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ABOUT DAN DELUCA Dan DeLuca is the music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer. [Photo of Dan DeLuca]

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2011

Review: Union Transfer, and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah



No offense to Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, the scrappy indie-rock band fronted by Philadelphia Alec Ounsworth, but the headlining act was not the main story at Union Transfer on Wednesday night.

The venue was. The new rock club in the old Spaghetti Warehouse building at 10th and Spring Garden that was once a railroad storage depot made its Philadelphia music scene debut on Wednesday, and it didn't disappoint.

The former meatball palace has retained its egg-shaped chandeliers and vaulted ceiling, and added a sparkling state-of-the-art sound system that came across clear and full from every nook and cranny of the room.

That was true during Clap Your Hand's show, which culminated

with a two-song encore of the delicate "Adam's Plane," a standout cut from the group's third album, Hysterical, which came out this week, and the more raucous "Heavy Metal," from the band's 2005 self-titled debut that was burdened with zeitgeist defining status because the band self-released its music and were favorites of music blogs with growing music industry clout.

And it was also the case during the captivating opening set by Polica, the foursome from Minneapolis featuring two drummers and coolly composed singer Channy Moon Casselle - formerly with Roma di Luna, if you're keeping an indie-rock scorecard at home - who were the first band to grace the Union Transfer stage.

That stage is a moveable one, and for this show, it was pushed all the way back to the club's western wall. That freed up up the dance floor - which was open to all-ages at the otherwise over-21 venue - to accommodate a sold-out crowd of 1000, which is as many as Union Transfer will hold.

Most nights, the stage will be pushed back up for a more intimate capacity of 600. But even with that many bodies in the house on Wednesday - some of whom commenced crowd surfing when Clap Your Hands broke out the aggressively bouncy "The Skin Of My Yellow Country Teeth," like it was 2005 all over again - it never felt the slightest bit crushed or uncomfortable.

The most packed area, predictably, was the space behind the sound board that's elevated three steps high where alcohol is served. People were chattering under the horseshoe-shaped balcony there, but the sound was not the slightest bit muffled. Kudos to the Fishtown-based Fishtank architecture firm, who designed the space.

In addition to that bar, and the over-21 balcony in the general admission standing-only club, there are two additional bars on the east side of the building, with no view of the band, where opening night scenesters were free to congregate without actually listening to the music. All three bars have a mixture of micro- and mega-beers, with local breweries Yards, Troegs and Philadelphia Brewing Company all represented.

Union Transfer bands are being booked by local promoter Sean Agnew in conjunction with New York concert company Bowery Presents. Agnew's home base for the past decade has been the basement of First Unitarian Church on Chestnut Street, which has held true to a DIY ethos of breaking down barriers between bands and their fans, while hold true to a punk-rock ethos of not bothering with details like air conditioning or a decent lighting rig.

Which is not to slag off the Church, and here's hoping worthy bands still get booked there. The Handsome Furs show I saw there last month was about as much fun as I've had at a rock show all year. But Union Transfer, ups the ante, both with its lineup, which includes The Felice Brothers on Tuesday, Wild Flag on October 19 and St. Vincent on November 2, and in its ability to make bands look and sound as good as they can.

I suppose that was true for Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, who are a four-fifths Brooklyn band that was a never as good as they were made out to be when they were lavished with Talking Heads comparisons in the mid-00's. But they're also not as bad as you might believe them to be from the critical backlash that Hysterical has been greeted with, as the band has been accused of selling out its eccentricities in pursuit of mainstream success.

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Ounsworth possesses a pungent voice - some would call it whiny - and he tends to blur his syllables together. It was fitting to hear on the same day that R.E.M. announced their break-up, because he rivals Michael Stipe for indecipherability.

That voice qualifies CYHSY's music as an acquired taste that I've never warmed up to, and though Ounsworth is a talented songwriter, the band's tendency to drive almost every song forward in pursuit of a cathartic crescendo grew wearying, even though their set stretched barely over an hour.

Previously: [Union Transfer opens with Clap Your Hands Say Yeah](#) Follow in The Mix on Twitter [here](#)

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I'm sure the place was packed with whiny Indie geeks.

— taxmandumbeth

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 3:10 PM, 09/22/2011
Just as sure: you would not have been welcome.

— azzuri

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I was seeing bands when you were still running around for recess kid. You think I care what some indie geek has to say?

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 4:40 PM, 09/22/2011
indie geeks yes. as many of the shows currently booked are of the indie nature. but this is nothing but a good thing for the philly music scene. a brand spankin new venue in a neighborhood that needs something to help bring up life around it. can't wait for more diverse music to be displayed here. i unfortunately did not get to attend the opening last night, but will surely make it there soon enough.

— Mr. Negadelphia

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 5:23 PM, 09/22/2011
Hey no offense, I'm just calling it like I see it. I've been writing about music for publications for nearly a decade and I've seen all sorts of bands, interviewed all sorts of people. I've been to a CYHSY show or two, I'm just simply calling it like I know it is.

— taxmandumbeth

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- Yes, schools not turning out job-ready
- No, city's coped for a long time with that many poor
- Yes, with federal retreat from urban aid, outlook is grim
- No, this will spur citizens to action

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