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Between The Waves takes a promising turn in 2019

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MUSIC, NEWS, ACTIVISM, BUSINESS, EVENTS

The third annual music conference and festival makes some refreshing additions to its programming. (Photo: Roy Elkins, left, leads a conference session at the 2018 Between The Waves event. Photo by Reid Kurkerewicz.)

Between The Waves, a city-sponsored music conference and festival aimed at

teaching musicians business skills and elevating Madison as a destination for music fans, [returns for its third edition from June 7 through 9](#). Conference sessions will take place at the Madison Concourse Hotel and the live music portion will be at venues including the Majestic, the Brink Lounge, and the Come Back In/Essen Haus complex. Between The Waves' lineup brings back plenty of the usual suspects from the 2017 and 2018 conferences, but this year also brings signs of change.

Partnerships with the [Urban Community Arts Network](#) and with [DJ/promoter/LGBTQ activist Sarah Akawa](#) have made the 2019 conference roster much more inclusive of people of color, non-cisgender people, and musicians who openly embrace radical politics. Just as importantly, the conference schedule includes a bit more about what needs to change at the level of communities and institutions, not just a focus on what individual musicians can do to advance their own careers. The lineup this year also does a better job of reflecting the fact that while some musicians don't like to engage with the business side of what they do, just as many are quite entrepreneurial. Roy Elkins, who heads up Between The Waves and is CEO of locally based music-licensing company Broadjam, sees this year's lineup not as a change of direction but as an expansion of the event's scope.

"I hope we're on the right track," Elkins says. "There needs to be a cross section in this...we need people who are from the industry to inspire, but also to have a really good grassroots, DIY training session."

Highlights along those lines include Sylvia Johnson and Elyse Clouthier of queer-punk duo Gender Confetti, who will give a talk titled "Queering Music Culture," and longtime Madison MC,



Roy Elkins.

educator, and spoken-word artist Rob Dz explaining "How and Why Hip Hop Influences Arts & Community." Nicole Acosta and Dao Phakeovilay of Milwaukee's No Stress Collective will talk about "Dance Parties That Center Women, People of Color, Trans and Queer People: How No Stress Collective has Taken Over a Cis-Het Male Dominated Industry in Milwaukee," and fellow Milwaukeean DJ Fortune will discuss the role of women in DJ culture. [Half-Stack Sessions](#) and Communication co-founder Tessa Echeverria will join Lydia Roussos, one of the bookers of the Bangers & Mash dance night series, for a discussion of "Collective Organization in the Madison Music Scene." (Full disclosure: I work with Echeverria through [Tone Madison's partnership with Communication](#), and Roussos is a friend of mine. Journalist and hip-hop artist Michael Penn II, who will be discussing his work in media at BTW, is a *Tone Madison* contributor.) The 2018 BTW conference included a sparsely attended panel on diversity, but this year inclusion feels a bit more deliberately woven into the fabric of the event.

The lack of speakers like those mentioned above was one reason BTW came in for so much criticism during its first two years, [including from me](#) and [from Tone Madison contributor Reid Kurkerewicz](#). The event has received tens of thousands of dollars in funding from the City of Madison, in [city budgets](#) that tend to support a few specific events without creating a lot of additional opportunity for local musicians. (The money comes from an incredibly stimulating thing called the [Room Tax Fund](#).) If it's receiving public funds, BTW's detractors reason, it should engage more of the people who actually make the local music community interesting, and fewer establishment music-biz types. Even longtime Madison concert promoter (and now city council member) Tag Evers [said in an interview this spring](#) that "Between The Waves feels a bit forced to me, but I appreciate the overall goal of creating an event to assist artists in the nuts and bolts of starting a career in music." While the first two events included hip-hop showcases and had some diversity among speakers and performers, inclusion and representation was not its strongest suit.

Even some of the more conventional choices BTW this year make a bit more sense, especially a talk from veteran Summerfest music booker Vic Thomas. Lesser-known artists from around Wisconsin actually play Summerfest all the time, so if you wanted to give local independent musicians a bit of a bridge toward the bigger music industry, this feels a bit more practical and tangible than, say, talks with radio executives or hair-metal-artist-turned-classical-composer Kip Winger. The BTW festival also includes a "battle of the bands" whose winner will get to play at Summerfest. The previous two BTW conferences also included programming around music software and other developments in music technology. That theme continues in this year's conference schedule, which is good for reasons that should be obvious to just about any musician alive, regardless of background or genre.

There's still plenty of programming in 2019 that aligns with the first two editions of BTW, for better or worse. The inclusion of [Tim Sabean](#), who worked as an executive for Howard Stern's SiriusXM's channels, strikes a weird note any way you cut it, and BTW continues to overestimate the value of a [Skype call from Butch Vig](#). But there are still people who will get something out of talks on music technology, developing new revenue streams, and how to promote their work. And the changes this year means the conference has more to offer people who are looking for something different. There's also a sense that Elkins and other conference organizers are willing to give others some actual power to shape the event, and that maybe they've taken some of the criticism to heart in a constructive way.

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While sitting in on [last year's sparsely attended panel](#) on "Creating A Diverse & Inclusive Music Scene," which included both Akawa and Clouthier, Elkins says he ended up saying to himself, "I need to get these people involved...just listening to their conversation, I felt that this is a missing component, that we're not addressing this." This led to a conversation with Akawa, who in addition to DJing and producing under the name [Saint Saunter](#) has organized dozens of queer-focused nightlife and art events in Madison, including the annual [Hot Summer Gays](#) series, and co-founded the [now-defunct Queer Pressure organization](#), which focused on creating safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ community and other marginalized people. She's also starting up a new series called [queer.IRL](#).

Akawa isn't actually speaking at this year's BTW, but Elkins delegated a chunk of the programming to her, which explains the inclusion of programming like the collective organizing panel and the No Stress Collective presentation.

"My angle, coming late in the planning game, was to find speakers that would be interesting to me as a queer and POC promoter and DJ," Akawa says. "Roy seemed to hear the comments from [last year's "inclusive music scene" panel], and followed direction of roughly, 'if you want diversity, don't let it be for token diversity's sake, let it be because you—or your planning team—truly values and sees the success of locals, people of color, youth, etc.'"



Sarah Akawa.

The partnership with UCAN started brewing a bit earlier. UCAN president Karen Reece, a longtime advocate for hip-hop in Madison and leader of a [city task force on equity in Madison's arts scene](#), has been talking with Elkins about partnering up since before the inaugural BTW took place. Successful Madison-based hip-hop producer DJ Pain 1 is another of UCAN's leaders and has participated in each BTW conference so far. UCAN vice president Mark "ShaH" Evans has also taken part in BTW before and will also speak this year, drawing on his experience as an artist manager and social-media marketer. Plus, UCAN already has its own hip-hop-focused conference, Level Up, so the natural solution was just to combine it with BTW. The events Level Up brings to the table this year include a "Beatmaker's Brawl" competition and a production demonstration from Pain 1.

"I'm hoping this is a start of a long-term partnership and that next year we can start earlier to ensure these sessions are coordinated with everything else, and to get more artists of color and hip-hop artists represented in the festival," Reece says.

"One of the major barriers to equity in our music and entertainment scene is access to resources—both financial and venues, which was highlighted in the task force report and something Urban Community Arts Network has been working for over this past decade," Reece says. "To achieve equity and elevate the profile of artists of color, we need those with access to make room for others without. This partnership with BTW is a great example of how that can work."

Roussos, who didn't participate in the first two BTWs, sees this year as a step in the right direction. "Last year, I knew that this was going on, and I knew that people were unhappy with the way that it went on," Roussos says. Going forward, Roussos says they'll be looking for BTW to show its commitment to inclusion by doing all it can to give marginalized people resources and let them lead.

Echeverria, who is co-hosting the panel on community organizing with Roussos, sees improvement but strikes a more skeptical note. "I think the big issue is that they get a lot of money from the city and they should be more accountable to the actual musicians of Madison," Echeverria says. "It feels more like a band-aid than an organizational change, but it is better than last year. So maybe it's just slow change."



Karen Reece.

When asked about his plans for, well, making sure this isn't just a band-aid, Elkins admits to having some blind spots, but says he's committed to building more inclusivity into Between The Waves and bringing in more new voices to help organize the event. In the future, for one thing, he'd like to create guidelines for all the conference's speakers and sessions to "try to be more inclusive and a little more sensitive to the needs of everyone." While BTW's organizers haven't often engaged publicly with criticism, Elkins does actually seem to value feedback and new information, and he'll be looking for more of it during and after this year's event.

"I'm looking for something that I'm unconsciously incompetent about right now, that I don't even know I don't know," Elkins says. "Check us out next year. If we don't do it, then call us on it."

between the waves, sarah akawa, saint saunter, half-stack sessions, bangers & mash, ucan, rob dz, dj pain 1, karen reece



Scott Gordon

Scott Gordon is the editor-in-chief and publisher of *Tone Madison*, which he founded in 2014 with a group of other Madison-focused journalists. He has covered music and the arts in Madison since 2006 for publications including *The A.V. Club*, *Dane101*, and *Isthmus*, and has also written about subjects including environmental issues and public health for *WisContext*.

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