

# Sing Loud, Sing Proud

Siren Nation gives voice to female artists

BY ERIN ROOK

In a time when men's voices still dominate the arts and media, Portland's Siren Nation Festival provides a platform and a megaphone for female artists to share their work and get paid for it.

"I had been in booking for 10 years and I think the music business as a whole is a very male-dominated business," says Siren Nation co-founder December Carson, pointing out that most bookers and talent buyers for venues and festivals are men. "It shows that there's a diminished women's voice... I didn't feel like they were being promoted in the way I felt they should be promoted."

Like Olympia's Ladyfest and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, Siren Nation highlights female artists. But unlike some festivals, Siren Nation doesn't exclude anyone based on gender or sexual identity.

"What I would sense are bigger sexuality issues involved in a lot of the festivals is not an issue for us. We really focus on women making art," Carson says. "Men are welcome. We're trying to be as inclusive as possible."

The festival's programming reflects the push for inclusiveness, offering a wide range of opportunities for new and established artists and audiences alike.

For the event's fifth anniversary, Carson says she wanted to "bump up" the music portion by bringing together festival alums with first-timers at the top of their game, such as Kimya Dawson (The Moldy Peaches) and Corin Tucker (Sleater-Kinney).

"I really pushed for the music to be wide reaching," Carson says. "I am really looking forward to the all-ages show with Kimya Dawson, with STLS and Rock Camp for Girls [band Sassfest]," Carson says.

The festival will also feature performances by DJ Safi, Led To Sea, Lemolo, The Corin Tucker Band, Kelli Schaefer, Y La



Rock Camp for Girls band **Sassfest** performs at the all-ages show.

Bamba, Laura Gibson, My Brightest Diamond and more.

Music has been a part of the fest since it began in 2006, but new elements each year have added to Siren Nation's steady crescendo. The 2011 women's art festival will feature a film program in addition to music, visual art, workshops, lectures and an art and craft sale.

"Every year we try to add something to the festival and something to the organization we've never done before," Carson says. "This year the festival has, for the first time, a really diverse film festival portion."

In the past, the event spotlighted a few individual selections, but will this year feature three days of film curated by Erin Donovan, who owns documentary distribution company A Million Movies a Minute. Carson first partnered with Donovan for a screening of *Radical Act* during January's Reel Music Film Festival and was so happy with the collaboration she asked Donovan to join Siren Nation's board.

"I came to a meeting and realized there was a void in the film programming. No one was taking that on directly," Donovan says. "I sort

of appointed myself the film programmer and just took over. They were really supportive."

The Siren Nation Film Festival, held at the Mission Theater, is Donovan's first as a curator, but she says her work as a film reviewer keeps her apprised of trends as well as gaps in representation.

"I really just wanted to get a snapshot of what I think is happening right now with filmmaking," Donovan says. "People are telling really interesting stories in ways people haven't seen done before."

For opening night Thursday, November 3, Donovan chose *Hit So Hard: The Life and Near Death of Patty Schemel*, which offers a candid look at the band Hole through the experiences of its drummer. Schemel and producer Christina Soletti will both attend the screening.

On Friday, Siren Nation pays tribute to Russian filmmaker Larisa Shepitko, who died in an auto accident in 1979 at age 40. In addition to Shepitko's film *Wings*, about a female

Soviet pilot-turned-schoolmistress, the program will feature a rare documentary by better-known filmmaker husband Elem Klimov.

"His documentary was never properly released," Donovan says. "This is the best way to see the film."

Sunday's lineup includes a diverse selection of films made by women—among them *Eve and the Fire Horse*, an "incredibly lovely story" Donovan says "will be appealing to every single person in the world"—as well as a presentation by stop-motion animator Suzanne Twining (*Coraline*).

"I'm really excited about [the film festival]," Carson says. "We'll have three days of films about women artists who are really history-making that are also by women artists."

The fine arts exhibit will display works based on the theme "What comes after yes," which Carson says was inspired by all the hard work that comes after an artist says "yes" to a project.

"What I really like about the art show is it's a mix of really established artists and people who have never shown before," Carson says.

It all goes back to Siren Nation's aim to inspire and empower women to create art by highlighting their achievements through performance, exhibition and educational opportunities.

It's a mission Carson hopes to promote with greater frequency by eventually offering year-round workshops, making inroads into schools and sponsoring artists in residency.

"I think there is a lot of interest in bringing marginalized voices to the center, but not enough events in Portland that really centralize it on an ongoing basis," Donovan says. JO

*Siren Nation Festival, Nov. 3-6; various Portland locations; \$30 for access to all shows and film screenings, individual ticket prices vary; sirennation.org.*

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