



Michael
Schmelling

Your Blues

Oct 16–
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In early 2013, when [Michael Schmelling](#) (American, b. 1973) began his commission for the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago to work on the topic of Chicago music, he decided to seek out a large cross-section of unsung, mostly youthful musicians and bands. He took this approach because he knew that even though there was a time when blues and jazz dominated the music scene in Chicago, no one style rules today. Throughout the eighteen months he worked in Chicago on and off, Schmelling photographed music happening in basements, garages, underground clubs, and makeshift concert venues such as an indoor soccer arena, houses, and defunct stores. He visited parties, clubs, and festivals, and listened

*The best band will never get signed
The Kay-Settes starring Butchers Blind
So good you won't ever know
They never even played a show
Can't hear them on the radio*

—Wilco, from the song “The Late Greats”

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to punk, Chicago House, bop, R&B, rap, and styles that by combining genres were harder to define. The variety of types of music being made in Chicago impressed him, as did the fans, many of whom had eclectic style and musical taste, often attending radically different shows from one day to the next. The freedom for fans and musicians to identify with numerous types of music, and the cross-pollination of genres he witnessed coalesced into a picture of an energetic, varied scene that although undefinable seemed to carry a certain Chicago attitude.

One of Schmelling's first subjects was

Willis Earl Beal, a musician known for his wide-ranging talents—he is a gospel and blues singer, noise artist, visual artist and song-writer. Born in Chicago, Beal's life has been full of dramatic ups-and-downs. He has been homeless and suffered severe health problems, and he has been very vocal about the push-pull of wanting and not wanting to be famous, lamenting in song lyrics and interviews about his turbulent relationships with record labels, his perceptions of critics, and his views on artistic freedom versus the pressures of commercialism. As Beal explains, "If you're saying fuck the system, that means

you're aware of the system. That means you're oppressed. . . You're just as oppressed as the guys inside. I'm oppressed. If you want to make a change, you have to compromise. You gotta get in there to truly get out of it.¹" Like Beal, most of Schmelling's subjects exist more or less "out of the system" (that is, they are not signed to any major labels and have thus far avoided "selling out"), by choice or otherwise. In addition to the labels, the city, its venues and fans, Schmelling focused on the overlooked acts, the bands that might be popular locally but have relatively little national and international presence: artists like the boyfriend/girlfriend band The Funs, who live four hours south of Chicago in a converted funeral home that they aim to transform into a haven for an industrious, mostly DIY artists' community (they make their own recordings and cover art for vinyl records); the eighteen-year-old rapper Lucki Eck\$; rapper and business owner Z Money; Jimmy Whispers, who keeps his legal name a secret; Culo, an archetypal punk band; and Tink, a nineteen-year-old singer whose father is her sound engineer, and whose style ranges from rap to love ballads. Part of Schmelling's mission was to probe romantic stereotypes like the one expressed in the lyrics to "The Late Greats" by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy (quoted above), which is as much about the great, unheard of band as it is about the *myth* of the great, unheard of band.

Seeking out the edges of the scene, so to speak, has personal meaning for Schmelling. Having grown up in the Chicago suburb of River Forest, during high school in the late 1980s and early '90s, he and his friends did exactly that—went to concerts, visited record shops, and hunted for interesting underground or one-off concerts to attend. Working as a photographer for the school newspaper at the time, Schmelling taught himself how to print photographs, using a dark room in his parents' basement. His love

for music is reflected in his pictures from that time, mostly of his friends listening to and hanging around the music scene, with various DJs and bands. A few of these photographs are included in this exhibition, an autobiographical touch that is new for Schmelling and reveals a feeling that he had throughout the project: namely, although the groups, technologies, and environments change over time, teenagers and their relationship to music, as well as the fluidity and fertility of the music scene in Chicago, haven't fundamentally changed in twenty-five years.

As part of the exhibition Schmelling includes a video interview of two teenage boys from the 1980s who debate the virtues of various types of music such as heavy metal, thrash, and speed metal, discussing the merits and failings of various groups. Interestingly, their assessments often hinge on the moral—trash is bad because it is “destructive,” “overdoes it,” and promotes head-banging; they prefer music with “feeling, and some sort of meaning.” The teens also touch on that romantic cliché and precept of youth—the idea that fame corrupts—in candid quips, such as their assessment that Van

Halen is “kind of confused” in having gone “from metal, to jazz, to love,” yet is probably “sitting around having a good time, making a lot of money.” Through their dialogue with an off-camera interviewer, one gets the sense of the careful choices fans make about whom to admire and follow. The interview also reveals just how intertwined with one's identity music preferences can be—especially during our teenage years when music is an important occupation, outlet, and refuge.

The exhibition's title, *Your Blues*, comes from a song of the same name by the Vancouver band Destroyer, one of Schmelling's favorites. A gentle ballad, the song attracted Schmelling with its mix of poetic longing and romantic hopefulness. A heartfelt, softly sung “Lord knows I'm trying . . .” repeats over and over as the song's main lyric. The title *Your Blues* is also

or a song, as in “that's my song!”

Schmelling reflects the diversity of Chicago music in his subjects, dynamic photographic style, and deft sequencing, as well as through the ephemera interspersed in the exhibition—all of which reflect the hybridity, vitality, and variety of the Chicago music scene. Within the photographs of the lesser-known musicians he sometimes adds

images of those who are more famous such as Kanye West, in order to underscore the thrust of the project being about people making things—and famous or not, the process doesn't really change. Occasionally nostalgia comes across in his technique: Schmelling shoots with two 35 mm cameras, one digital and one film. He makes analogue 4-by-6-inch prints of his images first, as a way to edit and sequence, and also because he likes the color that is rendered from the machine-made prints. He scans the prints and enlarges the images from those files. This process maintains the color palette he likes and also allows each image to deteriorate ever so slightly, making the images feel somewhat mass-produced, or as if they have been offset printed or reproduced in a magazine.

In addition to single images Schmelling has created a series

of collages that reveal the scope of his work in Chicago, and also allow the cityscape to seep into the project. These collages take their inspiration from an old yearbook Schmelling found from the 1960s, a printed time capsule of teenage identity. Like the yearbook, Schmelling's collages follow a general graphic format that comes alive in the connections between images on a page, from one page to the next, and in the shapes created by the images within the layout,



a nod to the deep history of the blues in Chicago. While traditional blues no longer commands the attention it did in the 1950s and '60s, its influence is wide-ranging, and it remains a hallmark of Chicago culture. As a counterpoint to this large presence, Schmelling exploits the word *Your* in his title to signal the ubiquitous individualism and diversity that characterize Chicago music today. It also points to the music fan's idiosyncratic sense of ownership of a band

which form a sort of rhythmic score.

Schmelling also invokes mid-century Chicago in his images of the Delmark record label office, still in existence on Chicago's North Side. Founded by Bob Koester in 1953, the label is known for producing jazz and blues records by under-recognized artists. Koester gained an international reputation for identifying quality music that was not readily available, and many of Delmark's recordings have become legendary jazz and blues records. Schmelling was allowed access to their enormous archive of ephemera—rare labels and catalogs, photographs, etc. In the north gallery of the museum, he has created a room that takes its inspiration partly from the Delmark office. Painted pink walls, carpet and vinyl flooring, photographs, and remnants pay homage to improvised practice spaces and humble recording studios that have arguably churned out some of the best recorded music of all time.

Schmelling continues his exploration of labels in the museum's print study room, displaying images and album covers selected in partnership with the Numero Group from the label's archive. 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 their music's initial release. To that end, Numero creates LPs, CDs, cassettes, 45s, and DVDs, remastering prerecorded music from a variety of sources, always accompanied by extensive liner notes and beautiful packaging, infusing these almost-forgotten materials with new life.

As musician and writer Tim Kinsella poetically states in the essay he wrote to accompany this exhibition, "Where genre music fills certain expectations, hybrid forms



acknowledge that the listener always steers." Similarly, Schmelling encourages the viewer to create his or her own experience in this exhibition, one where the goal is to have the images come first, without immediate explanation. Schmelling has a proven track record of working with images in thoughtful and surprising ways; his diverse talents include book design, editorial photography, theater lighting design, and band photography. His books have received awards, and he has been recognized for a long line of music projects, including

The Wilco Book (2004), which features Schmelling's photographs together with artwork created by the band and artist Fred Tomaselli interspersed with comments from the band, technicians, and managers, as well as essays by Henry Miller and Rick Moody, and poetry from Bern Porter's *Found Poetry*. One of Schmelling's photographs makes up the album cover for 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, including many of the details surrounding hip-hop culture such as pit bulls, rims, tattoos, nightclubs, clothing, and gang signs, creating a rich portrayal of an urban subculture that, as similarly demonstrated in *Your Blues*, is about a lot more than just music.

Schmelling's practice attests to the pleasures and possibilities of hybridity and ambiguity, and in *Your Blues* he not only digs into some of the most individualized pockets of creative activity in Chicago, he also celebrates the artists working here, most of them unsung, and some likely to remain so. 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 and Associate Director

¹ Eric Sundermann, "Willis Earl Beal Is Not Real," <http://noisey.vice.com/blog>, September 4, 2013.

IMAGES:

Michael Schmelling, *Untitled*, 2013