

SXSW1

“This next song I wrote after havin’ a hot dog and a spruce beer and a *poutine*” said Gern f of United Steel Workers of Montreal. You know what *poutine** is?”

Is it heavy, hot and will it get your heart racing? Then it belonged at the 2008 Canadian Blast BBQ on the opening afternoon of SXSW. With five bands – USWM, the Pack A.D., City and Colour, Hot Springs and Dragonette – and featuring a live DJ/MC throwdown as its climax, the annual event upped the ante for Canada’s presence at the world’s most important music festival.

Gern f was the burly, gravel-voiced guy with the death row haircut standing stage left, under the big tent in Brush Square. While close to 2,500 people cycled through the site, the USWM dropped notice that Canadian bands at this fest have a new level of swagger and purpose.

“All you burly, bearded men, be careful – we’ve had grown men cry during this song,” he warned during a ballad. In the main, though, this was vintage “citygrass” – the band’s name for its propulsive acoustic urban roots music, banged out on guitars and standup bass, with the sass of singer Felicity Hamer to offset Gern’s gruffness. Picture Tom Waits working a truckstop and you’ll have the idea.

Under what Texans call “late winter” weather (cloudless and 80°) the Pack A.D. stripped the sound to its skeleton – its very loud, electric skeleton – for a set full of promise for the future of the world’s only female stomp-blues duo. Looking like Joan Jett’s kid sister, singer/guitarist Becky Black yowled her way into the afternoon. The obvious singularity of the band’s line-up couldn’t hide their equally obvious ambition.

There were squeals for City and Colour (yes, with a ‘u’), Alexisonfire singer Dallas Green’s one-man singer-songwriter project. Sandwiched between powerful bands while people munched on BBQ sandwiches, Green had been presented with perhaps the biggest challenge on the bill. Instead, he held the attention of a tentfull of fans with a set that was richer and more melodically colourful than expected. Not sure if he covered the Constantines (he’s been known to). Quite sure he didn’t need to.

“Are you guys drunk yet?” yelled irrepressible Hot Springs frontwoman Giselle Webber. Her band is itself a drug: with Webber’s weird, vintage Hagstrom guitar and the oomphy rhythm of bassist Frédéric Sauv  and brilliant drummer Anne Gauthier, they have distilled a rock’n’roll sensuality almost always missing from indie rock into songs like 38th Adventure, Headrush and Fog and the Horn. Webber is a fearless singer, somehow splicing Bjork and Robert Plant into her vibrato. They’ll be all over SXSW, playing Maggie Mae’s Thursday at midnight, and Caswell House Friday at 8:15 p.m.

The surprise of the day may have come from Dragonette, the other half of the afternoon sexy. Despite losing their equipment on the trip from Toronto, singer Martina Sorbara led the group through a plucky set that reveals – one full album into a career – a fully-formed electropop band ready to establish itself in that vacuum. New millennium Blondie, anyone? With the keyboard riff to I Get Around rattling the tent pegs in Brush Square, even the hip hop kids in the crowd were paying attention.

Of course, those kids were mainly there to hear Grand Analog and Cadence Weapon rock the mics over ribcage-rattling beats supplied by mixmaster Ghislain Poirier and rhythm pirates Megasoid. The unprecedented DJ/hip hop Explosion may almost have been too much for a crowd that had already heard so much. The real story here could be read from the line-up: a wildly diverse collision of styles that underline's Canada's new position as International Player. Or as Hot Springs' Webber sang, "Keep it comin'!"

Later, Gern f was asked how he felt about the afternoon "A little tired. We got into Austin at 5 a.m. Wednesday."

What'd you do, *drive* to Texas?

"Yep." It took them three days. There's something else that's uniquely Canadian.

*A steaming bowl of French fries smothered in gravy and cheese curds. Yes: hot, heavy and heart-racing.