
High fives for the Nines

Posted by Scott McLennan

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Walter Sickert & the Army of Broken Toys reflect the Nines festival's attention to visual arts as well as music (Caleb Cole photo)

To understand what the new Nines festival is all about, just look at the two Boston bands it chose to place on the bill: Air Traffic Controller and Walter Sickert & the Army of Broken Toys.

Sickert's army plays a roiling brand of music that pulls in a cabaret mood and cinematic scope, all of it coated with a sinister tinge. Air Traffic Controller deploys carefully crafted pop anchored by an earthy earnestness. And while quite different these two bands are on top of their games, touring the country, winning awards and ready to take the next career step.

The entire roster of performers at the Nines reads like a top shelf of independent-minded bands cutting across alt-pop, post-rock, hip-hop, and R&B.

The festival features Explosions in the Sky, Dr. Dog, Delta Spirit, Shuggie Otis, Matt Pond, Walk Off the Earth, Kid Koala, and K Flay plus Walter Sickert & the Army of Broken Toys and Air Traffic Controller. A comedy tent will feature six comics chosen by the Comedy Studio's Rick Jenkins. And there are several visual and performance artists presenting their work at the Nines. All of the participants (and ticket info) can be found on the Nines website.

"The Nines has a three-pronged attack that's like our shows. We are an amalgam of music, theater and the best circus you've ever seen," says Edrie, the accordion-wielding member of the Army of Broken Toys.

She and Sickert spoke by phone from the Toys' design lab and noted that they were also drawn to the festival's eclectic programming.

"When we put together our shows we don't like to have bands that necessarily always play together," Edrie says. "We like introducing our people to other crowds and getting other crowds to see what we do."

As for playing outside and during the day rather than in one of the clubs, art centers or mansions that more routinely house a show by this troupe, Sickert says the Nines will be business as usual_ which means expect the unusual.

"The Toys always play over the top anyway," he says. "It's always a question of how much can we jam into 45 minutes."

In addition to performing with his band, Walter Sickert will also have some of his artwork, including this piece, on display at the Nines

Air Traffic Controller successfully made the leap from clubs to the festival stage last year when it performed at the Life is good festival in Canton.

ATC's Dave Munro recalls not being sure how to read the crowd back then and simply hitting up the field of onlookers with the band's most upbeat and catchiest songs.

The Nines, by design, will be looking for Air Traffic Controller to be as adventurous as it wants, and Munro says he finds the lineup pretty inspiring.

"I would've gone to this festival myself if we weren't playing," he says.

Since releasing the album "Nordo" last year, Air Traffic Controller has seen its profile steadily rise. Most recently, the song "You Know Me" won an Independent Music Award for best indie/alt-rock song and the band won the Artist on the Verge award at the New Music Seminar held in New York City in June.

And even though Munro has started songs for a new album, he is focusing ATC on building the fan base via concert work, including festival shows and a fall tour of Europe.

"There is a time to write and a time to tour," he says. "This is a time for us to be out there playing."

And the festival experience is also becoming a good time for laughs. The Comedy Studio's Jenkins says that comedy has become such a successful component at music-centric events South by Southwest, Bumbershoot, and Bonnaroo, that he had no doubts about bringing the type of show he helms at the Harvard Square comedy club out to the Nines. But notes this will nonetheless be a bit of an experiment for him and the performers.

"The club seats 75. We'll be going out on a bigger stage and performing to a lot more people," he says. Jenkins is bringing along Erin Judge,

Ken Reid, Jenny Zigrino, Joe List, Bethany Van Delft, and Mehran Khaghani. This diverse cast will be divvied into two trios, each performing two sets.

Like the Boston Calling festival staged this spring and the aforementioned Life is good fest, the Nines is scheduling performances to avoid overlaps among the music stages, meaning there's no feeling like you're missing one thing while enjoying another.

"There should be even more festivals that include Boston bands," Sickert says. "There's so much talent in the city, and a lot of underutilized talent."

The gates to the Nines open at 11 a.m. on Aug. 10, with the action taking place at Willard Field in Devens.

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