

SOFAR, SO GOOD

Imagine a concert where nobody misbehaves

Would you buy a ticket to a concert without knowing who was going to perform? Marlo Vercauteren is betting you would, and so far she's turned out to be right. Vercauteren, a 25-year-old electrical engineer in Eugene, has signed up with three partners as a local agent for Sofar Sounds, an international network dedicated to the idea that people will show up to hear live music — without knowing who the acts are — so long as they know that the music will be good and the concert vibe will be intimate, friendly and respectful.

Sofar got its start in London in 2009 and has spread to cities around Europe and the United States. The organization brings together bands, informal venues and audiences for house concerts. The brainchild of three music lovers in the U.K. who were tired of cell phones, talking and general bad behavior at music venues, Sofar bans cell phone use and noise at its shows to create a quiet, attentive atmosphere.



By marketing its concerts as slightly secret and exclusive, Sofar has generated enough buzz to attract well-behaved audiences in even jaded markets. “In a town filled with fickle fans, it’s completely miraculous to watch Angelenos adhering to these rules, yet they do — even when they’re sitting on the floor crammed together with fellow music-lovers,” the *L.A. Weekly* wrote last year about Sofar Los Angeles.

Vercauteren signed on last summer after a friend, Eugene neurologist and musician Jeff Frank, told her about Sofar. Their two other partners here are Cole Crenshaw and Cam McNeely. All work as volunteers.

Behind the curtain the Sofar process is intricate. Musicians who are touring — they tend to be small, somewhat lesser known acoustic acts — send audition material to Sofar. Once they’re approved, they give the company a list of available dates and places.

Local representatives like Vercauteren and Frank, who also have to apply and be screened to join the network, give the company a concert date. They end up with not one but three performers who get equal billing for the evening — there are no headliners, to keep people from skipping the openers and arriving late — each playing a half-hour set.

“The audience doesn’t know who they are going to see,” Vercauteren says. And, as with many house concerts, the audience gets the address of the show only a day in advance. Venues tend to be informal — backyards in good weather, living rooms in the winter.

Sofar Eugene’s first concert was in August; they have continued at a regular pace with audiences of 40 or so paying \$10 each for tickets. The shows have been successful, Vercauteren says, though they haven’t made much money. “The bands have all shown up,” she says. “And we’ve even had people volunteer to host the bands. People really enjoy the atmosphere. You can sit and mingle with people you haven’t met before and listen to music.”

Performers who have played here include Thrown Out Bones, Gracie Gray, Lorain, Maita, Sara and Kenny, Bird Concerns, David Pollack and Tim McNary. ■

For upcoming shows and other information see sofarsounds.com/Eugene.

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