

Music is Art is all about heart

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Amid all the changes we're seeing around here of late, it's tempting to forget the past and rush to embrace a future where we're getting Paul McCartney-level acts in downtown Buffalo on a routine basis, the waterfront is alive and bustling, and there are no longer tumbleweeds blowing around on an otherwise deserted Main Street.

All of these developments are welcome. But they don't really tell the story of Buffalo.

That story was told most effectively on Sept. 12, when the otherwise clement weather broke for a day to offer patrons of the annual Music is Art Festival a 12-hour stretch of relentless rain, cold winds and nary a ray of sunlight breaking through the thick cloud cover lurking above Delaware Park. Some 200 bands and artists performed throughout a day that was capped by the first full-band performance from the Goo Goo Dolls in the 13-year history of this festival, birthed by the band's bassist, Robby Takac.

The rain never stopped. In fact, it only got worse as the day proceeded. And yet, I ran into people after sunset that had been there since early afternoon.

Sometime past noon, I encountered Takac, who was cruising around the grounds on a golf cart, smiling, greeting fans, hopping off the cart for photo ops with whoever requested them. He stopped to say hi, and made a show of prying his ice cold hand from the cart's steering wheel to shake mine. "Nice weather, huh?" he deadpanned, and laughed. And off he went, seemingly relishing his role as the festival's ambassador, emcee and cruise director.

If you visit Musicisart.org, you'll see a tag line beneath a picture of Takac with his friend, the late and dearly missed Lance Diamond, that reads thus: "Music is Art: Exploring and reshaping music's cultural, social and educational impact on our community."

Might sound like boilerplate cultural organization lingo to the cynic, but in MiA's case, these words ring true. MiA in general and the annual festival in particular, have become a cornerstone of the area's music community. In fact, one could make the reasonable argument that MiA has had a major hand in creating – or at least providing a focal point – for that music community.

Consider that, in 2003, when Takac launched this festival in the Allentown neighborhood, adjacent to the bustling Allentown Art Festival, the music community was scattered, diffuse and amorphous, if still somehow doggedly clinging to life. Bands existed in their own separate bubbles. Artists in different genres didn't really intermingle. If you played in a rock band, you didn't necessarily count DJs or jazz musicians or punk-folkies among your friends. Rarely did members of the music community meet outside of their respective "clubhouses," surrounded only by the like-minded.

Music is Art helped changed that by providing an all-embracing environment where anyone with an artistic bent could feel free to let their freak flag fly. It fostered a sense of community among artists and music lovers. What we had in common was our desire to do something meaningful in the city and surrounding environs we called home.

The MiA fest was embattled from the beginning. Chased out of Allentown by an Allentown Village Society not eager to embrace competition for its own festival, Takac and his team tried to make a new home at the Erie County Fairgrounds, but this venture failed – it just didn't feel like Buffalo out there. It made sense when Takac and team found their proper place around the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Delaware Park. It felt like it, from the beginning.

During this year's festival, stages spread across Delaware Park and across Lincoln Parkway on the steps of the Albright-Knox accommodated bands and artists ranging from deep blues, rustic Americana and plain old rock 'n' roll, to experimental electronic stylings, hip-hop and alternative rock. The weather was abusive, but fans hung in there, huddled beneath umbrellas, or like me, giving up, and accepting the inevitable fact that you were going to get wet, and stay that way.

At the Marcy Casino reception area, a huge portrait of Lance Diamond greeted all comers. Around the corner, the revered artist Phillip Burke, whose exhibition was enjoying its final weekend at the Burchfield Penny, worked on a portrait of local music supporter Erin Moser, as her father, independent promoter Bruce Moser, looked on with pride. Just about any local musician you could name was in attendance, either as a performer or a spectator. The vibe was positive, the weather only something to comment on in passing, and dismiss with a smile and a shrug.

Soundmen and stage crew worked tirelessly throughout the day, throwing tarps over equipment, trying to get rid of the water that was pooling on the stages by late afternoon, and generally keeping the music flowing.

As the event proceeded toward headlining sets from Willie Nile and then the Goos, the area in front of the main stage was packed with waterlogged but exuberant fans.

All of this speaks to the fortitude of the folks behind MiA and the fans who support it. Our town, our homegrown festival, and our day to celebrate both. No amount of rain, it seems, could dampen the spirit of the event.

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