



## Plotting the future of the creative economy in Portland

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**Barry Johnson, The Oregonian**



Motoya

Nakamura/Oregonian

Alicia Rose, when she was booking shows for Doug Fir in 2006.

Where is Portland's creative economy heading? This is a difficult time to ask that question because the future of the global economy is so uncertain. At this point, we don't know whether we're headed back where we left off 18 months ago or whether we're going somewhere completely new.

But that question is at the center of the **New Oregon Interview Series** put together by Nora Robertson, who is also the emcee, and Tiffany Lee Brown.

There are eight events in the series -- the first was last Wednesday night -- each covering a different area. Last week's was on music, and next month's will take a look at film. Books, food, performance, visual art, fashion and urban planning also are on the

schedule.

To figure out the direction and velocity of Portland's popular music scene, New Oregon invited Mississippi Studios co-owner Alicia Rose, band manager Slim Moon and hip-hop artist Mic Crenshaw to the first event.

Rose ran a music distributing business and booked bands for Doug Fir. Moon founded and for 15 years ran one of the Northwest's most important record labels, Kill Rock Stars. (Nirvana was on an early compilation disc; others on the roster included Bikini Kill, Elliott Smith, Sleater-Kinney and the Decemberists.) Crenshaw was a spoken-word artist and is now trying to start a charter high school focusing on recording arts.

The best way to plot the future of local popular music is to start with the present. The panelists agreed that Portland is rapidly becoming a major music center, if it wasn't already there. We've never had this many bands that are this good, with such widespread national and even international reputations.

How did this come about? Rose suggested a combination of factors. Portland is affordable. It's supportive of new bands and musicians. The scene has reached a point where it is attracting lots of people from out of

town. "Portland has made the transition from a town you left, and completely flipped to a town you come to."

Portland also values creativity over marketability, Crenshaw said: "The people who are really doing it and are really about it are doing it for reasons other than success." But that doesn't mean they aren't working at it. "There is a critical mass of people who are hustling hard," Crenshaw said. And there aren't, as Rose put it, a "bunch of janky dudes who really can't play anything."

The result, Moon said, is a society of middle-class bands, which he applauds. He said there was only one real rock star band in town and a large number of talented bands producing art and making a living. I'm not sure which band he thinks is the rock star band. The Decemberists? The Shins? The Dandy Warhols? Each has made major national waves at one time or another.

And if you don't follow these things, other local bands you should know about in Moon's "middle class" might include Viva Voce, Spoon, the Thermals, Blind Pilot, Blitzen Trapper, Modest Mouse, Menomena, Lifesavas and Gossip, still all the rage in the United Kingdom. And I know that list leaves out other important ones, such as Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks.

The panel spent more time talking about the present than the future, which is understandable given the state of the music business. The flood of CD money has subsided dramatically, by as much as 50percent, Moon said, and everyone is scrambling to figure out what the next step will be.

But this didn't seem to create a sense of panic on the panel. "People who love music will support it," Rose said, "and when you are doing something authentic, people will respond."

As Crenshaw put it, "It takes a community to create success." And more than anything, I think they trust the vitality and integrity of the city's music community.

**NOTE:** This post ran as a column in The Oregonian, Monday, June 29, 2009.

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