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Firecracker 500 Festival explodes The Mill this weekend

May 28, 2014 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment No comments

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The Goner Records four-piece, Ex-Cult, will headline night two of the festival. - photo by Unruly Factions.

Firecracker 500 Festival

The Mill — May 29-31

Get your earplugs ready because the now (consistently) annual Firecracker 500 Festival is happening a month early this year, kicking off what will undoubtedly be a great summer of music listening and day-drinking.

Firecracker brings together a bunch of primarily Midwest garage, psychedelic and punk bands. Spanning three nights (May 29-31) at The Mill, this year features Detroit's Mexican Knives (droning garage), another Michigan band The Hemingers (simple punk/garage songs about tacos and dropping out of school), as well as the return of Bloomington's Thee Open Sex (droning psychedelic).

This year's lineup features a combination of bands I love and bands I have yet to love, and thinking about them all reminds me of a giddy conversation I had at last year's Firecracker with Uh Bones drummer Joe Montanaro. We both felt that not only are more bands recording albums and touring under the labels of garage and psychedelic, but also that these bands are receiving more attention from music critics: Even *Pitchfork* (evil, evil *Pitchfork*) started a garage rock column, "Shake Appeal." This and the fact that psych fests are exponentially reproducing across the U.S. supports the feeling that these genres are both expanding and gaining in popularity. But are there actually more garage and psychedelic bands? Or are these labels just being more loosely applied to groups?

To answer this year-old question, I turned to the musicians who will be performing at Firecracker: Chris Shaw of Memphis' Ex-Cult (aggressive punk), Steve Krakow of Chicago's Plastic Crimewave Syndicate ("power trio spacejams for dayz"), John Ziegler of Omaha's The Lupines (garage, rock and roll) and Nolan Krebs and Andrew Tamlyn of Grand Rapids' Heaters (psychedelic, garage awesomeness). They shed light on the state of garage and psychedelic music, what those labels even mean and whether their local scenes are as weird and ever-changing as Iowa City's.

[The Golden Cage](#) by plastic crimewave syndicate

Do you think there is currently a resurgence in garage and psychedelic music?

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6:00 PM



Southern Valentine with New Pi's Matt

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PYO Knit & Wine

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Steve Krakow (Plastic Crimewave Syndicate): Yes, there were never enough bands to have a Psychfest in Chicago, even 10 years ago, but we have had a local Psychfest here [in Chicago] for the last five years now — I think we were first after Austin. “Psychedelia” isn’t a dirty word like it used to be when people equated the term with Grateful Dead-like bands.

Nolan Krebs (Heaters): Lots of people seem to be into [garage and psychedelic music] these days, which is cool. Most of it seems to be music born from the same old records that we’re into, whether it’s Hawkwind or The Seeds. So, whatever. We don’t have any qualms with it. I’d rather listen to a scuzzy, garage rock band than a lot of other shit that’s out there.

John Ziegler (The Lupines): I don’t know. There’s even more garage bands now? People complained of that when I was super attentive four years ago. It seemed like things peaked when Jay Reatard and the Black Lips were both touring and alive, maybe just in my own mind or memory. Now, it’s just the Black Lips, who I still appreciate, and more bands than I can count.

I can’t keep up with the hype; it seems like there is some new, twinkly guitar band every week. And surprise, surprise, I knew it all along, but it looks like the music lends itself very well towards branding and merchandising of cars and cell phones ... And I don’t lament that, but I think the smartphone and social media are equalizing music into this college-radio indie gestalt of indistinct imagery and sounds, and it sucks. Image-wise, everything is all duded out for this communion of humanity and positive thinking and some vague future of endless party-going (perhaps that’s not new), and sound-wise, it’s all just fucking twinkly ...

Chris Shaw (Ex-Cult): I think that aggressive music is getting more attention from some of the bigger media outlets than it used to. Over the past few years, bigger bands that play that type of music have gotten recognition and it’s had a trickle-down effect, which is awesome. All different types of underground music is now getting exposure, and that’s always a good thing. But people have been playing punk, hardcore punk, whatever you want to call ... no one ever really stopped from when it started. It’s not like all of a sudden [people say] “lets be in a punk, garage or hardcore band,” it’s just that people are starting to pay attention to it again.

▶ [BROWN SUGAR](#) by Heaters

I feel like the terms psychedelic and garage are applied (even in this article!) so haphazardly to anything with a vintage or fuzzy sound that they no longer mean anything. What do those labels mean to you — if anything — and how do you describe your music?

NK: We’re not sure what those labels mean either. “Psych” has been a helpful word in describing some of the sonic elements we’re into, but I’m not sure it’s all-encapsulating or anything. I think we take some cues from early rock and roll bands (hence the garage rock affiliation) and add our own flavor to it. Over-driven swirls of aquatic jangle. How’s that?

JZ: We are garage or rock and roll. I don’t mind labels so much. What else are you going to actually say? People can’t ESP their sentiments about a band direct to your brain yet, but there might be an app for that soon.

CS: I used to say the term garage music was just an excuse for bands to suck because it encompasses so many different things, and it can be so many different things. I basically just sum it up as “if you suck, you can just label it garage, and it’s fine no matter what you’re playing.” I wouldn’t call us a garage band. I think because we are on [\[Goner\], a garage label](#), that that’s the easiest comparison people can draw ...

Garage punk, psych punk, I don’t know what those mean either. I like psychedelic music. I think people want to put a label on it so they can decide if they like it, like “I like psychedelic rock, and this is a psychedelic rock band, so I must like them,” or “I know I like hardcore punk and I read this is a hardcore punk band, so I must like them.” I think we’re just an aggressive punk band, we might not fit the cookie cutter definition of what a punk band or a psych band should be, I think we fall somewhere in the middle ...

▶ [I BLAME CREATION](#) by THE LUPINES

Regardless of what these labels may actually mean, or how they are externally or self-

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applied, the fact that Iowa City even has a garage and psychedelic music fest is kind of weird to me, considering Iowa City's fragmented and constantly-rotating show attendees and the small number of garage and psychedelic bands currently in town. Can you describe what your local music scenes are like?

Andrew Tamlyn (Heaters): There's a weird range of music here in Grand Rapids, anywhere from sludge doom to friendly folk, ultimately keeping it one big ol' family mixing and matching genres, and keeping the weekly house shows thriving with wonder.

CS: People get an idea of Memphis that isn't completely accurate because it is an extremely small scene. So, even when bands that are on the national radar come through, it's a good show if 30 or 40 people come. I mean, there are a lot of good local bands and Goner [Records] has had a lot to do with that. Memphis by nature is just an older music scene. The kids that go to college ... the punk shows just don't attract them. Like, I am probably one of the youngest people that comes around, and I'm not that young anymore.

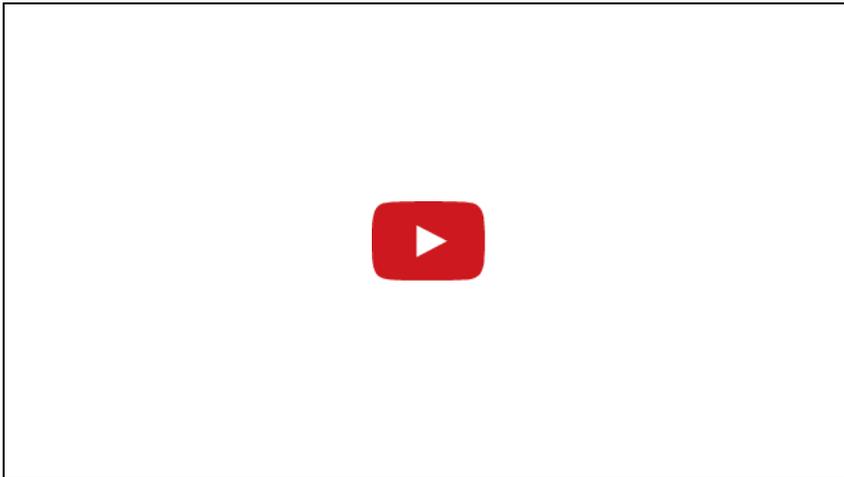
JZ: Attendance is a bit iffy in [Omaha]. I have about 11 bands on a list that I would like to play with. [Omaha] is a bit cloistered and paranoid, but I think that goes without saying for any town's scene.

SK: It's fantastic, better than it has been in my nearly 20 years in [Chicago]. Besides psych, there is all kinds of awesome arty bands (Ono, Toupee, ADT), grimey punkers (Running, Basic Cable), heavy bands (Unmanned Ship, Oozing Wound), country (Lawrence Peters outfit), folk (Ryley Walker), you name it.

For more information about Firecracker 500 Fest and music links for all the bands playing, go to firecracker500festival.com. And, even if you don't do any pre-fest listening, Joe Derderian, the host extraordinaire of Firecracker, is right in saying, "The best way to find new sounds is still in a live setting."

Melissa Zimdars co-hosts *The Fuzz Fix* every Thursday from 6 – 8 p.m. on KRUI.

Watch Ex-Cult perform live in Portland and Seattle:



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About Melissa Zimdars

Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, specializing in all things television.

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