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Way cool; It's big. It's unique. It's Buffalo's seventh Infringement Festival, an 11-day event with more than 1,200 performances in 52 venues.

By Colin Dabkowski

Jul 29, 2011

In 2004, when a small group of countercultural malcontents banded together in Montreal to launch the world's first Infringement Festival, they were making a bold statement against the status quo.

The more visionary among them might have suspected that their radically democratic, all-inclusive experiment -- launched in response to the more staid Montreal Fringe Festival and dubbed "a critical response to the oppressive neoliberal worldview" -- might find acolytes outside of Quebec.

But certainly no one predicted that the city of Buffalo, where an impressive fleet of cultural enterprises large and small has long been flying beneath the national radar, would develop that seed into the largest of five Infringement fests in North America.

And this year, Buffalo's seventh version of the mammoth affair, which got started on Thursday night, is one for the ages. By the estimation of the event's increasingly harried team of organizers, this year's Infringement Fest will feature 1,200 separate performances in 52 venues across 11 days. These include 190 musical acts, 24 film and video productions, 20 dance troupes or individual dancers, 35 separate theater productions and 27 poetry and spoken word events.

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The fest has come a stunning distance since 2005, when the Montreal group Car Stories, with the help of early Infringement proponent and Subversive Theatre founder Kurt Schneiderman, launched Buffalo's first modest version of the event.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to overstate the significance of Infringement in revealing the true depth and variety of Buffalo's many artistic communities and enterprises -- and thereby feeding those communities with the concentrated esteem of their city.

In the recent debates over cultural funding in Erie County, we've heard the name of perhaps some two dozen arts organizations large or established enough to rise to the attention of the Western New York populace. But there are many orders of magnitude, organizations, artists and mini-collaborations in the region's sprawling creative underground which -- by virtue of their small size, occasionally unorthodox subject matter or refusal to play by the rules of traditional art-commerce -- have remained largely unsung outside of small circles of followers.

These groups and individuals are on full and glorious display during the Infringement Festival, which is what lends the festival its unique and indispensable power as a city-defining, culture-shifting venture. They have names like Moss of Ancients, Crabmeat Thompson, the Boom Boom Betties, the Zombettes and Spider Goat. Their disciplines range from straight-up rock 'n' roll to rap-punk fusion, traditional graphite-on-paper sketching to interactive hula-hoop instruction.

That head-spinning range, along with the serious dedication of the festival's creators and organizers, unveils a thriving artistic underground that cities twice Buffalo's size would be hard pressed to reckon with.

This year, the fest's constantly rotating and expanding team of organizers includes, but is not nearly limited to: music booker Curt Rotterdam; all-around Infringement PR guru and Filigrees Gallery & Boutique owner Melissa Campbell; dance coordinator Leslie Fineberg; web dude Dave Pape; theater coordinator John Shotwell; visual art coordinator Cat McCarthy; film and media coordinator and musician/poet Geoffrey Peters; and legions of others.

Discussions of the quality of work in the festival are another matter entirely -- but suffice it to say that the experimental, hit-and-miss nature of Infringement is part of what lends it its power.

And all of that is what makes the Infringement Fest not only the largest, longest and coolest arts festival in our expansive region, but one of the most important cultural developments the city has seen in the past decade.

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Buffalo Infringement Festival

WHEN: Through Aug. 7

WHERE: 52 venues in Allentown and across the city

INFO>: **infringebuffalo.org**

On **Buffalonews.com**

Starting today, The Gusto Blog will be our headquarters for coverage of the Infringement Festival's wide range of art, theater, music and genre-bending performances and exhibitions. Bookmark the blog at **[typepad.buffalonews.com/gusto](http://typepad.com/buffalonews.com/gusto)** and check back often for daily listings of best bets, mini-reviews of Infringement shows and video dispatches from the front lines of the Infringement frenzy.