

## **At the Sound of the Horn:**

*A glimpse into the Richmond music scene and the people who cover it*

RICHMOND, Va -- They slave away for weeks on end creating harmonious lyrics with the music, making sure everything is in rhythm. Those songs are composed of melancholy and joy; a mirror into the song maker's life and experiences that reflects onto you the audience. You, an audience who wants up-and-coming bands to push the envelope.

And there you are, huddled into a small, cramped, and dimly lit basement in Richmond, Virginia on a Friday night. You've been waiting all week for this show and these bands. Maybe you drank a little, just enough to alter your normal mindset to lose yourself and escape from the stress of overbearing essays and old and dry professors. But all that is far away now. The bands start to play and you surrender yourself to the music.

Then there is he, you know, the guy walking around with the camera who possibly annoys you as he moves around trying to get the best angle to photograph the band. You may wonder who that guy is, or you may even be on a first name basis with him, since the Richmond music scene is close-knitted.

Odds are he is one of the reporters from The Horn RVA, a unique student operated, online publication dedicated to covering the music scene of Richmond.

But what exactly is The Horn? "The Horn is a group of VCU students who love local music and coalesced together to create a sort of living memory of Richmond music," Craig Zirpolo, Editor-in-Chief of The Horn, opened up in a candid interview.

Two years ago The Horn was born from Mesh Media, a Virginia Commonwealth University student organization and media conglomerate dedicated to covering the culture of Richmond. The Horn is one of four (Shafer Bird, Rams Review, and RVA Fashion Uprising) media outlets under the Mesh Media banner. The others cover food, sports, and fashion, respectably, while The Horn covers the music scene.

"We seek to give what others would call 'inside' coverage," Zirpolo said, "which is really just our interaction with the music scene as dedicated fans seeking insights into the multitude of performers from and touring through Richmond."

"A lot of what we do is to relay information about great bands through our [website.]"

That information comes in the form of audio from bands, interviews with band members, and video from shows. The Horn tries to cover everyone, whether good or bad, making waves through the city of Richmond.

“We aren't all about flaming bands we don't like, because every word you waste debasing one group you could use to help spread the word about another great one,” Zirpolo said. “That isn't to say we won't call bullshit when someone pulls out a hacked together Stairway to Heaven cover, but we aren't actively seeking shitty music for the sake of self-righteous hate-reviews.”

Zirpolo, the current Editor-in-Chief of The Horn, is a Virginia Beach native and became a VCU student after a stint at the University of Virginia.

“Music is just my preferred medium of art,” Zirpolo confessed. “I'm a photographer and a writer, as self-indulgent as that sounds, but for me sound has always been the most moving way to share emotions.”

Zirpolo's parents introduced him to music as a kid and his love for it grew as he got older. Like other artists he began and cut his teeth as a teenager snapping photos of music groups at Virginia Beach shows. His passion to cover music led him to change venues from Charlottesville to Richmond, arguably the center of new music in Virginia.

Now at The Horn's helm Zirpolo can guide and direct both his creative energy and those on his staff. “The Horn was created out of the idea that music is a staple of Richmond's culture and student interactions with music were characterizing a lot of the new music and groups within Richmond,” Zirpolo said.

“Many college towns see a rivalry of sorts between the college life and the outside life of the location, but with Richmond music it really is a symbiotic relationship between new and old Richmonders.”

Whether the show is some up and coming college band on a beer-soaked basement floor in the infamously known Hell Block on Grace Street or nationally known band playing at The National downtown, The Horn strives to cover it all.

“We all have an idea of what The Horn should be and we spread that into our separate mediums of choice,” Zirpolo said.

“A lot of it is spontaneous, so when we're hanging out on our time we'll get a call saying there's a show and head there and blink into Horn mode. Horn mode isn't really all that different from being at the show on my time, except of course I have to keep a more keen eye on flying beers and the like with gear involved.”

Zirpolo explained the way most information and news on the house show seen throughout Richmond is spread by word of mouth. Certain names and houses are whispered in almost speakeasy-type fashion and people in the know understand it. Social networks are also paramount to getting the word out. Zirpolo believes this is a great way of disseminating information.

“It's a very careful risk putting that info on the internet, but it is essential to the foundation of house shows now. Social media is coming into it in a big way, and that is no coincidence. It's not done in an exclusive way either, and penetrating into the scene is only made easier by its accessibility on social media sites.”

At the shows themselves a wide array of people come to play at them. “Much of our interaction is with student musicians and recent graduates of VCU and other schools playing in the area,” Zirpolo explained, “really just a wide variety of people from all walks of Richmond. Maybe in real terms they are all different, but at a house show everyone is equal, and it's really a beautiful thing.”

“People there are just as eager to create as they are to consume, and it's that relationship that really adds the backbone to the whole equation.”

Covering an event is completely different than just going to one. The photographer and writer create, improv, and perform just as much as the bands do.

“I try to get there as early as I can, talk to as many people as I can, and above all make sure I'm where I need to be before the sets start,” Zirpolo said. “I shoot on a fixed low aperture lens, so I have to move around a lot to vary my shots up so that definitely comes into play as well.”

Regarding equipment The Horn is loaned cameras and audio recorders from their parent group, Mesh Media. Reporters from The Horn can record sound with their cameras or where available hook into a soundboard and record off it. The Horn website offer downloads of many of the groups playing in Richmond today.

“That's been a lot of fun and we've seen huge response from our audience to the free downloads on our [website], so that has all been really rewarding.”

This success was not at all guaranteed: The Horn's reporters worked hard to embed themselves into the culture.

“It took us a little bit to really get engrained in the scene here,” Zirpolo said. “People were always receptive to the idea and what we did, but not a lot of folks were aware of our prescience, so we always had to explain who we were and what we were doing.”

In the two years of The Horn's existence, they have impacted the way student music is experienced and they do not plan on slowing down, as Zirpolo put it:

“I think our most important role is to act as a bastion of Richmond to the greater audience outside. Our voices carry farther than amps in a bar ever could, across the vast expanses of the internet, and through this means we can convey the wealth of Richmond music to people across the world and put Richmond on the map as the musical hub that it is.”

The Horn plans to take on bigger endeavors later this year. They hope to highlight some of the venues in Richmond where bands play and also hope to do some documentary work on the Richmond music scene.

They already have forayed into bigger projects with success. One day Zirpolo got the idea of burning a CD with local Richmond on it so he could drive around the city listening to it in his car. The idea eventually became The Horn RVA Presents, a collaboration of 17 groups recorded onto CD and digital download formats. VCU funded the venture and The Horn produced it.

“The whole process was the most fun I’ve ever had working that hard,” Zirpolo said.

After the songs were recorded the entire thing almost became undone. The company that originally was to print the CDs backed out and that left Zirpolo with a last minute decision on what to do. He found Disc Makers, a company in New Jersey that could print the CDs but they had no money left to meet the last-minute shipping cost.

“I drove up to New Jersey to pick up the CD,” Zirpolo said, “but really the whole experience kicked ass. It was so affirming for the Release Show to come together and be such a fun night. The bands were grateful for us putting it together.”

Just like the bands, The Horn RVA continues to forge its path and make a mark on the city of Richmond.

“I feel so fortunate to be here,” Zirpolo said. “I really feel like The Horn can find a place where it belongs within the community.”