

Musical Chairs New owners promise changes won't hurt the Café Eleven brand

For St. Augustine music fans of a certain age and inclination, two distinct eras separate their live-music existence: BCE (Before Café Eleven) and CE (Café Era). Year Zero was 2002, when Ancient City native and Flagler College graduate Ryan Dettra took a gamble, along with his parents, and bought a vacant convenience store in St. Augustine Beach, transforming it into a nationally recognized concert venue (Cover Story, "King of Clubs," Sept. 13, 2005).

Before Café Eleven, cover bands, jazz ensembles and reggae revivalists were par for the St. Augustine course. If you wanted to see popular national touring acts, you had to drive an hour north to Jacksonville or two hours south to Orlando. Shortly after opening the Café, the Dettras exponentially expanded the Oldest City's musical offerings. Homegrown punk stars Against Me! sold out their first few shows, and six months after the Café opened, avant-garde art-punkers Les Savy Fav played an infamous set, during which frontman Tim Harrington stripped nude, ran across A1A, and plunged into the ocean, enticing 80 percent of his fans to follow. The band called their agent after the tour, claiming St. Augustine was their favorite stop of the year, and the onslaught began.

Band of Horses. Bonnie "Prince" Billy. Cold War Kids. Delta Spirit. Dr. Dog. Iron & Wine. Man Man. Modest Mouse. The Hold Steady. The Mountain Goats. TV On The Radio. Vampire Weekend. The Café's cumulative eight years of concert history reads like an über-hip summer festival lineup — all critically revered acts, all with millions of fans and billions of records sold among them, all crammed into a tiny neo-modern gem in St. Augustine Beach.

Some locals didn't appreciate the Café's exclusion of local bands, but Dettra had a plan. "My strategy from the get-go was to develop more of an artsy, national scene here in St. Augustine," he says. His plan worked — so well, in fact, that St. Johns County hired him in 2007 to manage the newly renovated St. Augustine Amphitheatre. But it was that development that — at least in the short term — changed things at the Café.

"After I took the county job," Ryan says, "the Café became too much work. My brother was managing the kitchen, and my mom had to go from part-time to full-time." So the Dettra family decided to sell the Café, finally closing the deal last October. Ryan says they passed up several lucrative offers from prospective buyers who wanted to change the Café's format, instead "taking a little less" to sell it to British couple Mark and Tracey Trowbridge, "because they said they wanted to keep things going," Dettra affirms.

But soon after the sale, there was a noticeable shift at the Café. The music schedule slimmed, with national touring acts supplanted by nights of local music and open mic nights. Several longtime employees quit, the menu changed and a decidedly un-indie Bud Lite neon sign went up in the window. Many observers were convinced the Café Era was over.

Tracey Trowbridge and her freshly hired Events Director Kevin Carter stress that their goal is to preserve the Café's reputation, while



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expanding offerings to include more local and regional variety. Dettra planned shows six months in advance before passing on his vast network of connections, and Tracey says that everything has carried over since, splendidly. "The agents and bands we're working with know the Café Eleven name," she emphasizes.

So the major difference in Café Eleven A.D. (After Dettra?) may be the Trowbridges' desire to expand opportunities for Florida musicians. "There are so many local acts around here busting their tails," Tracey says. "And we're happy to give them a chance to play on a nationally acclaimed stage."

Kevin Carter also brings deep musical roots to the job — he's a New Jersey native familiar with that area's thriving independent scene. He hopes the open mic nights can succeed under Garden State coffeehouse staple Dave Kosciolk, a strong supporter of African nonprofit Invisible Children, who's moving down in October. That charitable bent matches another of the Café's announcements — a partnership with Gainesville-based Harvest of Hope Foundation, which hosted the last two wildly successful Harvest of Hope Fests at the St. Johns County Fairgrounds. The first "Harvest of Hope Foundation Night" at Café Eleven is scheduled for Sept. 4, when five Florida indie-punk bands will perform, raising money and building momentum for next year's HoH Fest.

Café Eleven has also benefited from the unexpected closing of Nobby's Tavern, which had become a regular stop for grassroots bands (Miami sludge rockers Torche moved their Aug. 8 performance from Nobby's to the Café, with more last-minute changes sure to follow). In addition, Jacksonville native Walter Parks took a break from backing American folk icon Richie Havens to play his first Oldest City show in 20 years on Aug. 11, while New Jersey pop-punk legends Ted Leo & The Pharmacists pull into town on Oct. 14.

Dettra says he'll be there. "Booking shows takes a lot of work and energy," he admits. "I hope Tracey, Mark and Kevin keep it going, because there are plenty of bands that love coming to Café Eleven."

Pressed to reveal any leads on upcoming shows, Trowbridge and Carter both smile and say they're on the verge of confirming several major acts. "No matter what," Tracey finishes, "we just want people to know that Café Eleven is going strong — and we hope to make it better than ever." □

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