

Arts to benefit from growth Local music scene far from dead

BY NICK PARKER
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Last year the University arts community lost a champion.

Arts Carolina, a lauded program which organized, coordinated and advertised for the various arts on and around campus, was cut as a result of straining economic times.

Thus, the 2003-04 school year was markedly sparse of artistic expression.

Though programming continued both through the fine arts departments and student groups, promotion was spotty, events were humble and collaboration was nearly nonexistent.

Now, after a year of struggling with consistency and exposure, the arts community is looking toward the future to find hope.

"This past year was rough for all of us," said Ray Dooley, chairman of the Department of Dramatic Art. "The absence of Amy (Brannock, director of Arts Carolina) was obvious any time you looked around campus.

"We are trying to move on as a community and to continue growing. It's both scary and very exciting."

It's growth and change that could be a long time coming, but it is a professed priority of the administration.

Dooley will head a committee charged by Chancellor James Moeser on April 13 to locate an Executive Director of the Arts — a future position to be based in the Office of the Provost.

Much like Arts Carolina, the EDA will collaborate between the diverse fine arts departments and plan events which pull together all of their unique strengths.

The position also will be responsible for finding all programming for the major performance venues on campus, including Memorial Hall, which is slated to be reopened in the spring of 2005.

"The EDA is a position that I believe will radically change the arts on campus," Moeser said. "It will bring a new focus, enthusiasm and leadership that is crucial for the arts to flourish."

Perhaps the EDA's greatest responsibility, however, will not reach its completion until 50 years down the road.

The Arts Common, a massive plan which hopes to transform the

area around Hanes Art Center, is still just a dream.

After several decades of construction and an expected \$200 million budget, the area will — if the plan succeeds — become an arts hub, a central location for any conceivable fine arts function.

"It's a lofty goal but a very important one," said Steve Allred, associate provost for academic initiatives, who is heading the push for the Arts Common. "This will finally put a physical face to the vibrant arts community that is already here."

Upon completion, the Arts Common will feature an underground parking, a grass quad, renovations to existing structures, several completely new classroom and performance buildings and a central, vista-like area highlighting the individual strengths of the fine arts departments.

"I think that this could really turn into 'the Pit of north campus,'" Allred said. "Our dream is to have somewhere that every artist on campus feels like is a second home."

But the days of lounging in the grass next to a new Communications Studies building or admiring sculptures outside of a rejuvenated Hanes Art Center are still a long way off.

In order to better structure and fund the changes, the Arts Common plan has been broken down into several phases.

Phase I — which includes the construction of an underground parking deck and a new building for the Department of Music — hopefully will begin in the early months of 2006.

"We want to get this off the ground and running as soon as possible," Allred said. "But realistically, we need to make sure we are doing everything right and as affordably as possible, so this could take a while."

On Wednesday, Allred met with a planning committee to whittle down a long list of prospective contractors to a short set of finalists. At this point, the committee has a list of six architectural firms that possibly could take on the responsibility of Phase I construction.

A large panel of representatives ranging from the College of Arts and Sciences to the Buildings and Grounds Committee to the Office

of the Provost will interview the firms May 5 and make its decision shortly after.

That recommendation will go to the Buildings and Grounds Committee and the to the Board of Trustees for final approval on May 25.

But not even this year's freshman class will see the final results as students, as Phase I completion is estimated for 2009.

"If Phase I goes according to plan then it could really bode well for the entire project," Allred said. "A good start could really grease the wheels for what could be a very long road."

But planners are just trying to get the groundwork laid before setting their sites on the final goal.

The proposed music building will turn the existing Smith Hall into one wing of a larger, 80,000-square foot complex which will include a 650 seat performance auditorium and a 150 seat recital hall.

That building alone will cost an estimated \$28 million by itself, with \$20 million coming from bond money.

"Most of the funding for these projects will come from a combination of bond money and private contributions," Allred said. "I am sure that the EDA will be responsible for finding a lot of that money, working to try and get private donations."

Phase I also will include the construction of a new parking deck, to be housed completely underneath a new grass quad beside the music building.

The lot's 300 spots will be reserved entirely for visitor parking and the \$12 million project will be paid for out of its own parking fees.

It's a massive project made more of ideas and aspirations than brick-and-mortar. And, even if it goes without a hitch, the Master Plan will take more than 50 years to reach fruition. But at this point, it's all baby steps.

"Honestly, this plan is so large that I probably will not live to see its completion," Allred said. "But the point is to give something to the future generations at Carolina that they can unite over. To get there, we have to dream big but work small."

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BY PHILIP MCFEE
ASSISTANT ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

When a company isn't profiting like it once did, a natural conclusion is to blame the product.

When local music venues are struggling, hometown bands typically bear the blame.

With news of a financial pinch at Go! Room 4, things have begun to look less than stellar for the once-hyped Chapel Hill musical powerhouse.

But the still-strong scene is far from defeated.

"(There are) not as many indie rock bands," said Cat's Cradle Owner Frank Heath in December. "Aside from missing ... hugely successful national acts, I think that it's not so much a lull. I think there's more good bands now than there were six or seven years ago."

What Chapel Hill lacks now that cemented its reputation in the '90s is attention from national media — reporters riding the buzz stirred up by Superchunk, Archers of Loaf and Ben Folds Five.

There's a lack of immediate, national name recognition. But beyond the distracting hype, the

bands are busy.

"I think people were sort of tired of listening to and playing music that's in a narrow band," Heath said.

Martin Hall, director of publicity for the the Superchunk-spawned label Merge Records, reflected on the national media's tendency to assign hyped areas a blanket sound.

"Now it's much more diverse. It's not as easy to listen to a band and say, 'Oh, that band's from Chapel Hill,'" Hall said in a December interview.

Local artists are ushering in a new, diverse sound that makes it difficult to classify in a single genre.

"Certain kinds of music have always created more of a buzz — rock bands who get in magazines as opposed to country bands," Heath said. "Experienced musicians are experimenting."

Once the drummer for megagroup Ben Folds Five, Darren Jesse continued to make music after the dissolution of his '90s crew.

"There's a lot going on," Jesse said in December. "The music scene in general in the country

(has) gone through some major transitions in the past five years.

"You have to stay creative." Innovation is vital, though it can hurt show attendance. "Certain types of music don't draw the same crowds. I think it's just a change in generations."

Tift Merritt, a former UNC student turned award-winning country artist, successfully took her alternative sound to the national arena. Her story is indicative of the direction of Chapel Hill's new generation of musicians — unique and unconcerned with the fixations of big-time critics.

"The real people who usually make things happen aren't testing the barometer. ... Every five minutes, they're doing their own thing," she said in December.

She recognizes that the soul of the local scene will live on, overlooked or underappreciated, through crises or calm.

"It's pretty hard to keep Chapel Hill down, whether anybody's looking or not."

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

THE Daily Crossword

By Alan P. Olschwang

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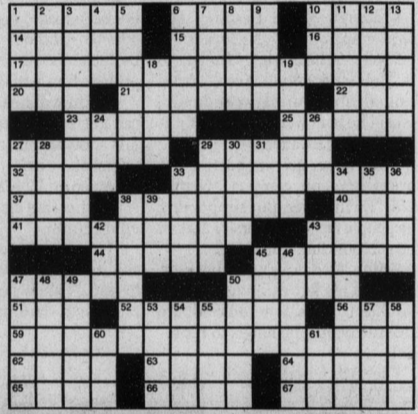
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