

Michael
Schmelling

Your Blues

Oct 16–
Dec 21, 2014



Michael Schmelling
Untitled (JimmyWhispers_37), 2013
c-print
Courtesy the Artist

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *Michael Schmelling: Your Blues* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. A PDF with images that can be projected for classroom use can also be found there. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here: <http://www.mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php>

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Michael Schmelling: Your Blues

In early 2013, when Michael Schmelling (American, b. 1973) began a commissioned project for the MoCP on the topic of Chicago music, he decided to seek out a large cross-section of mostly unsigned, youthful musicians and bands. He took this approach because he knew that even though there was a time when homegrown blues and jazz acts dominated the music scene in Chicago, no one style rules today. For eighteen months he worked in Chicago and photographed music played in makeshift concert venues including an indoor soccer arena, houses, and defunct stores. He visited parties, clubs, and festivals, and listened to punk, Chicago House, bop, R&B, hip hop, and hybrid styles that combine genres and are harder to define. The freedom for fans and musicians to identify with numerous types of music, and the cross-pollination of genres Schmelling witnessed coalesced into a picture of an energetic, varied music scene that although undefinable seemed to carry a certain Chicago attitude.

In addition to shooting many album covers and bands, Schmelling's diverse talents include book design, editorial photography, and theater lighting design. He has been recognized for a long line of music projects, including *The Wilco Book* (2004) and the photograph that appears on the album cover of Wilco's *A Ghost is Born* (2004), which won a Grammy for Best Recording Package. Another critically acclaimed publication by Schmelling, *Atlanta* (2010), documents the hip-hop scene in Atlanta and creates a rich portrayal of an urban subculture that, as similarly demonstrated in *Your Blues*, is about a lot more than just music.

In *Your Blues* Schmelling digs into some of the most individualized, creative pockets of musical activity in Chicago and celebrates the artists working here. Ultimately, his work applauds romantic notions of youth, extreme individualism and risk-taking that form identity, the dynamic and intense sense of community music can provide, and the simple joy of playing, singing or humming along.

Karen Irvine, Curator



Michael Schmelling
Untitled (dancer_1), 2013
c-print
Courtesy the Artist

Questions for Looking and Discussion

Note to Instructors: We recommend that your students look at the work and consider the first list of questions before they read about the exhibition. There are more questions and activities than you could use in one class session. Select those that best fit the topics and curriculum of your class.



Michael Schmelling
Untitled, 1990/2014
Courtesy of the Artist
Silver gelatin (RC) print

1. Look carefully at the individual works in this exhibition and respond in discussion or writing to the questions below.
 - What do you see? What pulls your attention? Why?
 - What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that expressed?
 - What can you tell about how this image was made? What do you notice about the framing, composition, lighting, color, and printing?
 - What do we learn about the person or people in the image?
 - o What do you notice about their clothing, hairstyle, expression and body language?
 - o What do you think that person is trying to communicate through his or her physical image and how they have presented themselves to the camera? Why?
 - o What do you notice about the places and groups that we find them in?

- Can you think of some genres of music, artists, or eras that might have influenced the subject of the image's style? How is that visible?
- What, besides people, does Schmelling notice and record?
- What do you notice about how the images are sequenced and arranged in the galleries?
- What do these pictures have in common? How would you describe Schmelling's visual style?
- What do you think that Schmelling wanted to show or say related to Chicago's music scene through this work? Why do you think that?

2. The work in this exhibition stems from Schmelling experiences and recollections of being a teenager active in Chicago's music scene in the late 1980s and early 90s. Schmelling included a few images of that time from his personal collection, which are displayed on the mezzanine level of this exhibition.



Michael Schmelling
Untitled, 2013
C-Print

- What connections and differences do you see between Schmelling's early and more recent images of the Chicago music scene?
- Do you see connections between what we see in Schmelling's early and recent pictures and your own experiences with music?
- Would you agree with Schmelling's claim that there is something universal about how young people relate to music? Describe.

3. On view on the MoCP's mezzanine level, are collages that Schmelling created, combining various images he shot in Chicago.

- What do you notice about the pictures that he grouped on each page?
- What do they have in common?
- What do they look like or remind you of?
- What do they communicate as a whole?
- Why do you think these images are presented in groupings as opposed to individual images?



Michael Schmelling
Untitled, 2013
 C-Print
 Courtesy the Artist

4. Schmelling created a room on the MoCP's first floor that takes its inspiration from the offices of Delmark Records, which was founded in 1953, is still in existence on Chicago's north side, and is known for producing jazz and blues records by under-recognized artists who were not safe bets commercially. A selection of record covers and ephemera from the collection of Numero Group is on view in the MoCP second floor gallery. Founded in Chicago in 2003, the Numero Group is a record label that creates compilations of previously released music, reissues original albums, and produces album reconstructions from a variety of musical genres. The label's focus is research and preservation of obscure recorded material by artists who found little commercial success with the material's initial release.

Note: You can read about Delmark and Numero Group in the links provided at the end of this document under "suggested resources."

- What does Schmelling's inclusion of these additional elements beyond his photographic documentation add to or evoke in the overall presentation of this exhibition?

5. What has changed in how music is produced and distributed since for example, 1953 when the Delmark Records company was formed?

- How has this changed how we consume music?
- How has this changed who has power or control over what is produced and heard?
- Can you think of ways that these changes might have impacted the types of music being created today?

6. In the art and music scenes, there is a pervasive romantic notion that the best art is not shown in galleries or museums and the best music is not played on the radio or in clubs and that recognition and commercial success equal selling out.

Both Schmelling and musician Tim Kinsella, who wrote an essay to accompany this exhibition, acknowledge this in their own experience within the music scene—that there is an almost obsessive striving for authenticity and one-upmanship to discover the next great garage band, unknown album, house party or piece of musical equipment and that these objects of desire prove to be elusive, mythic even—often just out of reach.

- Can you find examples of these ideas at play in your own personal experience or within a subculture or community that you belong to? Describe.

Activities

1. Identifying Influence: Your Artistic Practice

Musician Tim Kinsella, in the essay he wrote to accompany this exhibition, *Total Permission in Blue Utopia* includes many quotes and cites many authors including the quote below on the role of influence on creative process. Kinsella says,

T.S. Eliot believed that the poet's work is a series of formal processes that filter and reconfigure the cultural inheritance. Modernism is a curatorial act on the past, setting history in negotiation with itself by exemplifying what ratios the different priorities of different historical moments will enter into new work. It's logical and requires a deep history of the medium. And emotional detachment helps.

The implication is of course that no poet has meaning on their own, but only in terms of context to the countless dead poets. This is the evolutionary process and it is why (T.S.) Elliot speaks of each poet as a channel for the vehicle of poetry.

Acknowledging distortion, Harold Bloom wrote "strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves." The form evolves through your bumbling misunderstandings of your predecessors.



Michael Schmelling
Untitled, 2013
C-Print
Courtesy the Artist

Carefully read, consider and discuss the above statements. Do you agree with what Kinsella says here? Why or why not? Write about how this statement, or one part of it, connects to influences in your own creative process. If you are not an artist or writer, describe a connection to the work of one of your favorite artists or writers. Name some of those influences and their impact.

2. Identifying Influence: Personal Style and Music

Schmelling says that hybridity, a mixing of cultural and aesthetic influences, characterizes most of the musicians featured in the exhibition and the Chicago music scene in general. Kinsella elaborates on this idea when he writes, "while Genre music fills certain expectations, hybrid forms acknowledge that the listener always steers." Where do you see or hear hybridity at play in this exhibition?

Select an image from the exhibition that features a musician or musical group. Use the questions at the beginning of this section to consider what you notice in the image. Next, look up and listen to some of that artists' recent music.

- What stands out to you in the song? What do you notice about the lyrics?
- What do you notice about how the song is constructed?
- Can you identify musical influences in this song? From what artist, genre, or era? How is that evident?
- Describe connections and differences you find between what you observe in the photograph of the musician and what you observe in their music.
- Do you think others might have an idea of your personal tastes, such as in music, based on your outward appearance? Describe.

3. Community and Identity

Michael Schmelling and Tim Kinsella articulate that part of what being a member of a music scene has provided for them, especially when they were young, is a sense of belonging or community. Consider the following quote by Tim Kinsella:

And like the secret language between lovers and the codes within a band, a community crafts its own lingo and jargon...And all together you learn how to live beyond and models that any of you had ever seen. And the joy is contagious. The rhymes and symmetries of self-identification within a group hop genre distinctions, seem to leap twenty streets at a time.

"Community" is often considered in a limited way, mainly in relation to one's race, culture, or the place where we live or come from. The term "community" is often used to evoke positive affiliations and influences. Schmelling and Kinsella suggest a more complex and fluid notion of "Community," which encompasses the groups that we may be drawn to and choose to join.

- To what degree do you think identity is self-determined?
- What factors influence identity?
- To what communities do you belong? Think broadly. Make a list of at least 8.
- Which were you born into?
- Which did you choose to join? Why?

Select one of the communities that is primary to you and consider:

- How does that community influence your style, interests, beliefs, and actions?
- How does it color how you see the world?
- Can you think of codes, lingo or jargon that this community shares?
- Is that community's influence on you always positive? Explain.

Kinsella also articulates that even within a tight community we still often search for authenticity and attempt to distinguish ourselves from the tribe.

- Can you think of ways that you seek to distinguish yourself from your community?
- Why do you think Schmelling chose the title *Your Blues* for this exhibition?

Optional Extension:

Create a series of photographs documenting your community inspired by Michael Schmelling's work.

Suggested Resources on the History of the Chicago Music Scene

The Real Chicago Blues: An interview with David Grazien, University of Chicago Press 2003

<http://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/305686in.html>

The Chicago Blues tradition and Influence

<http://chicagoguide.cpsarts.org/chicago-pages/music/blues>

(Numero Group) *Digging Beyond the Crates*, Spin Magazine, September 27, 2012

<http://www.spin.com/articles/numero-group-worlds-greatest-reissue-label/>

Delmark Records Turns 60

<http://www.artsjournal.com/jazzbeyondjazz/2013/05/delmark-records-turns-60-deep-in-the-catalogs-classics.html>

How Chicago House Music Got it's Groove Back, Chicago Reader, May 3rd 2012

<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/a-history-of-the-second-wave-of-chicago-house-music/Content?oid=6194277>

House Music by Frankie Knuckles

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOLE1YE_oFQ

National Content Area Standards Addressed in This Guide:

CCSS (www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.