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### Hot Topic: CMJ Checks In With Some Of The Music World's Most High Profile Causes

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By Michael Tedder



CMJ ARCHIVE FOR

A few years ago, a benefit concert was organized to raise money for former Saves The Day bassist, Sean McGrath, and his accruing medical bills. Years after the event's financial success, friend and benefit organizer, Bruce McDonald, went on to create McGrath's memorial fund and began e-mailing his music industry friends and contacts. One of his contacts, McDonald says, "replied to my e-mail saying, 'Oh my God, I remember that benefit, I always wondered what happened to Sean.'" Though unfortunate, it is not uncommon for a worthy cause to make a big splash only to gradually diminish in profile, if not in magnitude, over time. McGrath's battle with cancer was just one of many causes that has captured the attention of the music community at some point in the recent past. Inspired by the creation of the The Sean McGrath Fund, here is an update on several music-related causes to serve as a reminder of what music can accomplish.

#### The Sean McGrath Fund

Sean McGrath always wanted to give back. McGrath was a founding member of Saves The Day, and after leaving the pioneering emo heroes he went on to play with groups such as The Alps, Hands Tied and Mouthpiece. After he discovered he had intestinal cancer in 2002, McDonald helped organize the "Hold On To Your Friends" benefit show to help with medical bills. The fact that so many people—including bands like Thursday, Midtown and groups whose members he didn't even know personally, like Taking Back Sunday—cared enough to reach out raised McGrath's spirits, and he was determined to pay back this kindness by helping other people just as soon as he was better.

Because he had a rare form of cancer that grew on the inside of his digestive track, McGrath was initially misdiagnosed with

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jaundice. When he went to get what he was told would be a simple liver operation, "the moment they cut him open they stitched him back up," McDonald says, "because the cancer was so extensive, that they weren't prepared to take care of it. So the next day I got a call from a friend, 'Sean actually has cancer,' and I was absolutely floored, because he was so healthy, so vibrant and he still played music."

After the "Hold On To Your Friends" benefit, McDonald continued to hold one-off benefits to help with his friend's medical bills. McDonald, a former supervising producer at Fuse, had met McGrath when they both worked at MTV. They quickly bonded over a shared love of punk and charity work, and before long were inseparable, even taking sketch comedy classes together. When McGrath moved back in with his parents, McDonald moved in as well to help care for his friend. Sadly, McGrath passed away two years to the day of that first benefit. By the end of his wake, McDonald and Jessica Shapiro, McGrath's fiancé, decided that since he wasn't going to be able to give back, it was up to them to do it for him.

"I'm not nearly as emotional about it anymore. It's still a terrible, sad loss, and I always wonder what his hair cut would have been this week or if we would have done more comedy classes together, maybe we would have written something together," McDonald says of his friend. "But I can't really be in the business of what ifs." Instead, McDonald prefers to think about what he can do for his friend's memory. McGrath was frugal with the money raised for him, and when he died there was \$20,000 left in his fund, which his parents insisted be used for charitable purposes rather than final expenses. After a period of mourning, McDonald and Shapiro approached the Princeton Area Community Foundation to set up The Sean McGrath Fund.

The Fund's mission is to support not only youth cancer prevention organizations, but also causes that were close to McGrath's heart like music education and animal rights, with an eye towards picking smaller organizations that could greatly benefit from financial support. It officially launched this year on McGrath's birthday, January 27, with McDonald announcing that he was going to attempt to raise \$32 a week to commemorate what would have been McGrath's age this year. "Even guys in band t-shirts scrounging together beer money can still probably afford 32 bucks," McDonald says. The community foundation told McDonald that a day after he e-mailed the announcement they had a record number of donations. To date, The Sean McGrath Fund has raised more than \$1,500, and McDonald has gotten enough encouraging responses from managers that's he's hoping to turn "Hold On To Your Friends" into a regular series of benefit concerts. Additionally, Taking Back Sunday has volunteered to donate proceeds from an upcoming concert to the fund, and Thursday frontman Geoff Rickly said his band would love to get involved with the Fund.

"When we were offered the opportunity to help him we jumped at it," says Rickly. "I remember standing on the side of the stage watching Taking Back Sunday with Sean and Bruce, and just laughing because we were having such a good time. Sean was one of us, a young musician just making his way in the world. We see how vulnerable we all are. I hope my friends would be there for me."

### **Home Alive**

Shortly after its members moved to Seattle in the early '90s, The Gits developed a reputation as a must-see live act, in large part due to their magnetic singer Mia Zapata. With their fierce energy and Zapata's charisma, coupled with the attention on Seattle at the time, the group's breakthrough seemed inevitable.

When Zapata's body was discovered in the Capitol Hill area of Seattle on July 7, 1993 it marked the beginning of the end of an era for the Seattle music scene, and the start of a mission. Zapata's death—she had been found raped, strangled and abandoned on the street—horrified and galvanized the Seattle scene. Worried that the death of their friend would go unsolved by the Seattle police, Zapata's band mates and other members of the scene banded together to hire a private investigator to solve the case.

Then rock legend Joan Jett, who at the time was producing songs for Bikini Kill, collaborated on a song about Zapata's death with Bikini Kill front woman Kathleen Hanna entitled "Go Home." When the remaining members of The Gits contacted Jett about playing a benefit show, it led to her helping raise money for the investigation by touring with the remaining Gits as the band Evil Stig, which then led to a benefit live album on Warner Brothers in 1995. Jett has also discussed the case on *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted*.

"I know from inside that feeling of having people that you care about, and music that you care about, and a mission where you feel like you're going to change the world and do something," Jett says, "and I cannot fathom what that must have felt like to have that just stopped, and lose such a great, creative beautiful soul. When this happened," Jett adds, "you've got to remember that they didn't know if it was someone from outside the community, they didn't know if it was the person sitting next to them at the bar. So that element, I think, slowly tore the whole community apart."

Jett's longtime manager and collaborator Kenny Laguna, who produced the Evil Stig album, says that while he and Jett consider themselves "supporters of the police," they thought it was important to get involved in the investigation. "You'd be amazed what doesn't get paid attention to," Laguna says.

"Unfortunately, rapes and rape-murders don't always have the same priority as some of the other crimes."

After years of no leads in the case, advances in DNA testing technology enabled Seattle's cold case unit to match DNA evidence taken from Zapata's body to Florida fisherman Jesus Mezquia, who lived in Seattle at the time and had a history of violence against women. On March 25, 2004, he was sentenced to 37 years in prison for Zapata's murder.

Laguna says that Zapata's loved ones "never gave it up. Their mission in life was to get the guy," he says, noting that when Mezquia was convicted "We got a text message from (drummer Steve Moriarty) that just said, 'We got him.' The private eye who was working on it at one point called me and said, 'If you guys hadn't done all that work, that might not had happened.'" I give the most credit to the community and to the band. The Gits had a magic... and they loved each other. They were kids, and their whole lives got stopped right there. They're just not the same because of what happened."

Though Zapata may be gone, her legacy continues to live on, and not just through her music or the upcoming documentary, *The Gits* (to be screened this summer). The non-profit organization Home Alive, started in response to Zapata's death, offers sliding scale self-defense classes to the Seattle community. And all of the instructors are not only trained in how to teach martial arts, but they are taught how to tell Mia's story before every class. "Mia's death was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back," says Becka Tilsen, program director for Home Alive. "That brought people together to really look at the state of violence in their own communities, in their own lives, in their childhood and to create something that could address violence on a continuum."

Home Alive, which started with a focus on teaching self-defense to women before growing to include men and transgender people, holds seminars at women's shelters, schools, community centers, union halls and more. One of the main impetuses for the group, Tilsen says, is not just to teach self-defense, but to break down common myths found in many self-defense courses. "People still hear it all the time that wearing x, y or z clothing will get x, y or z violence happening to you," Tilsen says. "So the implication is that we have to change our appearance and fit gender stereotypes in order to be safe... and a lot of the messages are not backed up by actual, reported incidences of violence."

Home Alive has weathered a reduction in large donations from musicians and a large-scale staff lay-off several years ago. It since has recovered to have three full-time staff members again and has fundraisers with local bands and music venues. Despite the financial hardships, Tilsen says the group is as popular as

ever, with more requests for classes than they can meet. It also saw a renewed interest from the community following a series of recent gay bashing and attacks on young women in the Seattle area. "Though we have not been able to fully meet the demand," explains Tilsen, "we've been able to triple our class load in the last few months. That's a huge increase for our little operation and I am proud of that."

### **Sweet Relief**

The internet has been a mixed blessing to the Sweet Relief Musicians Fund. Even though the group was kicked off Facebook—apparently organizations are not allowed to have a profile on the site—JoAnne Klabin, Managing Director of the Sweet Relief Musicians Fund, says the web makes it easier for musicians in need of financial assistance to discover and contact them. Unfortunately, the same telecommunications highway that's made it easier for Sweet Relief to find those in need has also played a part in the financial downturn of the industry that makes the support possible. "What is the music industry now? It's not what it was in 1994," Klabin says. "The good 'ol days when you could get a really generous donation from a major label are gone. You just have to keep being imaginative."

After songwriter Victoria Williams was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1992, artists such as Pearl Jam and Lou Reed contributed to a tribute album and benefit concerts to help her with medical bills. Two years later, the Sweet Relief group was formed with Williams' wish to give back by providing financial assistance to other musicians who were unable to pay for medical treatment. Though Williams is no longer involved in the organization (she declined to be interviewed for this piece, and Klabin declined to comment on the singer's current health condition), Sweet Relief continues to hew to her vision. The organization, run by a grant committee of volunteers from the music industry, followed up the Williams tribute album with a covers album benefiting songwriter Vic Chesnutt in 1996. Since then, Klabin says "the industry changed a lot. And it was considered by the board not sufficiently lucrative to do another record."

Now the group mainly relies on the generosity of music fans and artists, and the willingness of artists' managers to pass along donation requests to their clients, which is "kind of hit and miss" according to Klabin. "We'll ask bands for great seats to a show or meet-and-greet tickets, then we'll auction those to fans," Klabin explains. "That's our main fundraising effort at the moment." Klabin says that L.A. punk legends X donated tickets and meet-and-greets for all of the dates on their upcoming 31st anniversary tour, and Tegan And Sara donated two dollars from each ticket sold from a recent concert date.

Sweet Relief, Klabin says, gets most of its applicants from

charities such as Music Cares and the Jazz Foundation. It is also launching a health education initiative to encourage musicians to get regular preventative vision and hearing exams, and offer stipends for musicians that cannot afford the exams. "People don't realize," says Klabin, "that a lot of the people we help aren't capable of working at the moment, or their careers were 30, 40 years ago."

### **The Callum Robbins Fund**

When Kim Coletta heard that her good friend and former Jawbox bandmate James "J." Robbins' eight-month old son Callum was diagnosed with the debilitating motor neuron disease Type 1 Spinal Muscular Atrophy, she knew she had to help. The Desoto Records head set up a page on her label's site and asked for donations through PayPal to offset Robbins' mounting medical costs. "The only thing I did to publicize it was send an email out to the DeSoto Records listserve," Coletta says. "It went live one night and in the morning I checked up on it. My jaw almost hit the ground when I saw the donations pouring in."

SMA affects about one in 6,000 infants, according to the Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy organization; it typically weakens the muscles needed for activities such as swallowing, walking, breathing and neck control. Children with the disease have a typical life expectancy of two years, those that survive face a financially-demanding life of physical therapy and machine-assisted living.

Callum's story spread across the internet and the independent music community. Fans and friends of Robbins—who plays in the group Channels and has produced records for Against Me!, Pilots To Gunner, Murder By Death and many more—were determined to help. Members of Shellac, The Evens and Shudder To Think, among others, donated rare albums and memorabilia to be auctioned for Callum's benefit. And The Dismemberment Plan, who were signed to Desoto and produced by Robbins, reunited for a pair of benefit shows.

"I just have to say we feel incredibly lucky that people have been so supportive. It just kind of blows us away when people that we don't know have reached out to us, we're pretty much speechless about it," Robbins says. "Neither Janet (his wife and Callum's mother) nor I are religious in any way, but there's definitely a... I hesitate to use words like this, but there's almost a spiritual side to it. There's an energy at work that's really amazing to us." Robbins said the money raised has been used to pay for Callum to receive Chronologically Controlled Developmental Therapy from the Futures Unlimited center in Mississippi. The therapy has allowed Callum to develop muscle tone and stay healthy. "When we came back from Futures Unlimited the first time, we were in the motel, and (Callum)

was on the bed and he rolled himself onto his back from the sideline position," Robbins says. "And that was something that we didn't think he was capable of doing. And we can see every time that we go down there that he's just kind of like revitalized."

Robbins says that his now two year-old son is a voracious reader with "an amazing personality and an incredible intellect." It is too overwhelming to think about the future and the mounting costs that will come from wheelchairs, specialty transportation and further treatments, he says. He can already see his son becoming frustrated with his physical limitations, and even catching a simple cold from his cousin recently resulted in a nine-day hospital stay. Instead, he prefers to be grateful for the compassion shown to him both by music fans and the community of parents of children with SMA: "The support that we've had has made things much more possible than it ever would have been without it."

### **The West Memphis Three**

There was a time, she calls it the early days of the internet, when so little information was available about the West Memphis Three that Lisa Fancher— who runs the L.A.-based Frontier Records— said she actually thought they had already been let out of jail. But this assumption was one of many things that changed for Fancher when she saw the 1996 documentary *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*.

Paradise recounts the arrest and trial of the Three— Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley— for the 1993 murder of three 8-year-old boys in Jonesboro, Memphis. The Emmy-winning film depicts what many have called a miscarriage of justice. Among the most notable scenes are the three young men being accused of participating in Satanic rituals because they enjoyed the works of Metallica and Stephen King, and "expert" testimony from an occult specialist with a mail-order degree from a discredited college.

"I didn't really think about it that much," says Fancher, who now volunteers for the Free The West Memphis Three Support Group. "And then a year later a friend of mine told me she was watching Court TV and saw Damien and he was suing the prison because he was being abused by the other inmates. At that point then I really felt sick to my stomach that I hadn't done anything about it."

Fancher soon got heavily involved in the West Memphis Three case. And she wasn't alone. In years since the case and the documentary, celebrities such as Eddie Vedder, The Supersuckers, Winona Ryder, Natalie Maines, Margaret Cho, Trey Parker and Alkaline Trio have publicly voiced support for the Three, and many have written songs, played benefit concerts

or donated to the cause. But according to Fancher, no one has been a "soldier" for the three young men like Henry Rollins.

Like Fancher, Rollins said he was inspired to get involved after watching *Paradise*. He called the West Memphis Three support group to volunteer to help, and performed at a benefit show with Tom Waits and Bad Religion. But Rollins said that he was so deeply affected by the case that he felt the need to make "a statement" with a tour and album.

"It really just got me going," says Rollins, "because I saw myself in those three guys. 'Oh well, this guy sat in his room and moped around a lot. He must be evil!' Well, that's me! I sat in my room and moped around, and I don't think that I'm all that evil. And the more I read about the case, it just really bugged me. You know, these three guys are sitting in jail. The horror, the sheer horror, of the idea of sitting in jail for life for something you didn't do. I could not, in good conscience, walk away from that."

Rollins released a benefit album, *Rise Above: 24 Black Flag Songs to Benefit the West Memphis Three*, that featured Mike Patton, Iggy Pop, Tom Araya (Slayer) and many more covering songs from Rollins' first group, Black Flag. Rollins then went on a benefit tour performing Black Flag songs for the first time since that band disbanded.

All of the money raised from the tour and album went to pay for new testing of DNA retrieved from the murder scene. Though Fancher declined to give a specific number, she put the cost of the new testing in the neighborhood of "hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pretty much everything Henry has done has gone to DNA testing. It's made a huge, huge impact... that's the stuff that's going to get the guys out."

After years of legal maneuverings, this September the Three will get a new hearing that will allow their lawyers to submit new tests of the DNA found at the Jonesboro, Memphis murder scene. Fancher and the rest of their supporters believe that this evidence will exonerate the trio, as they say that none of the Three's DNA matches the DNA retrieved from the scene.

"It doesn't match. Anything that they have discovered thus far does not match the West Memphis Three," says Fancher. Though she admits that she doesn't believe that Judge David Burnett will "change his mind and suddenly go 'Oh yeah, they're innocent,' because it just hasn't been like that ever," she does feel the new evidence will be enough to help the Three's supporters push for a new trial. Which, in her opinion, "couldn't come soon enough."

Fancher says that Echols health is rapidly deteriorating in prison, while Misskelley keeps to himself and Baldwin works at

the library, has become a favorite of the guards and is an unofficial counselor to new prisoners. Rollins said he communicates with the boys and the progress being made keeps their spirits raised. But not everybody was happy about the work Rollins was doing. When the benefit tour reached Nashville, the owner of the venue wanted to cancel the show because of local protests. Later, Rollins conversed with one of the mothers of the murdered boys for a local news taping.

"And the news crews are there waiting for the fight to start and they were very disappointed when she hugged me and thanked me for what I was doing," Rollins says. "I told her, 'Well, you might not believe me, but I can't describe to you how badly I feel about what happened to you and your son.' I can't bring those kids back to life, but ...there are these three people sitting in jail who did not get, in my opinion, due process. And you've got to police that. America has kind of sunk unless we all are always minding that store," he says. "You gotta care."

*If you would like to donate or get involved with any of the causes mentioned in this article, feel free to contact them at the following addresses:*

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