Gogh or Picasso, which one, but the faces –

M.A: Yeah, definitely. Picasso.

¹ The walls of MoMA2 are completely covered in modern art.

WHIT: Definitely Picasso-esque.

M.A.: I'm also not an art guy.

WHIT: [pointing at one of the paintings] Yeah. He does that a lot, which is like very Pollock, I guess.

A.L.: This place really doesn't feel like other venues when you step in it, because there's so much stuff on the walls, and not just printed out, but actual paintings. Yeah, you step in and you're like, "who *is* this?" So, sound design: you've got your PA downstairs. I think you have a blanket against one of the walls, is that right?

WHIT: Yeah, I mean we can go down there, but I put some moving blankets up. I don't think that they really do anything for the neighbors, honestly, but I think that it made the room sound really nice.

C.G.: We've done the same thing, yeah, we've tried to put up a bunch of moving blankets and there's not really any sound dampening externally, but oh man, it's nice.

WHIT: Yeah, it's so dead... and I put some foam right over where the drum kit goes and the blankets where the drum kit goes, because I just hate – I've been to so many house venues and it's just piercing and it just doesn't sound good, it hurts and it's uncomfortable. It depends on what people bring to play, but I try and make it so that you don't kill your ears down there every time, but it doesn't really actually work because bands just blast it anyway.

M.A.: Yeah, we totally agree; we have a drum shield.

C.G.: We got a drum shield for this exact reason. So far it seems to work, although I guess we haven't had any bands yet that would really be ripping into it, so, you know, we'll see.

WHIT: Yeah, sometimes I have drum tape on the cymbals. That sort of thing helps a little bit. What else do we do for dampening? For a while I had those mesh cymbals, practice cymbals I borrowed from somebody, but bands didn't want to use them. But yeah, I think it sounds really good down there – better than most venues – just because of the way the room is shaped or something. I don't know, it just happens to sound good down there, so I'm actually starting to record people down there now as well – because I'm an engineer at a studio in South Philly called Audeoboi. I've thrown a few shows there, like Greg Mendez, Tagabow, Spellbinder. Another big show we did with ZekeUltra, Lucy (Cooper B. Handy), Manny Roach, and Hooky. So I've thrown a bunch of shows there – actually just three, but bigger shows there, because I'm an engineer there, trying to bring people in. Honestly though, you know, there's something to be said for that studio in particular, and there's plenty of studios that sound really amazing, no doubt, but I found that in my basement, the drum tone that I can get in there, between the mix of close mics and room mics, has been just as good, maybe better than what I've been hearing.

M.A.: That's nice. Sometimes it's like a stroke of luck. You can't recreate a room, you know, like it's just – you have to be in it.

WHIT: Yeah, it's just the room. I've been trying to take advantage of how nice that room happens to sound. So I'm recording down there now as well. I'm starting to.

M.A.: That's great.

A.L.: Is there a genre that you like to host here? It seems like you host all sorts of stuff.

WHIT: I'd say we got a little more known as a venue by hosting cool shoegaze shows. But, I'm more like indie rock, even like alt-country.

A.L.: Nice. Are your shows on any kind of a schedule? Or how do you decide when to do them?

WHIT: Not really, no. Basically, the way that I have booked here from the beginning is people will ask me about a date and I'll tell them "build the bill, you can build the bill." I mean, I have booked shows here. I think I've done about 60 shows here, and I think I've probably booked about 10. So there's been about 50 shows that I didn't really put the bill together, I just sort of hosted. So it'll have to do more with the date than anything. People will ask me a few dates and if there's a date that I can do, I'll look at the bill and, you know, consider if I know any of the people or like the music or whatever, you know, and a lot of times even if I don't know them or if I don't in particular like the music, like if they have a good vibe and a good community, like I'll say yes, I'll take it on. I have slowed down a lot, and I'm not doing it as much because it takes a lot of work.

A.L.: You kind of already answered this but, how do you book bands?

WHIT: Through DMs. Just to tell you guys, the way that I feel this has gotten to be a successful little place is because I wasn't like, "oh no, I need to book the bills," and, "this is *my* thing." You know what I mean? It's not that at all. Honestly, I would say, I guess it's my house, but it was Ethan from Couple Ghouls, Doug from Julia's War and Tagabow, and Alex from Naked Light Bulb. And there's two or three more I didn't mention, but there's those three, you can mention those three people in your article because I would just give them the props, honestly. It's Ethan, it was Doug, it was Alex, and I think there's a couple more I'd say, but it was really those three who really just kind of put the place on the map, booking the bills and getting their communities out.

You know, the thing about it is that it's not about how big your following is or whether you're from out of town or local or whatever. I've realized, in terms of getting people to come, pay for tickets and see the show, it's not about anything other than your community. That's all it is. There's bands with 20 Instagram followers who have packed this place out because they brought all their friends, and there's bands with 3,000 Instagram followers

from just down the road, maybe New York, New Jersey, who brought literally nobody – zero tickets sold – because they didn't bring their community, they don't have a real community or whatever. So it's really just about actual, in-real-life friends and communities and being a part of it and bringing their people out. That's why Ethan and Doug and Alex made an impact here and got this place popular, because they brought their friends out.

A.L.: Favorite feature of the venue if you had to pick one?

WHIT: The art and the kick drum.

A.L.: Your kick drum is awesome. Did your brother make that too?

WHIT: He painted it, yep.

A.L.: Any particularly memorably great/awful/funny show stories?

WHIT: No, nothing bad. I would say it's been surprising. Nobody's ever stolen anything (knock on wood). I think I've seen cables go missing or whatever, but then I realize that I have one of their cables or something. Nobody's stolen anything. Nobody's stolen any electronics, gear, amps, art, anything. No art heists. One time somebody graffitied on a piece of art, but only one time.

And then, yeah, I would say the more memorable shows were... there was a show where Mormon Toaster Head was here. They brought like – I don't know how – I know they're popular, but I think they're from Chicago and they recently moved here. And so I was just really surprised that they had such a big community. They brought everybody out, and we almost capped. We sold like 60 or 70 tickets.

And then Greg Mendez was here and Soup Dreams was here and they sold like 75-80 tickets that night or something like that. Maybe not. I know we made like 900 bucks and sent it to the Palestine relief efforts. I think it was \$10 for the ticket, so I want to say we probably sold over... I don't know. I know some people gave \$20 instead of \$10 as well, but it was packed, and we had to cap. So those two shows, the Greg Mendez show and then the Mormon Toaster Head show were two that really stick out as really, really popping, really good communities that came through, nice people.

And then there's another one, Whit Waltman. That would be the third one. I wasn't here that night. My brother was, he said they were really, really great guys and there was like a lot of people here, apparently. So I'd say those three were just positive ones that stick out.

Again, it just goes back to the same thing where it's really only about the community. There's a little bit of a built-in community here in South Philly –there's 10-15 regulars who come in, but it has nothing to do with us.

It's only about your band's community and your band's friends and how much you can get them to come out, and how often, and how consistently. That's really the only thing that impacts attendance here. And also the weather.

C.G.: The weather. Can't do anything about it.

A.L.: Is there anything else we should be asking you about your venue?

WHIT: No, I mean, I think this is just like every other venue. It's just sort of a reflection of the bands in the community and the communities around the bands. It's really just that. It's kind of just an open place that can foster community, and most importantly, it's really just getting bands a place to play fucking shows. I mean, that's why we all do it, is because it feels really good when you play a show. And when you play a good show, and there are people there to see it, and your hard work kind of pays off, and not necessarily because you made 150 bucks, but because you got to have that experience and people watching you got to have it too. That's sort of what this is about for me.