

## Cover Story: State of the Arts - Branching Out

*Seven artists discuss living in Cincinnati while working elsewhere*

LAURA JAMES — AUG 30, 2006 2 PM

Cincinnati drenches itself with doubt, doesn't it? One day we shake up the international art world with a new downtown building, and another day we humiliate ourselves with a censorship trial.

We love our town. We hate it. It's full of great things. It's pathetic and worthless.

So what happens when talented, creative people live here and work everywhere? To catch a new view of the State of the Arts in Cincinnati, *CityBeat* brought together seven talented people of various genres to participate in an open dialogue. They talk about ideas, roots, politics, personal interaction and our city. The good and the bad.

### Meet the artists

**Jay Bolotin:** I'm an artist and a writer of music. I'm (in Cincinnati) kinda by mistake, but I've been here well over 20 years. I followed my work here. I had a family here, two children, raised them. And I'm still here.

I've had recently a series of exhibitions at the museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. That'll go on to the Joslyn Museum in Omaha, Vanderbilt University, the Georgia Museum of Art, a museum in England and so forth. (The exhibition) has to do with a movie constructed out of woodcuts for which I wrote the score also.

**(Editor's Note:** See *CityBeat's* cover story on Bolotin and his woodcut film, *The Jackleg Testament*, "Man Out of Time," issue of May 18, 2005.)

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Geoff Raker

*State Of The Arts -  
Working Globally, Living  
Locally*

**Napoleon Maddox:** I'm a vocal artist. The work that I do is either MCing or rapping or beat boxing — a kind of vocal percussion — or singing or spoken word dramatic poetry. I also do some electronic composition that basically is recomposing sound with electronic tools. I grew up here in Cincinnati.

My main project is a group called Iswhat?!, which is a presentation of improvised Hip Hop. We use Jazz, Rock, any other type of thing that we can improvise to make a bed for Hip Hop. That group has been around for about 10 years, working around Cincinnati and expanding out and in Europe. Some of the other stuff I do is work with this group called Sotto Voce, which is a recent project of Roy Nathanson's (the saxophone player from the Jazz Passengers), and I also work with some people in New York and Chicago.

(**Editor's Note:** Look for a cover story profile of Maddox and Iswhat?! in next week's *CityBeat*.)

**Stacy Sims:** I'm from Cincinnati originally and worked in the visual arts. I worked at the Contemporary Arts Center, started a week before the Mapplethorpe trial back in the day. For a while I had a company that created traveling art exhibits for this country and abroad. And then, in my late thirties, I finally got my act together and raised my own voice: a novel published by Viking a few years ago called *Swimming Naked*.

Since (2001) I've written two more novels. I just finished another called *Reality Show*. I have an editor at Holt interested in it, and because I didn't want to get a real job I opened a Pilates studio, which is now five studios with like 500 clients a week. I also created a program called "The True Body Project," which helps teen girls connect to their bodies. So my challenge really has nothing to do with Cincinnati proper. I keep creating all kinds of other work for myself.

(Editor's Note: See *CityBeat*'s cover story profile of Sims' True Body Project, "True Body and the Write Stuff," issue of Sept. 7, 2005.)

**Jimmy Baker:** I ended up in Cincinnati via grad school (at the UC's College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning) for painting. Right after finishing, a giant studio space just fell into my lap. I figured, "I'll stay here for another year and see how that pans out." I landed a three-person show at a decent young gallery in Chelsea (New York City), just off of a lark. I met a guy in Chicago, and he e-mailed me and said, "Hey, I want you to be in a show." That was the doorway to getting work out of the (area).

I set up a whole camp (in Cincinnati), and that's wound up with a lot of good results. My friend Matt Coors and I did a show together in Philadelphia and then another in Los Angeles, and I've had a bunch of shows in L.A. — group shows — and New York. Everything just kept coming together. Things have gone really well. Foxy Productions (the gallery in New York City) has taken

work to Basel, Switzerland, for the fairs, which is what keeps everything rolling. I also teach at the Art Academy here. Teaching, I just do it because I love it. It's a nice link to stay attached to younger artists.

**(Editor's Note:** See a recent *CityBeat* interview with Baker, "The Aftermath of an Idea," issue of April 19.)

**Dana Ward:** I'm a poet and editor and a publisher. I edit a publication called *CyPress*; it's a small press. We do what might be considered — as deluded as these terms are — avant-garde and experimental poetry. We publish an annual called *Magazine CyPress*. I give readings in New York, San Francisco and Chicago several times a year. My work's been published in a variety of magazines that are very much in the same tradition as *CyPress*. I was the poetry editor for the New York City free paper, *Boog City*, for a year and a half. I was a writer at a poetics blog run by Stephanie Young called, *The Well-Nourished Moon*.

I am a Greater Cincinnati native. I grew up right across the river in Northern Kentucky. I'm here primarily by benefit of the financial ease. What I do is not only not lucrative — it actually *costs money* to do the things I want to do, which is fine.

**(Editor's Note:** See a *CityBeat* story about Ward's involvement with Publico Gallery, "Artistic Teething," issue of March 16, 2005.)

**Spencer Yeh:** I guess the thing that really took off, what I'm spending most of my time working on, is music — like what Dana said, "Experimental" music for lack of a better term. A lot of people generalize it and call it noise, but that's a whole different issue. I just went to Chicago and moved back here for a number of different reasons. I studied a lot of (Experimental music) while I was in school and in Chicago, but I never knew of anyone in Cincinnati doing it. Eventually, though, I made some connections here, and I've also kept up with the people I've met. I finally made it over to the UK, which was made possible by a couple of festivals. I'm going to Belgium this year, and back to London.

I enjoy (making music), but I'm also a fan. When I first moved back here, I did a lot within the city, just trying to promote or set up shows, and that worked to a degree. Eventually my own projects slowly got more attention and prominence. I live here, and I either produce and record works either here or in the area, like Lexington or Columbus. I keep up with all the people that I've met and pay attention to where they are and try to drive up and meet them. It's kind (of) weird — you have your home office here, but your coworkers are scattered around elsewhere.

**(Editor's Note:** See a *CityBeat* profile of Yeh, "Cincinnati's Burning," issue of Dec. 22, 2004.)

**Abiyah:** I'm a cross-genre vocalist. What I started out doing was spoken word, and through meeting a variety of people it morphed into Floetry, which is merging spoken word with music. Now it's more like songs, but it's rapping and singing, too, and the poetry is still there in the lyrics. My foundation is '80s Punk. So having that, and building on Hip Hop and Reggae and all that other stuff so it's electronic based, dubbed, alternative, different things. I met someone in New York in 1997 who had produced a spoken word Hip Hop album called *Eargasms*, and he named it *Floetry*. By calling it something, audiences connect with the idea.

I began using the Floetry term here in Cincinnati, and then I branched out with that. I presented at conferences like the Southwest Texas Popular Culture. I was also included in *Bum Rush the Page*, the Def Poetry Jam anthology put out by Random House in 2001. I've been recording in Chicago this year, and there's a beat boxer in Florida (who) asked several people to do vocals for his album. I did the vocals here and then e-mailed them to him and then there it was on the album. No flight, no hotel, no nothing. I do a lot of (e-mailing) with a contact in Chicago as well.

**(Editor's Note:** See an early *CityBeat* profile of Abiyah, "Floetry in Motion," issue of June 28, 2001.)

### **Clever communication**

**CityBeat:** *Let's go back to what Spencer said: You're all based in Cincinnati, but your coworkers are elsewhere. When you're dealing with people who are all over the country, how easy or difficult is it for you to communicate, and how much of your time is spent on the computer or on the phone or in the airplane?*

**DW:** I live through e-mail. My most vital conversations about poetics and aesthetics are through e-mail correspondences that run throughout the day.

**CB:** *Do you think you'd be able to do what you do it if weren't for e-mail?*

**DW:** It would be far lonelier, and I would be far less informed about the aesthetic activity that's happening in other cities.

**SY:** But there is distance, too, so you never really get sick of the people you work with.

**NM:** That's interesting. I've never thought of it like that.

**SY:** You (reconnect) based on the energy of the work.

**Jimmy B:** There's a better synergy. There's something that keeps a certain level of hunger for one-on-one interaction.

**CB:** *Do you have a lot of people coming to Cincinnati from other cities?*

**Jimmy B:** We all kind of rotate in and out.

**A:** I wouldn't have been able to send tracks back and forth and to progress as much as I have without e-mail.

**Jay B:** I find it interesting in terms of this question of communication in that I'm still writing *letters* with a *pen*. And people consider that a kind of bizarre gesture.

**NM:** Even a phone call now means more.

**SY:** There is this tendency, beyond drunk dialing, when you think, "Why am I going to e-mail someone when I can just call them?" You're right, Jay. It's funny how you mention the letters.

**Jay B:** It becomes a document that exists (somewhere) other than make-believe.

**SY:** Do you think that's something that's lacking now, or do you think it translates?

**Jay B:** Don't get me wrong, I do use e-mail, but with letters there is this quality of time. I mean I don't *want* to hear back from someone right away, nor do I want them to hear from me. 'Cause you gotta figure some of this stuff out.

**DW:** I think that there is with e-mail a kind of suddenness to the quality of writing, a risk. It terrifies me sometimes to write e-mails with analytical comments and so forth, because I *know* it's ill considered. But there's something sexy about taking that risk.

**SY:** But if it's taken and thrown into public as a standing document then...

**DW:** Then it's a disaster! I'd get a flogging.

**SS:** One of the things that interests me about the e-mail culture is that many people who *would not* express themselves in any way express themselves routinely. Any voice is worthy of having a Web site. But that makes it hard to discern one (voice) from the other.

**SY:** The thing is, so much is shooting past us, all these little characteristics get pushed up against the world.

**NM:** I like being on the message boards and read something that affects me, and then I respond. And then someone might say something, and I'm like, "Why don't they like me?" But then when I meet the people in person they are completely cool. ... If I talk to someone across e-mail, it's not finished until I eventually meet them in person.

**Jimmy B:** Throughout history you had this one-on-one meeting, and then it was the pony express, and so on. It's creating these tiers of division that once had no division at all — just personal interaction.

**SS:** The danger for me is a more solitary experience — I can live in the machine and in my head. I need to print it and read it, just reading it aloud makes it discern from just crazy talk to something that might transcend something.

**CB:** It's your own performance then, reading it aloud.

**SS:** Yes, and it becomes time-tested.

**DW:** You need to let (the work) exist in time. I think that's something that can pretty much extend around the table.

**A:** I'm a good procrastinator; it's how I work best. I know if I'm in a mad rush and the adrenaline is going, I produce better (music). I've been a lot more productive in the last three or four years because of that, because I know I can just zip it off to someone.

**NM:** It sounds like a lot of what we're talking about is a fine line between short cuts and fast quality.

**Jay B:** We're talking about these tools that we didn't have six or seven years ago. Tools that are available to everyone, for not much money. It's an obvious point, but (with) this proliferation of work, I still happen to think that there is just as much compelling work as there always has been. Just because there is more of it doesn't mean much. And now I see so much work that is *about* that aspect of the art world or the music world. It's a crazy tornado of information that has some wonderful aspects, but it doesn't really interest me.

**DW:** I'm curious about the commercial publishing world. I've heard that it's just sticky and weird.

**SS:** There are so few slots available that I'm competing with the best of the best, which makes me want to be really good. And why would I do it if I weren't trying to be really good? And I *have* access, so I can't delude myself into thinking it's because I live in Cincinnati that I can't get a book deal. I *have* an agent, I *have* people reading my work.

### **Cincinnati reviewed**

**NM:** I wanted to get back to something that Stacy said that was so dope — that you're not going to delude yourself into thinking that, "Oh, I'm in Cincinnati, so I can't do this."

**DW:** I'm going to ask this question because I've been thinking about it a lot recently: The narrowness here induces a little hypnosis because I've seen this every day of my life, and I find it ... a challenge to my imagination. I find myself having to fight that low-grade hypnosis that sets in, this repetition.

**CB:** *Don't you think people feel that sensation in cities all over the world?*

**SS:** I notice it when I'm not working. I can tell myself when I'm watching *Law and Order* for the 100th time that there is no one interesting in Cincinnati, and then I meet a good group of people like this.

**SY:** I still feel like there are so many places in Cincinnati that I haven't even checked out yet.

**Jimmy B:** I've been in the city for four years now and there are still people I'm meeting, people who *are* here. I've found it an exciting challenge to go find those people...

**NM:** And just listen to them.

**Jay B:** I lived in Nashville when I was a very young songwriter ... and people, once they're involved in a certain genre or a certain scene, begin to write songs about writing songs. I found that, for the most part, incredibly boring. Somehow I thought it might be better to live a life outside of these specific little ghettos. And I mean, how much more interesting is it to talk to a guy who dries corn or (who is) a welder than it is a songwriter? Because that person knows something I don't know. On a larger scale, that's a little like how Cincinnati is.

**Jimmy B:** That's a really good point. Not living in New York or L.A., you are distanced from those immediate scenes — you're not so caught up in the culture of it. You find content in other places.

**DW:** Having some distance from trend is a positive thing.

**CB:** *How do people respond to you as being from Cincinnati? Would it be easier to say, "I am an artist from New York?"*

**Jay B:** It's doesn't particularly help me or hurt me. I think, again, it's an oddly exotic factor if you are from someplace else.

**SS:** It helps people create a mythology around you, like, "He's from *Kentucky!*"

**Jay B:** There's a tradition of that, though. I always think: What was William Burroughs doing in Kansas? That fascinates me. A lot of the people you end up hearing about are from Alabama. ... Maybe 40 years ago people would hoard (to New York) because it was cheap and there was space and, yes, of course, it was exciting...

**SS:** I was (in New York a few weeks ago), and everywhere I went I heard people talking about what they were writing, how they were writing, who they were sending it to. If I lived there I would be a nervous wreck. I just thought, "I'm so lucky."

**Jay B:** Like the whole Nashville songwriter thing — little ghettos.

**NM:** One of the things that makes me fulfilled working in Cincinnati is that I am so *unhappy* with things in Cincinnati. I'm an adult. I'm not going to say, "I don't like Cincinnati, I'm gonna go." I'm content with my struggle here right now.

**Jimmy B:** There's the other thing, too — this dual mentality, where half of you is here and half of you is somewhere else. (It) makes it hard to focus on the community you're in.

**DW:** Because if you're here, you should be here in your space. And that's not easy because living in Cincinnati you have to deal with some seriously horrifying shit.

**NM:** (But the) overwhelming conservatism here breeds a creative or radical response.

**DW:** The conservatism is ferocious. But you're right, it provides a tremendous fuel for critique.

**SY:** It's fine to be critical, but the negative anti-Cincinnati attitude, like, "I'm just here to pass time until I can move to X or Y," why bother doing anything?

**Jimmy B:** That's what's cool about this group — we have our hands in the local and the foreign at the same time. It would feel really underhanded if there was someone sitting at this table who said, "I really don't give a shit about Cincinnati. It's just cheap."

**NM:** Yeah, we probably wouldn't be all that nice to them. ©



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