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YOUR GUIDE TO UNSIGNED BANDS

EDITED BY KATIE HASTY

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SY SMITH

Sy Smith offers sage advice to fellow indie artists pursuing the never-ending quest to be seen and heard: Create your own venue.

After talking to the proprietors of a coffee shop in urban Los Angeles' Leimert Park neighborhood, Smith established Bitchcraft in 2001. The monthly showcase—which ran for almost two years—featured three or four female acts, unsigned and signed singers and comedians. DJs spun records between acts.

"Then I'd perform for 45 minutes," Smith says with a laugh. "It wound up becoming a loving environment for people to see chicks do their thing."

Smith is still doing her thing. The singer/songwriter/producer/arranger released her third independent album, "Conflict" (Psyko Records via MDI Distribution), in April; collaborators included producers Ant Bell (Jill Scott) and Ty Macklin (Erykah Badu). Like its predecessors, "Conflict" finds Smith skillfully fusing R&B/soul and jazz into spacey concoctions accented by tempo shifts and insightful metaphors. Gliding over, under and around the tracks are Smith's captivatingly sly, sultry vocals.

Smith moved to L.A. in 1997 and signed with Hollywood Records in 1999 but was later dropped. She has since written for Santana, sung backup for Whitney Houston and with Vonda Shepard on "Ally McBeal," and contributed vocals to commercials for Procter & Gamble and Nissan. A backing vocalist for the "American Idol" house band, Smith has also performed with trumpeter Chris Botti at the Hollywood Bowl and Boston Pops.

"I like to eat so I keep my hands in a lot of pots," Smith says. "Anywhere I can use my voice or make music, I try to do it."—Gail Mitchell

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KILL THE ALARM

Kill the Alarm has already assembled a small army of fans in New York, enough to sell out the Bowery Ballroom twice this year. Now the band, headed by impressive vocalist/songwriter Garen Gueyikian, has its sights set out-of-state in an attempt to disseminate its radio-ready rock.

The group recently remastered its February 2007 release, "Fire Away," and made it available as a free download for fans who sign up for the band's e-mail list. In the past two weeks, more than 1,000 new fans have signed up. According to the act's management, "Fire Away," has sold between 3,000 and 4,000 copies. The group also has experienced a steady flow of merch sales.

With the help of agent Alex Ross at Supreme Entertainment, the group hopes to tackle the live circuit in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., next; fans in Chicago might be treated to a couple of Kill the Alarm signature covers, like Usher's "U Got It Bad" or K's Choice's "Not an Addict" Nov. 1 at the Beat Kitchen.

The band has toured with and opened for such mainstream rock acts as Pat McGee, Eve 6, Cowboy Mouth and Pete Francis of Dispatch.

Kill the Alarm is writing and recording new material and also contributing a song to fund-raising organization Make a Wish Foundation's Christmas CD. "In a year, playing Irving Plaza would be an amazing next step," Gueyikian says. "We'll keep on writing as much as possible because the more you put out, the more of a chance that someone will pick it up."

—Laura O'Connor

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VIDEO: Watch an exclusive Kill the Alarm interview and performance at billboard.com/killthealarm.