

Mayberry on Mushrooms: An Oral History of The Bowling Green Music Scene

Sam Osborne

FLK 399

Professor Kaufkins

December 10, 2014

ABSTRACT: Bowling Green, Kentucky has garnered attention for its budding music scene in the last five years, as alternative rockers Cage the Elephant, Sleeper Agent and Morning Teleportation have accrued fan bases across the nation and globe. Good music is nothing new to Bowling Green, though. Through oral interviews with musicians young and old, venue owners and participants of the local scene I got perspectives into why Bowling Green has become a hub of musical talent. Family tradition, loyal venues and dedicated fan bases are crucial to contributing to the patterns of consistent musical talent being produced in Bowling Green.

KEYWORDS: Bowling Green, music, Cage the Elephant, Sleeper Agent, Government Cheese, Tidball's, Picasso's, The Hilltoppers.

Through extensive oral interviews with established and fledgling artists and others connected with the Bowling Green music scene over the course of this semester I was able to get insight into why Bowling Green has become a consistent producer of musical talent. Patterns of local family lineage with music and supportive local venues became apparent through my fieldwork. The closeness and camaraderie between artists and the mellow small town vibe of Bowling Green proved to be crucial factors contributing to the success of Bowling Green artistry.

It's easy to overlook Bowling Green, despite its rank as the Commonwealth of Kentucky's third largest city.

Yes, it pops up on the national radar now and then. In February, a sinkhole swallowed eight Corvettes at the National Corvette Museum as sports car aficionados

worldwide watched in collective pain.

But now the fast-food hub, long famous for its Corvette heritage, might have a natural signature developing that could stick: a budding music scene born of roots that some might not know about.

Bowling Green bands such as Cage the Elephant, Morning Teleportation and Sleeper Agent — long known by the college set at WKU and elsewhere — continue to make waves nationally.

In 2011, Rolling Stone took notice of the Bowling Green music scene. The iconic music publication selected Cage the Elephant and Sleeper Agent as the No. 1 and No. 2 best new artists of the year, respectively. Cage the Elephant's latest album "Melophobia," released in October 2013, gained critical acclaim. The group played on "Ellen" in March 2014. Ellen Degeneres is a fan, she says. They also nabbed spots playing well-known summer festivals in 2014 — Coachella, Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza.

The recent emergence of the Bowling Green music scene might seem like a contemporary trend. However, the city has been the stomping ground for talented musicians for decades.

The Hilltoppers, a pop trio formed at WKU in the 1950s, sold more than a million copies of the 1953 release, "P.S. I Love You."

Bowling Green native and bluegrass musician Sam Bush was instrumental in creating the "new grass" sound, which incorporated electric instruments and song styles from other genres. Bluegrass music, created by Kentucky musician and native Bill

Monroe in 1927, has since become a multimillion-dollar industry eight decades later¹.

All this occurred long before Matt Shultz, the front man for Bowling Green's Cage the Elephant, dangled from the rafters for capacity shows or snapped backstage selfies with Beyoncé at Coachella.

From country songwriters to rap groups to punk rockers, Bowling Green, more than anything, means music.

The United States endured record frigid temperatures brought on by the "Great Cold Wave." On Jan. 20, 1985, Bowling Green recorded a low temperature of -14 degrees.

But that month in the basement of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house at WKU, Tommy Womack's rock 'n' roll dreams started heating up.

Womack graduated from WKU in December of 1984, but he didn't have any intention of putting his degree to use. Womack spent his adolescence dreaming of life in a band. He decided that bitter-cold winter — the kind that drives mice indoors — to form a band called Government Cheese.

"For years and years, all I'd wanted to do really was do music," Womack said. "I was depressed because I was a preppy, myopic dweeb that I figured was never going to make it in a band. I just wanted to be in a band so bad.

"So I graduated college, got my diploma in December 1984 and immediately went out and got a job at the brand new Lee's Recipe Fried Chicken on the 31-W Bypass. Government Cheese played their first gig in January of 1985 in the basement of the Sig

¹ Mills, S. W. "Bringing the Family Tradition in Bluegrass Music to the Music Classroom." *General Music Today*, 2008, 12-18.

Ep house.”

He finalized the lineup in April and by summer, Government Cheese started making a name for itself, albeit a negative one. Its brash punk rock sound didn't appeal to Bowling Green tastes.

“By this point, a lot of people in town hated us,” Womack said. “There were a lot of really good musicians in town, really respectable players to look up to. We weren't ‘punks’ as people. We were college students, and every one of us wound up graduating college. But the music we played was punk. Put together in a punk manner, and themes of the lyrics were punk. Everything was punk except the guys themselves.”

The band holed up in a house on Nutwood Street, spending countless hours practicing in the kitchen and some were less than enthusiastic about the bombardment of noise the band produced.

Locals rejected listening to songs about things like dropping acid on a camping trip, but before long, hoards of college students took to the sound.

“The whole scene was starting to change,” Womack said. “This weird Government Cheese thing was happening on the street. By 1986, we owned Bowling Green. The freshman and sophomore class at WKU really had taken to us.”

Government Cheese became a weekend fixture at Picasso's, a now defunct venue that stood in the basement of Mariah's Restaurant. Eventually Picasso's began to draw in bands from Nashville, who typically would open for Government Cheese because they drew large, raucous crowds.

Womack said some of his fondest memories involve performing to capacity crowds at Picasso's. One of the venue's biggest nights of the week was the “Bladder

Bust.” Starting at 7 p.m., patrons paid a cover and drank for free all night — until the first person used the bathroom.

“People were getting drunk as hell and groaning,” Womack said. “Their faces becoming etched with pain, and we would be playing rock’n’roll to these people, and they would be dancing in pain because they had to go to the bathroom.”

Womack said Picasso’s was “ground zero” for the Bowling Green music scene in the late 1980s.

“Every night at Picasso’s was packed, and we owned the place,” Womack said. “I had a second adolescence, and it was way better than the first one.”

In 1986, Government Cheese strayed from Bowling Green, building followings in Louisville, Lexington and Nashville. Soon after, the band signed with Nashville indie label Reptile Records, received some airplay on college radio and even had a music video on MTV. Government Cheese’s video for its single “Face to Face,” produced by WKU broadcasting students, was featured on MTV’s “120 Minutes” in January 1988. The video features the band in their natural habitat, playing to an enthusiastic, head-bopping crowd at Picasso’s. Womack said the exposure on MTV was huge for Government Cheese.

“What it did for our ability to get booking was incredible,” he said. “The power of MTV then was incredible.”

Government Cheese disbanded in January 1992, as the toll of perpetual touring and partying wreaked havoc.

“It was a hard-partying lifestyle,” Womack said. “When you’ve been living in a van with four guys for days on end, weeks on end, years on end, little things start to mean a lot. ‘Fuck you’ replaces ‘good morning.’”

The fame and fortune Womack pined for never came to fruition, but he said he is proud of the lasting impression Government Cheese made on the Bowling Green scene. “We made our stamp, and that’s my dream come true really,” Womack said. “I did wanna be a rich and famous rock star, and that didn’t happen. But also part of what I wanted to do was be somebody that contributed something that lasted to the climate, to the culture I was around, and we’ve done that.”

Government Cheese got together for sold-out reunion shows in Nashville and Louisville earlier this year. The band recently finished recording their first album in 25 years.

Womack said he is thrilled to have the opportunity to write a new chapter of Government Cheese history, a defining part of his youth.

“In this business, longevity means everything,” he said. “No matter how uncool you are when you’re a year-old band or a 2-year-old band. By the time you’re a 7-year-old band people respect you just because you keep getting up every time you’re knocked down. It will work that way for Cage the Elephant. It will for that way for Sleeper Agent. Anyone who sticks around for long enough.”

Within the past decade, Bowling Green has proved to be a consistent producer of indie rock talent.

Cage the Elephant paved the way, gaining legions of fans in America and abroad for high-energy performances and a distinctive punk-rock sound that fans connect with The Pixies and grunge rock superstars Nirvana. Cage the Elephant’s song “Aberdeen” is an ode to the Washington town where Kurt Cobain grew up.

Bowling Green based psychedelic rock outfit Morning Teleportation caught the

eye of Modest Mouse front man Isaac Brock after the band moved to Portland, Oregon. The well-received debut album, “Expanding Anyway,” was released on Brock’s label Glacial Pace Recordings in 2011. Sleeper Agent followed later in 2011 with its debut “Celebrasion,” a collection of fuzzy, fast-paced teenage rock anthems. The buzz generated by the band’s first album led to tours with Weezer, Fun, Grouplove, Ben Kweller and other respected acts, as well as an appearance at the 2012 Coachella Valley Arts and Music Festival.

The consistent outpouring of talent proved Cage the Elephant’s ascent to prominence was no fluke, but also left many scratching their heads and asking why this unassuming Southern town had become a consistent producer of shiny red corvettes and indie rock talent.

Many have noted Bowling Green’s potential to become the next Athens, Georgia or Omaha, Nebraska, both home to sprawling music scenes that have created long-standing cultures of generating musical talent.

Sleeper Agent bassist Lee Williams has been a part of the Bowling Green music scene since his early adolescence, and has watched it flourish. Williams was hesitant at first to compare Bowling Green with other established music scenes, but he said that is quickly changing.

“People have been saying for years, since Cage really started picking up momentum, that Bowling Green’s music scene was going to be one that people wrote about and remembered like Seattle’s or Athens, Georgia’s,” Williams said.

“For a long time, I thought it was silly of people to be writing history while it was happening like that. But now that more time has gone, I’m starting to believe that those

people might be right, or at least close, and we are all really lucky to have a community like this.”

Bowling Green’s Tony Smith dreamed about a history on top of the music scene in Nashville.

Growing up in the Bowling Green music scene, Smith cut his teeth playing rock ‘n’ roll in basements and small venues in his hometown as a teenager.

But he waited for the day when he could grace the stage of a venue in Nashville. That’d be the day he knew he had arrived.

Smith said the small-town feel of Bowling Green often had him longing for something more.

“It’s boring,” he said. “If you’re not in a band, if you’re not creating some kind of idea or doing something, you’re probably going to school or working a job. I think the creativity comes from being antsy and wanting to do something.”

Smith spent his formative years fronting bands like Such Tall Buildings, The Decade of Experts and Assassins and Downtown Handshake. He was immersed in a Bowling Green music scene that includes the likes of Cage the Elephant, Morning Teleportation and the emerging Buffalo Rodeo.

“As a teenager, I always wanted to play Nashville — it was everything to me,” said Smith, a 2010 WKU graduate with a degree in advertising. “If you’re going to make it, you have to play Nashville. They wouldn’t book my band or anything.”

Smith said attending shows in Nashville inspired him. He’d try to channel the energy he saw.

“We’d go to a lot of shows in Nashville, and we’d take it to Bowling Green and

we'd try to duplicate it," he said.

Despite the rejection, Smith trudges ahead in his creative endeavors. Smith said the Bowling Green music scene he grew up with had been hungry for attention in regard to its musical talent for some time.

"Maybe Bowling Green feels a little shunned," he said. "We're important too. We've got music and ideas and we're gonna do it, 'So fuck you.' That's kind of the mentality."

Daniel Shultz, the youngest brother of Cage the Elephant's Matt and Brad Shultz, has continued the family tradition and now fronts local rock band, Maëlle.

Shultz said playing in Nashville is an essential step for a Bowling Green band trying to gain exposure. Maëlle's first show in Nashville was at the High Watt on Cannery Row. He said while some bands are unfamiliar with Bowling Green, often people are aware of the town's musical roots as "a little fantasy land for musicians."

"It's a big thing like for a Bowling Green band playing Nashville for the first time," Shultz said. "But once you eventually keep going and you're playing like Atlanta or whatever, Nashville is still always there and in your heart."

Shultz, 18, has already played popular summer music festival Lollapalooza, playing bass for his cousin Kane Stewart's band Plastic Visions in Chicago in July.

Watching his brothers find fame with Cage the Elephant was influential for Shultz, but he said he isn't interested in trying to ride his brothers' coattails to find a career of his own. But he does intend to carry on the family's legacy of musicianship.

"It's a good kind of pressure," Shultz said. "I can't just be some shitty band and be like 'Oh yeah, my brothers are in Cage the Elephant, sign me!"

“My brothers want me to work for it, and I want to, too. I want to experience everything there is to experience when you’re working for your music, your craft.”

Shultz cannot offer a definitive answer as to why Bowling Green developed into a musical hub.

“I think about that every day,” he said. “It’s like, ‘Why Bowling Green?’ You know I don’t understand it, but I love it.”

Shultz remains focused on making a lasting impression on the local music scene like his brothers have, but most important, he wants artistry in Bowling Green to continue to prosper.

“I just want this to thrive,” he said. “I want there to be something for generations and generations. I just want this town to grow musically and as a community and everything.”

To longtime Bowling Green residents disconnected with the local music scene, the bar at 522 Morris Alley is still sometimes referred to as the old Parakeet Café building. However, the two-story brick structure is now home to Tidball’s, one of Bowling Green’s few live music venues, and one considered by many to be the epicenter of the local music scene.

John Tidball and his business partner, Brian Jarvis, both Springfield, Tennessee, natives, opened the bar in 2001. In the 13 years since, the venue has developed a loyal, local following and a reputation for consistently showcasing and promoting local talent. Jarvis said that Bowling Green wasn’t the Southeast music hub it has developed into when the bar opened.

“When we opened, we were just trying to find someone that was not going to run people off,” he said. “We also tried to base this place off of original music, not covers, not like every other place you would go to. We wanted bands to bring their material, put a lot more heart and effort into it.”

Tidball’s draws acts from across the Southeast, but Jarvis said giving a platform for local music to thrive is always at the forefront.

“Every night we have live music we want to have a local band, because that’s really what we’re all about,” he said.

Jarvis said regulars of Tidball’s are extremely faithful to local artists.

“This city and its patrons are very loyal to the Bowling Green music scene,” he said. “They are more in tune to listen to that local band and give them their attention a lot quicker than they will somebody from out of town. We always try to include local bands on every bill or gig.”

Jarvis vividly recalls Cage the Elephant, then “five kids that had long stringy hair,” playing their first show at Tidball’s.

In the beginning, Jarvis wasn’t exactly a fan.

“When they first played their music it was so different, so in your face out there,” he said. “They would do crazy shit. Climb on the speakers and play, climb on the balcony and hang from the chain.”

Jarvis said it wasn’t long before Cage perfected captivating, high-energy sets.

“Looking back on it now, it’s like these guys kind of knew what they were doing,” he said. “As soon as they would start to play the crowd was zoned in. Whoever

was here, their eyes were on the stage. People were just crazy over them. Eventually, you would see why. Their stage presence is just amazing.”

Jarvis said Tidball’s is extremely appreciative of the exposure they’ve gotten since Cage the Elephant has found fame and name-dropped the venue in numerous interviews, including with Rolling Stone.

“It’s funny how the roles change,” he said. “In the beginning, we kind of put them under our wing, and now they’ve always kind of looked out for us. Sent us people, spoke well of us.”

Jarvis said Tidball’s has far exceeded expectations since their 2001 opening. “We had a goal when we opened — we want to do this for three or four years and get our money back,” he said. “We saw that there was something kind of special here.”

Tidball’s has no intention of closing anytime soon, but the venue will leave an indelible impression on those who frequent the space, Jarvis said.

“We love Bowling Green and we’re here until we decide not to be here,” he said. “We’ll be here until John and I decide to call it quits. Before, everyone always knew it as the old Parakeet building. Well, in five or 10 years, or however long, they won’t know it as the old Parakeet. It’ll be known as the old Tidball’s building.”

Womack said it’s no surprise Bowling Green emerged as a hotbed of indie rock talent.

“Bowling Green has always been a very fertile musical town,” he said. “It’s like you have to turn over a wooden board laying in the ground and all these little things scurry from underneath the board. That’s the Bowling Green music scene. It’s not

advertised big on billboards coming into town. You kinda have to be there and get to know people and figure out where the places are and what the scene is. There's something in the water in Bowling Green. There's always been great music in this town.

“There's a certain Buddhist grace to Bowling Green. It's in the quality of life, not just in the music. It's a certain mellow, enjoyable vibe. It's Kentucky's own Mayberry on mushrooms.”

Throughout my fieldwork spanning the course of this semester, I talked to veteran musicians, fledgling musicians, a co-owner of a popular music venue in Bowling Green and those who participate in the local scene by supporting Bowling Green artists. My interviews gave me varied perspectives and stories about Bowling Green music throughout the decades. Family lineage with music and a history of supportive local venues were patterns I discovered throughout my fieldwork. While several artists noted that the boredom they experienced growing up in Bowling Green served as an impetus to make music, Womack noted that Bowling Green's unique small town feel makes it conducive for artists to thrive. A big underlying theme that shone through throughout each of my interviews was the tight-knit nature of the Bowling Green music scene. Artists noted that the camaraderie is a driving force within the music scene and something that distinguishes it from music scenes throughout the country.

Works Cited

Jarvis, Brian. Interview by author. Recorded interview. Bowling Green, Ky., November 11, 2014.

Reynolds, Jordan. Interview by author. Recorded interview. Bowling Green, Ky., October 22, 2014.

Shultz, Daniel. Interview by author. Recorded interview. Bowling Green, Ky. October 15, 2014.

Smith, Tony. Interview by author. Phone interview. Bowling Green, Ky., March 15, 2014.

Womack, Tommy. Interview by author. Recorded interview. Nashville, October 22, 2014.

Williams, Lee. Interview by author. Recorded interview. Bowling Green, Ky., October 3, 2014.