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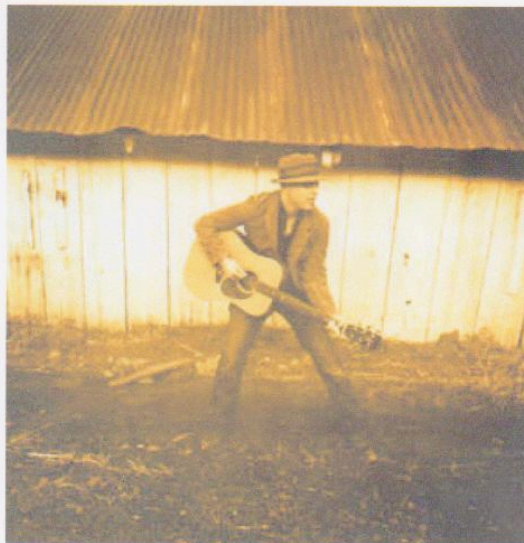
SLO Musicians Seek Success Outside the Area

By Patrick S. Pemberton | ppemberton@thetribunenews.com

Back when he was an English major at Cal Poly, Matt Ward would pack up his guitar and head to Linnaea's coffee house for a mellow gig before a handful of people.

A decade later, Ward has received much more exposure, having recently performed on "The Late Show with David Letterman," "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" and "Austin City Limits." But for Ward, success didn't occur until he left San Luis Obispo, adding credence to a common perception: If you're a local musician and you want to make it in the music business, you have to move.

"I don't know anyone who stuck around SLO and got famous," said Daniel Whittington, the former front man for the band Rhodes, who now lives in Austin, Texas.



Daniel Whittington, former frontman for Rhodes, doesn't 'know anyone who stuck around SLO and got famous.'
 Daniel Whittington courtesy photo Ticket 8-20-09

Taking a look at San Luis Obispo's music scene, that statement seems to ring true. And it isn't for lack of talent.

"For such a small town, San Luis has an incredible amount of music talent," Whittington said. "Almost to the point of being surreal."

With that in mind, it might be surprising to learn that so few musicians from San Luis Obispo actually become household names.

Jon Anderson, lead singer of Yes, is the county's most well-known musician. But he moved to the county well after he became successful. Guitarist Peter Buck briefly lived in San Luis Obispo, but that was a few years before he became famous with R. E. M.

Not that there haven't been success stories. A few years ago, Damon Castillo landed a publishing deal with Warner/Chappell Music while living in San Luis Obispo. Still, his musician twin Dominic Castillo—despite a decent local following—ultimately decided to move to Portland for a change of scenery and bigger crowds.

"A lot of people are into going out and seeing live music here," Dominic Castillo said. "Here, going to see a band is a common activity."

Tough to make a living

While the Central Coast offers ideal living conditions, it's not always an easy place for musicians trying to eke out a living. While Rhodes scored a big gig opening for Aerosmith at the Mid-State Fair in 2007, Whittington said it was hard to draw crowds otherwise.

"In SLO, if you're not part of some event that's already occurring, no one even bothers," he said. "So basically, people in San Luis care about music only if it fits into their existing plans."

Even Castillo, one of the more well-known musicians in the county, had trouble drawing crowds.

"It was up and down," Castillo said. "Very inconsistent."

For some bands, bigger crowds can be found simply by seeking out a bigger city. That's what the guys from Two a Day did six years ago when they moved to Seattle.

"We wanted to be in a bigger market and a bigger city in general," said lead singer Joe Cassese. "We thought it'd be tough to get noticed in San Luis."

The band Scissors for Lefty, which has opened for Arctic Monkeys and The Smashing Pumpkins, and solo act Travis Warren, who briefly became the lead singer of Blind Melon, clearly fared better after leaving the county.

But that doesn't mean a band can't survive in San Luis Obispo.

Lucas Ohio, who began playing music with his band The Shamblers while studying at Cal Poly, played gigs regularly.

"You can develop a strong, local following in a relatively short time if you put your work into it," said Ohio, who now lives in the Bay area.

While Ward is enjoying his success a decade after leaving San Luis Obispo, he doesn't think his higher profile is linked to moving.

“My opinion is that there’s no formula to follow —no rules for how to make your career,” he wrote in an e-mail. “No matter what you are doing, anything can happen anywhere.”

The band Sherwood seems to back that.

Sherwood, which has scored a deal with My- Space Records and has toured the world, started making their push while living in San Luis Obispo. The band built its audience via the Internet—which they accessed from the library at Cal Poly.

Today they are touring with Better Than Ezra.

Good place to learn

Thanks to his collaboration with actress Zooey Deschanel, Ward’s recent albums have sold more than 120,000 copies apiece. And he has worked with successful artists such as Norah Jones and My Morning Jacket. The Ventura native left for Portland, he said, more out of curiosity than career advancement.

He didn’t even expect to make it big in the music business.

“It’s not something I thought about at all, really.”

Ward (who performs as M. Ward) spent a lot of time at KCPR in the 1990s and said San Luis Obispo was a good place to learn his craft.

“The community of musicians exposed me to a lot of different kinds of music ... the artists that I met in San Luis Obispo are still my main collaborators — people like Adam Selzer, John King and Dana Bruington.”

When career and family obligations forced other members of The Shamblers to go separate ways, Ohio considered moving to Nashville to pursue a music career.

“I just kind of felt like it was time to move on,” he said.

While he visited Nashville and played several gigs there, he ultimately decided to return to the Bay Area, where he’s from.

“I need my friends around,” he said.

Shortly after moving to the Bay Area, Ohio got his song “All Good People,” on a popular compilation CD put out by radio station KFOG. (The compilation also features a song by Scissors for Lefty.) He hooked up with a trio of musicians that has played music in the area for 25 years, and renamed his band Lucas Ohio and the Shamblers.

“I’m getting a pretty big jump start on my beginning chapter here,” he said.

Meanwhile, Castillo changed the name of his band from Dominic Castillo and the Rock Savants to the Ravishers.

“The new name actually fits on marquees,” Castillo joked.

The band is now playing regularly in the Pacific Northwest.

“Within the first week, we were having gigs given to us,” he said.

After one gig, he said, 20 musician friends joined him onstage.

“That’s something that might have been tough back home,” he said. “I don’t even know if I knew that many people.”

One night, Cassese was walking through Seattle and saw that Castillo was playing at a club there. After moving to the Pacific Northwest himself, Cassese’s band, Two A Day, actually broke up when two band members gave up on playing live music. But Cassese and his brother, Nick, teamed up with a third musician, Sam Larson, and formed Surrounded by Breakers, which recently recorded new music. They continue to perform in the Seattle area.

For a time Whittington drove down to L. A. regularly, performing at popular clubs, like the Whiskey a Go Go. But he decided the scene wasn’t right for him.

“I would play at the Whiskey, and there would be like six or seven bands, and they would all be in the green room, very aggressively ignoring each other,” he said.

Eventually, he returned to his home state, where his music has taken on an acoustic, Texas flavor. Austin, he said, is a place where bands support each other and people make an effort to see live music.

And that’s not all: It’s also more affordable.

“I calculated our expenses and figured out by moving to Texas, after the first two months we were here, we saved about \$700 a month—without changing anything.”