

The Battle of the Bands

By Sean Michaels.

Illustration by PASCAL GIRARD.

I'VE NEVER FORGOTTEN and I can't remember that Battle of the Bands in 2001. It was a freezing winter evening, one of those April nights when Montreal disregards the spring and fills the sky with snow. I remember this. I remember the wind. I remember ducking into the Cabaret Juste Pour Rire, at Sherbrooke and St. Laurent, and seeing a bunch of nobodies make a racket.

We all have our mile-markers—moments we look back on to measure how far we've come, how different the light. First kisses, parting looks, the last time the whole gang got together. For me, there's always been this stupid Battle of the Bands. I do not remember the name of the group that won. Nobody seems to remember the name of the group that won. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered, in the end, was one of the opponents.

That opponent was Arcade Fire.

Who lost.

"It was the birth of a scene." These are the words of Ian Ratzer. I found him using Google. Ian was at the Cabaret that night; he was in the group that came third, a funk-jam band called Euphoric Side-Effects. He recalls the way Arcade Fire braided Christmas lights across the stage. He doesn't recall frontman Win Butler's cowboy hat. (I am certain Win wore a cowboy hat.)

When I write to Win, he doesn't talk about headwear. But he remembers the show: he had only just moved to town, from Massachusetts. It was the first time he performed with his now-wife, Régine Chassagne. "The drummer was a kid from McGill jazz school who only played that one show, but Dane Mills was in the crowd and joined the band after that," he says. These are the details that stayed with him. "I think we came in third after two different funk bands." Arcade Fire actually came fifth, as far as Ian and I can figure out. They played country-tinged folk songs. Régine wore glowing deerie-bobbers.



Sean Michaels founded the blog *Said the Gramophone*. His previous story for *Maisonneuve* was "Knights of Griffintown" (Issue 37).

The reason I came to the Cabaret that night was to see an excellent and funny folk-pop trio, Bear Left. The band's expectations were low, recalls singer Howie Kislowicz—to "play a bigger stage" and reach a new audience. Bear Left finished fourth. "I can't remember the name of the band that won," Howie confesses, "and I don't even know if they played another show after that."

They didn't. The winners were a seven-piece funk band that was probably called Gzel Sol but that may have been called Ma Beans and Her Dirty Funk. "We were sort of a late invite—I think another band dropped out," recalls guitarist Sam Sewall. After using the grand prize—studio time—to record a four-song EP, the group never performed again.

Despite Ian's contention that the Battle was a landmark event for the Montreal music scene, very few of its participants are professional musicians today. Ian is a video-game pro-

grammer, Sam coordinates a chem lab, Howie is finishing a doctorate in law. (His new band, *What Does It Eat*, released an album last year.)

Win is a worldwide rock star.

None of them dwell on that night in 2001. Only I do. I am the only one who looks back at that Battle when he is counting the days, measuring progress. *I was there, then; I am here, now.* The rest describe it as a distant recollection, a dinner-party anecdote, nothing more. They do not speak of mile-markers and how-far. They do not sit and think: *I am thirty now, a writer, and happy; and how was I before? How was I that time I saw Arcade Fire at the Battle of the Bands? How far have I traveled?*

They are wiser, I suppose, or better adjusted. They have more sensible monuments. It's strange that we don't get to choose. ♪

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