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Wednesday, March 21, 2007

**Schultz By Southwest: Earvolution Goes To Austin**

By: David Schultz



A March tradition that could rival St. Patrick's Day and the NCAA Tournament for alcohol fueled excitement, the South By Southwest festival once again attracted every facet of the music industry to downtown Austin, Texas. For those in the business, a portion of SXSW is just

that: panel discussions and trade shows abound and this year featured keynote addresses by the likes of Pete Townshend and David Byrne. Technically an industry conference, the 5 day, 4 night festival is so much more than a boondoggle; it attracts press, fans and most importantly, musicians from all over the country.

Billing itself as the music industry's largest gathering, SXSW brings more than 1,300 artists to play at hundreds of official and unofficial parties and showcases. The SXSW sanctioned showcases take place at night, with each invited act getting at least one official chance to ply their craft. For every official appearance made over the week, each artist will give many more performances at the various parties and unofficially sponsored showcases which magnificently inundate SXSW. Wherever there was room, someone put on a show. For the 2007 SXSW, Earvolution joined the fray, sponsoring what will ideally be the first annual Earvolution.com showcase at Emo's (IV) Lounge on the corner of Sixth Street and Red River Street.

While fun and games for those in the audience, much work goes into getting singers and bands onto these stages. Managers fight hard to secure slots for their acts, signed or unsigned, on as many showcases as possible, there being a premium on being seen, being heard and generating as much as buzz as you can. For the musicians, the stakes can be large: potential managers, publicists and labels use the occasion to gauge interest in the band not only by the fans but also by their competitors. Killing at SXSW can create ripples that emanate loudly throughout the biz. The typical showcase set runs about 40-45 minutes, leaving little time for building up a rapport with the crowd. As a result, most acts get right down to business, putting everything they have into the limited time they're given. Making it at SXSW shows that you can play, but the larger question raised after SXSW is can you sell?

Given the large industry presence, it's easy to look at SXSW, (or "South By" as one badge wearer could be overheard instructing another), with a cynical eye. Quickly though, it becomes obvious that with so many quality musicians playing that week than physically possible to see and hear, to remain skeptical and

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suspicious just makes yourself your own worst enemy. Amongst the many things I learned at my first South By – besides picking up the lingo – comfortable shoes are a necessity, especially if you plan to take in full days of music. A game plan for the day, whether you follow it or not, also helps.

**Tuesday, March 13**

Our SXSW contingent consists of myself and Earvolution founder Jeff Davidson and we arrive on Tuesday evening. Our landlord for the duration, local filmmaker and Austin native Mike Mann, offers to take us into the downtown area to scout out [Emo's](#) and give us the lay of the land. The Emo's complex is staggering both in size and efficiency, with four separate stages, an open courtyard and live music emanating everywhere. In New York City, such a facility would be simply unfathomable: getting past the space restrictions, a Manhattan version would charge at least a \$20 cover charge regardless of the bands on stage. At Emo's, when there is a cover, it goes straight to the band and many nights simply being old enough to enter gives you access to at least a dozen bands . . . and this is just one of a couple dozen venues that populate the Sixth Street downtown area. No wonder the Austin music scene thrives.

With our guide Mann pointing out such local tidbits like the bouncer being the lead singer of [The Crackpipes](#). We also caught part of set by [Ume](#), a trashy little power trio. Ume's heavy sound may be a bit standard but their guitarist, the remarkable Lauren Larson, is not your typical riot grrrl. Petite and ladylike, Larson simply shredded her guitar with a skill and proficiency you wouldn't expect from a lovely blonde, especially one sharing the stage with her husband on bass. After tearing through a dozen or so of dead-on punk rock guitar riffs with her long locks swinging wildly in front of her face, she daintily picked up her purse and walked demurely off the stage. In briefly speaking with her after her set, I prepared for a coarse Courtney Love like demeanor only to have my stereotype shattered by Larson's Southern-style hospitality.



Only hours in, I'm already hooked on the Austin music scene. We stay at Emo's a bit longer for the Good Times Crisis Band before heading over to another stage for [Brothers & Sisters](#), a Sixties-style outfit fronted by a hefty Gregg Allman look-alike, who wore a muumuu (possibly a poncho) while leading the band through some traditional classic rock style compositions before a packed room.

We leave Emo's and amble around Sixth Street for a bit and it becomes clear why Austin is considered one of the preeminent cities for live music. Unlike Manhattan, where the music remains barricaded behind close doors, Austin's venues entice you by letting you hear what's going on inside. As a result, a walk down Sixth Street exposes you to the multitude of blues, country, metal and rock that keep the Austin machine well oiled. With an abundance of BBQ and beer and a cornucopia of music ahead, Austin will not only be the epicenter of the music world for the rest of the week, it will be sensory and auditory nirvana.

**Wednesday, March 14**

Wednesday afternoon marks Earvolution's introductory foray into SXSW at Emo's Lounge. Like everyone who descends on Austin for the festival, Earvolution had a slightly self-interested motivation for hosting a day of music: generating awareness and interest in [Pawnshop Roses](#), an old-school, classic-rock inspired quartet from Philadelphia, PA cut from the mold of bands like the Black Crowes and *Exile On Main Street* era Rolling Stones. They also happen to be the first artist signed to Earvolution Records.

The couple hours leading up to [Joshua James'](#) just after noon-time opening set are a bit daunting. In a form of opening night jitters, we frankly worry that no one will show. Fears of an empty house are quickly allayed:



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throughout the day we are joined by Justin Ward of the [Live Music Blog](#); local, music-loving Austinites (possibly Austinians), a good number of laminate-bearing industry types and someone who looks conspicuously like Rolling Stone's David Fricke. James and [Wes Hutchinson](#) give different variations of the singer-songwriter motif, showing how much can be done with just an acoustic guitar. After his set, Hutchinson accomplished the not inconsiderable task of meeting nearly everyone who came to hear his set, making new fans with his personality as well as his music.



Our friends from Brooklyn, [The States](#), woke everyone up with an early afternoon set heavy on material from *The Path Of Least Resistance*, their upcoming album which is in the final re-mastering process. At the close of the set, a father approached Chris Snyder, the States' lead singer and guitarist, with his two young children in tow. Explaining that his kids really loved The States' set, he asks for autographs while his son and daughter shyly loiter close by. Even though the scene is way too precious, I go off in search of some promo cards while a sweaty but always affable Snyder, clearly flattered by the praise, chats with the family. When I return, he signs autographs for the beaming children, making them fans of The States for life.

[Pawnshop Roses](#) deliver a set that pulled in a good number of interested people off the street and I notice an individual who looks conspicuously like the ageless David Fricke. While fellow Philadelphians [Jealousy Curve](#) [entertained a growing crowd](#), I learn that the gentleman in the sunglasses is not Fricke covering our showcase for Rolling Stone but rather is here in support of the two Philadelphia bands. I learn later that the Fricke look-a-like is Roger Hale, father of [Halestorm's Lizzy and Arejay Hale](#). A band I would seemingly see just about everywhere during my stay in Austin.

After Toledo's [We Are The Fury](#) cap off the inaugural Earvolution SXSW showcase with a tight set of glam-rock in the mode of the New York Dolls, Live Music Blog's Justin joins us in a celebratory Jameson toast and we hang with Pawnshop Roses' Kevin Bentley talking music and basking in the glow of the successful showcase. While we wax philosophic on all things musical (i.e. discussing who we've seen live lately), the BBQ buffet for the Sub Pop party taking place that evening gets going. Curious as to who will be on the Sub Pop showcase, we grab one of the time sheets and discover that Emo's has made a glorious mistake: they designate the night's entertainment as the "SXSW Earvolution Party." Oh yes, I do love this town.

Next I was off to one of the official SXSW "badge events." The badge itself is an interesting object. More than just an entry pass, the badge, bearing the wearer's photo and company information, gives you a sense of security; for all intents and purposes, the festival is your oyster. The laminate, which costs upwards of \$500, turns out to be the *de rigueur* accoutrement for SXSW. For some reason, it is required that anyone in possession of a laminate prominently display it around their neck. Even if optional, I sense that no one would choose to hide their badge as "access" plays a not-so-insignificant role in this business. On the first night of the festival, the failure to laminate ourselves, or acquire its cheaper, lower-access equivalent, a \$175 wristband more suitable for those with no interest in attending any of the panels, frustrates our attempt to see The Rapture at the Free Yrself showcase at La Zona Rosa.

Not tarrying outside La Zona Rosa any longer than necessary - there are too many other showcases not requiring a badge and other bands playing for free to fret over missing one - we ambled back down 4th Street pondering the importance of the badge. Initially, I debated whether I was envious of the privileged laminate-owning masses or whether I was committing a

truly indie-level, rebellious act and by remaining "unlaminated" I was doing my part to fight the power. Rationalization can be quite fun. I will experience moments of laminate-envy over the next four nights, but they are relatively brief. As it turns out, with some shrewd foresight and a little cash (much less than the cost of a laminate and a little less than a wristband), you can pretty much see any act you wanted to catch.

Jeff and I decide to check out the Fado Irish Pub, where Pawnshop Roses will be playing tomorrow afternoon as part of the [Industry of Music](#) showcase. A traditional Irish pub, Fado has an outdoor stage area reminiscent of a backyard patio and I quickly recognize "not-David Fricke" amidst the crowd. As I brood over being followed around, albeit preemptively, we bump into Roses' lead singer Paul Keen, who explains the complex *Lost*-style connections between the various Philadelphia bands down in Texas this week. As one of the Philly bands turns out to be Halestorm, the presence of "not-David Fricke" at Fado now makes sense.

Fortunate enough to come all the way from New York to catch an uninspiring set from Brooklyn's [Locksley](#), we decide to scout out the potential of getting into the Beauty Bar to catch Illinois as part of the Ace Fu showcase. Our motivation disappears after hearing the dual guitar assault of Paul Ritchie and Dave Rosen and the Robert Plant quality wail of Mark Melicia of New Jersey's [Parlor Mob](#), who follow the same Seventies-style Sabbath-driven heavy metal vision as Wolfmother. After an hour of energetic Zeppelin-ized blues, Halestorm takes the stage with Lzzy Hale leading the hard-rock quartet on to the stage with an a capella burst of vocal theatrics comparable to Melicia's.

As the final act reflects a "very special guest," we make the mistake of sticking around in case something exciting happens. Even though there are rumors abounding of a Rage Against The Machine reunion somewhere in Austin this night, we are not delusional that we are in its presence. Before the "special guests" appear, we sit through an interminable set from the [Gore Gore Girls](#), who seemingly played the same song for a half hour straight. The song titles changed and one had a harmonica break, but the three chord drone remained constant. After toughing out the set, hopes were dashed as we learned that "special" is a term that can be thrown around rather indiscriminately: the mystery artist is revealed as Amsterband. In wandering back down 4th Street, we become enthralled with the [Spazmatics](#) playing outdoors at the Cedar Street Courtyard. Dressed as...well...spazzes, the geeked-out band-o-nerds had a full house rocking with a Violent Femmes medley. With nearly every other band in Austin making an effort to stand out with their original music, the Spazmatics looked backwards with their ultimate New Wave 80's Show, showing off their style or rather, lack of it, by closing the night with a cover of Bon Jovi's "Livin' On A Prayer."

#### **Thursday, March 15**

With landlord Mike Mann leading the way, Thursday begins with a noble SXSW goal: finding free lunch. With the allure of "free BBQ, free beer and free metal," we head to the Soho Lounge on Sixth Street only to find out that it's a laminate-only event. Though sparsely filled, we are denied entry, but since we weren't married much to the "free metal" idea, we don't put up a huge fight. As we regather to formulate a plan, I learn that there's more to SXSW than simply official and unofficial parties, there are also invitation-only private parties. The laminates might have been the most common skeleton key but they by no means opened every door; the private parties ratchet up the exclusivity level. Most of the invitations for the private parties are a little bit bigger than index cards; like the laminates they are designed to be worn around like necklaces. Anyone with private invites proudly wore them in addition to their laminate like Mr. T baring his chains. I imagine that whoever got the most invite cards around their neck wins SXSW.

Calling a quick audible, we make it to the Fontana

Distribution party at The Lava Lounge in time for some Iron Works barbecue and Ian Moore. Basking in the sun of the outdoor patio, we quaff some local brews while Canadian Ron Sexsmith ran through an extremely short set before turning the stage over to Kiefer Sutherland's favorite guitarist and co-star of *I Trust You To Kill Me*, [Rocco Deluca](#). With his backing band The Burden, Deluca was one of the many artists running themselves ragged this week playing numerous showcases. Deluca' afternoon set came with no frills: accompanied by Ryan Carman perched upon the nifty drum box he used to provide the beat, Deluca played a dazzling set on his Dobro steel guitar allowing him to focus more on his Jeff Buckley like vocals.

Once Deluca finished his set, we made a quick scamper to the outskirts of Austin for [Peter And The Wolf](#)'s set at The Peacock Lounge, one of the more contrived concert spaces in the Austin area. A cozy little space with a small outdoor deck and a comfortable collegiate style living room area, the venue was far from ideal for a SXSW showcase, much less one for the modestly sized band fronted by local musician Red Hunter. Using every bit of the available space, Hunter and a choir led by Dana Falconberry loped through a relaxing 20 minute set of lo-fi, atmospheric, Grizzly Bear styled folk better suited for a late evening than a sunny Texas afternoon.

On the way back downtown to catch Rachel Fuller's and Pete Townshend's [Attic Jam](#) at La Zona Rosa, I learn that the music scene's saturation of Austin life even permeates the transportation industry: our cab driver was extremely fluent in all forms of music and knew the city's clubs and their denizens quite well. Getting to La Zona Rosa at the same time as the Attic Jam was scheduled to begin, we encountered a short line to get in. The venue dropping the price of the show once Townshend played turns out to be a bit of a mixed blessing. While we wait unnecessarily in line, Townshend opens the show with an acoustic version of "[Drowned](#)." The cashier dutifully dropped the price while cheerfully making sure everyone knew that Townshend would be coming on and off for the next 2 1/2 hours. Further reason to keep calm: when Townshend is in the building for an Attic Jam, there is but one closing act.

Hosting a bill that caused her to blurt she was so excited "she could pee herself," Fuller welcomed Alexi Murdoch, Willy Mason, Martha Wainwright and Joe Purdy with lavish introductions. Each performer played a song before Townshend and Fuller would join them on stage. Without exception, each musician had a look on their face that expressed their amazement that they were not only on stage with the legendary guitarist but that Townshend was accompanying them on their material. Purdy opted for one of Townshend's songs and their acoustic duet of "Let My Love Open The Door" transformed the song from a cocky demand to a yearning plea. Ever the comic, Townshend kept the mood light, good-naturedly letting the various singer-songwriters shine while letting his star provide the glow. Due to running late, Townshend's closing set may have been cut short and although possibly historic, proved slightly disappointing.

Accompanied by Fuller, Townshend sang "In The Ether," the weakest effort off of The Who's recent *Endless Wire* before picking up the guitar and closing the show with what he believed to be the first ever public performance of "I Can't Reach You" from *The Who Sell Out*. Given the wealth of material at his disposal, the performance of an obscure track from 40 years ago felt a tad anticlimactic.

The Attic Jam abutted nicely with an evening showcase anchored by the [Cold War Kids](#). Even though they have reached a level of success that makes their appearance at SXSW seem gratuitous, Cold War Kids put on a simply astounding performance that blew away everyone in attendance. Having been [eminently impressed with the California foursome](#) on a couple other occasions, their forty-five minutes at SXSW left me speechless. The comfortably filled La Zona Rosa that existed during [Elvis Perkins'](#) stellar opening set slowly hit maximum capacity during the break. By the time the Kids took the stage and launched into "[We Used To Vacation](#)," there was hardly

any room to breathe much less move in the 1,200 capacity hall as it felt like the entire festival crowd packed themselves into the spacious warehouse.

As opposed to many of the other sets throughout the week where experienced crowds showed appreciation but never real excitement, Cold War Kids brought out everyone's inner music fan. When the opening bass line of "Hang Me Up To Dry" echoed throughout the cavernous room, the hall erupted. Going off the board a little bit, Elvis Perkins and his band returned to the stage and the two groups collaborated on a cover of Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," during which Nathan Willetts' emotionally fragile voice turned the soulful tune into a Cold War classic. With Perkins and friends providing the percussion and horn blasts that make up the auditory chaos underlying the chain-gang chant of "St. John," the set closed with one of those "Oh My God" moments that keep people attending shows night after night. The unrestrained, unapologetic and decidedly unindustry response was phenomenal . . . and quite cool. Equally as impressive: once the Cold War Kids left the stage, so did a great number of people. The Cold War Kids were clearly a destination event.

Returning to Fado, where Pawnshop Roses played an early afternoon set, I catch [The Gay Blades](#), an East coast guitar and drums duo that is a pair of double Ds short of The White Stripes. The Blades tore through a fun set notable for Clark Westfield's rifling guitar, quick wit, an impulsive announcement to give away everything at the merch table to anyone in the industry using the honor system and an unintended contribution by Sam Bey, Parlor Mob's drummer, that scored big numbers on the unintentional comedy scale. Grabbing a cowbell, an overly inebriated Bey continuously staggered on stage without bothering to take off his bulky backpack to lend additional percussion while provoking wagers on whether he would fall off the stage or tumble into the drum kit. Bets were taken off the board when the tambourine he kicked off the stage hit the bouncer in the head resulting in his prompt escort from the premises.



[Hoots & Hellmouth](#), a raucous acoustic string band overcame the difficulties inherent in following the previous calamities with an upbeat set that seemed torn from a mountainous backwoods. Opening with a romp through the Grateful

Dead's "Samson And Delilah," the foursome led a genuine hootenanny. Substituting foot stomps and energy for a rhythm section, Hoots & Hellmouth generated one of the rare instances of actual dancing at an SXSW event. The mostly hirsute Philadelphia quartet finished their hillbilly run through Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" by walking amongst the people, stomping, clapping and exhorting everyone to join along like crazed hippie camp counselors.

The evening concluded at the Cedar Street Courtyard with [Grace Potter & The Nocturnals](#) warming the slight evening chill by previewing selections from their upcoming album *This Is Something*. The winsome Potter, fast on her way to becoming the sexiest, hippie goddess in rock, led the Nocturnals through a rootsy, soulful set punctuated by guitarist Scott Tournet's increasingly killer guitar solos, Brian Dondero's finely honed bass and Matt Burr's straightforward, powerful drums. Rather than try to put into words the extent that the Vermont natives conquered SXSW, let this tale suffice. In the 21 years that I have been attending concerts the one thing that I have always ached to see, but never have, is a true encore. Without fail, once the planned encore ends, every crowd immediately shuffles off like lemmings, leaving the very intoxicated and consciousness-expanded few to scream fruitlessly for more. When Potter and the Nocturnals finished their set, few left the Courtyard. Even though the curfew had passed, the band upstairs and the power turned off, the crowd howled for more. Potter came back to the stage, seemingly questioning whether they could

heed the request for "one more song" only to be told no. Over the protests of the venue's staff, Tournet came running down the stairs with an acoustic guitar and he had Potter played a brief but rollicking "Mystery Train." With Potter spilling her whiskey while she bopped and sang next to Tournet, the two played what has to be every musician's dream – [a true encore](#). In talking to Matt Burr after the show, he said that it's every band's desire to kill at SXSW. Well, Potter & The Nocturnals didn't kill at SXSW – they devastated it.

#### Friday – March 16

Running from show to show, it can become easy to lose the forest for the trees so Friday was spent making an effort to soak up the SXSW atmosphere. Starting the day by catching our friends The States making some new fans at Darwin's Pub on Sixth Street, we lingered to catch the Tyrone Vaughan Band. The son or nephew of Stevie Ray Vaughan, which also implicates Fabulous Thunderbird Jimmy Vaughan's genes, Tyrone showed the power of good breeding, leading his foursome through some nice Texas style blues-rock.

Possessing vague directions to Antone's, Jeff and I progressed to our only intended destination for the day, the EMI Publishing party featuring [Robert Randolph & The Family Band](#). Given Randolph's stature and our perception of where he was playing, we imagined the "Hendrix of the pedal steel" to be playing an outdoor locale. Arriving at the cozy confines of Antone's, we were overjoyed to merge with the excited crowd bopping along to Randolph's funkified gospel and soul. Remaining firmly entrenched behind his pedal steel, the low stage allowed Randolph to play inches from the front of the crowd. The intimate surroundings also allowed the personable Randolph to play around a bit: during an instrumental version of Michael Jackson's "Wanna Be Startin' Something," he invited people from the audience to handle lead guitar and he made sure that a group of young kids right up front not only had a fun but also had a memorable afternoon. Due to the unexpected absence of Marcus Randolph, The Family Band welcomed Vinnie Amici of moe. who sat in with the band on short notice. As SXSW provides such a limited opportunity to present each band's skills, Amici's inclusion into the Family Band brought a bit of the communal, lets-see-what-happens spirit more commonly found at jamband festivals than SXSW. While the musicians are all enormously supportive of each other, once on the stage, the artists have to sink or swim on their own at SXSW.

Later that evening over at Stubbs Ampitheater, Tom Morello stole the show and 99% of the crowd in attendance never knew it occurred. Starting on Stubbs' interior basement stage within seconds of [Badly Drawn Boy](#) closing his set on the main stage with Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," Morello, formerly of Audioslave and past and presently of Rage Against The Machine, played an impassioned half-hour acoustic set chilling in its political acuity and directness. Making reference to the appearance of Slash at his set at The Parish the night before, Morello immediately informed the intimate assemblage that this evening it would be just be him, [The Nightwatchman](#), before tearing into his six song set. Like an even more pissed off Johnny Cash, Morello previewed songs from his upcoming album, *One Man Revolution*, and resurrected "Guerilla Radio" for those who won't be able to "scale the walls at Coachella." In song, Morello gave voice to the economically disadvantaged and politically disenfranchised with lyrics calling for the President to drown the next time a Southern levee breaks. Pity George Bush that his leadership has awakened the slumbering beast that is Rage Against The Machine. If Morello's [performance at Stubbs](#) is any indication of the fire fueling the upcoming reunion, Rage Against The Machine are about to become the most dangerous band on the planet.

Morello's performance was tucked between sets of a Friday showcase that featured Perry Farrell's Satellite Party, Andrew Bird, [Pete & the Pirates](#), Badly Drawn Boy and his fellow British brethren The Good, The Bad & The Queen. [Farrell's latest project](#), featuring former Extreme

guitarist Nuno Bettencourt, pieced together a nicely varied set that flaunted the mocking tone that greeted the project's recent album. Farrell's voice and image have matured over the years but one thing hasn't changed: he still imagines himself one sexy beast.

Gorgeously playing traditional violin as much as treating the delicate instrument like a guitar, the multi-talented [Andrew Bird](#), whose band included another multi-instrumental talent, Martin Dosh, drew waves of appreciation for his quirky, ambient repertoire. Before diving into every 80s music fans wet dream of a finale, [Badly Drawn Boy](#) pulled a couple Ryan Adams diva stoppages and showed a feisty edge that you wouldn't imagine from his music.

The night's headliner, [The Good, The Bad & The Queen](#) came across as the most polished arena-friendly act but over the course of their hour on stage, nothing seemed to take hold. Damon Albarn's latest "supergroup" never seemed to do anything really super. Damon Albarn moved between the keyboards and center stage but never seemed to captivate the crowd. The efforts of Clash bassist Paul Simonon, Verve guitarist Simon Tong and drummer Tony Allen can't be faulted but given the firepower at their disposal, their performance came off mundane.

#### **Saturday – March 17**

I tiredly and ruefully make my way out of Austin on a midday flight back to New York City. As I relaxed before my flight with a cup of coffee and a breakfast taco (no McMuffins, 8 places selling breakfast tacos: go figure), the scope of the SXSW Festival hit me like Pete Townshend's guitar nailing an unsuspecting amp: even the airport had a showcase.

All total, I caught roughly 30 of the 1300 bands that played here over my 3 1/2 days in Austin ...and not once did I hear anyone cover "Crazy." There is hope for us all.

Labels: [Cold War Kids](#), [Grace Potter and The Nocturnals](#), [Robert Randolph](#), [SXSW](#), [The States](#), [Tom Morello](#)

// posted by schultz @ 11:02 AM

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