

How Biff K'narly turning 30 is indicative of a maturing music scene: An OP-ED about Alton culture

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ALTON – Biff K'narly turns 30 Wednesday, and his birthday party to celebrate that occurred Saturday night at the backroom of Bottle and Barrel – the most recent local band hangout from a long line of venues.

As Biff, who is known to his oldest friends by his birth name, Mike Quinn, turns 30, it feels like an odd milestone in Alton's long, enchanting and sordid history of underground music. Since 2004, I have been going to see my friends play in bands anywhere willing to allow a large group of teenagers going through a phase, exploring their creativity and/or making lifetime bonds and friendships. Biff's 30th Birthday Bash at Bottle and Barrel seemed like a good example of how something a group of misfits and weirdos founded before we graduated high school has matured.

For me, the local music scene began in earnest during an event called “Maddifest” at the Wood River Roundhouse in 2004 or 2005. Like the majority of the best local music events, it was a coming together of talent to support a cause. I'm personally embarrassed to say I have no idea what that cause was, but I remember faces then more than a decade younger than they are now holding guitars and basses and lugging drum kits around. Many of them play music still – as a hobby, or as something to do when reminiscing with old friends, but Biff still lives that music as his way of life. I'd venture to say the entire city does the same thing.

The Maders – Drew and Hope – are proud parents raising children in a beautiful neighborhood. Their band, Hope and Therapy was one of the first local acts I remember thinking sounded like “real music,” like the type I could catch on 89.9. I caught them at a backyard bonfire I think was some early incarnation of BushFest – another local favorite still alive and thriving. I got the privilege of writing an article for their 10-year reunion show after learning so much more about the couple than just their music.

Now, the two of them stay true to their roots as the weirdo kids who played in alternative rock bands through Rock the Hops. Much like Biff K'narly turning 30, Rock the Hops has an adult feel to it. It's matured, but still fun. There's bands, art, and brews – each hobbies celebrated by the underdogs of the world who know they could fail, but will try anyway.

I believe that is the spirit of Alton's underground music culture: an effervescent and downright flippant disregard for expectations. People bring to the table what they have and everyone works to make it good. There's a part in the weird and wonderful machine for everyone who wants it to work.

Which brings us to this weekend. Last year, when Biff turned 29 – an otherwise useless age as far as most are concerned if we're being honest – he had theatrics. There was a reptilian overlord dressed in a brown shroud. There was a handsome lizard man in a

Halloween costume. There was even a documentary made about the entire experience. It was a spectacle.

But Biff turned 30 with much less pomp and circumstance. There was still a packed house, despite frigid cold and heavy winds. There were still amazing opening acts sourced from a pool of peers and friends each attached to a different and unique style, but Biff was more grounded. His music somehow seemed to have grown even further, and no longer did he care who recognized it.

Hence the spirit of Alton – it is a town that courts the national spotlight with ease. It has mystical treasures the rest of the country can only write in Hollywood scripts. The everyday dialogue of Alton sounds more at heart in a cult classic film from the 80s or 90s than just some Midwestern River Town. Part of that reason is in our weirdos and our creatives.

As we age, though, our secret love affairs with our neighbors' talents are leaving the crusty problematic basements where they were birthed and moving towards the backroom of bars and ballrooms of Mineral Springs Mall and the closed-down Broadway tie-dye aesthetic of Mississippi Earth Tones and the Earth Day Festival.

I'll be 30 in March, and will therefore magically lose touch with youth culture. I can only hope as my generation of weirdos and outcasts come of age, they can build places to host the next wave's talents. They are going to need safe environments that have high tolerance levels for behavioral issues and music adults just “don't get.” If we've learned anything from our time in the trenches of building a local culture is that it should have been easier to express ourselves in a creative and safe way the entire time. We still fight for affordable places to display original music and nearly beg our peers to leave their houses to come have a good time. Life happens more the older we get.

Lately, Biff has been showing me new music he's making. It sounds like highly-produced electronic dance music (EDM). It's really good. It's a new direction for him. I see him change his delivery about every two years. He's worn a lot of musical hats since his time in “Falling for Autumn,” the screamo band I saw him with at Maddiefest almost 15 years ago.

Alton has done the same thing. As the rise of alternative rock bands like Biff K'narly and the Reptilians, the now-defunct Polyshades and the newly-formed powerhouse, The Mindframes (which is built from professional audio engineers from Lighthouse Sounds with the eclectic character Matt Radcliff as a front man) continues, more people from both sides of the river are making a homage to Alton to hear them play. Alton has even found itself hosting some bands on the cutting edge of national trends.

Myself, I'm learning more and more about Alton's battle rap scene. Alton's history of racial segregation has been spoken about in regards to its churches and community organizations, but one of the places hungry for integration is our music scene. There's been crossovers in recent months. As one of Alton's first lines of what is hip and cool and accepted, its underground culture of creatives attaining a new level of diversity could be a lot of steps needed toward the overall healing of a historically fractured town.

It also gives tourists a taste of our local culture beyond cover bands and cottage shops. Alton has a lot to offer even longtime residents sometimes miss, forget or even ignore. As our young rebels are coming of age, however, we are also turning to each other and to our community. My Biff K'narly is 30, but there's kids like him right now looking for a creative outlet and people who want to listen. I hope people are ready to hear what they create. I know Biff has a lifetime of some of his best work he has yet to imagine ahead of him. I can't imagine what the kids of tomorrow will create.

I bet it will be awesome.