



one man's CULTURAL OASIS

Founder of *Life Is Beautiful* festival on a mission to hydrate city's art scene

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SHOOT ON LOCATION AT DOWNTOWN'S
COMMONWEALTH

Authentic. It's an often overused word -- one that rarely, if ever, truly applies. An especially foreign concept to a town like Las Vegas, which built on the premise of betting on the come, oozes of glossy fakery and glitzy spectacle. From magicians and showgirls to dancing water fountains and dueling ferris wheels, it's all one big show to a city that celebrates its superficiality with pomp and pride without a second thought.

Until someone comes along who sees things a bit differently. Someone who takes a long look around, sees beyond the flash, past the rhinestones and neon long enough to acknowledge what we are missing. Someone who believes he can bring a genuine idea to the surface of a place that's all about, well, surface.



Meet Rehan Choudhry. A fairly new transplant to our gaming mecca, arriving in June 2010 to open The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas as Director of Entertainment & Special Events, Choudhry is indeed an anomaly. He's not made his way to Las Vegas to add to the pageantry that is Las Vegas Boulevard and build onto the city's glorified theme park of fancy mega-resorts and adult amusements. Not at all, he's come to the desert to quench our thirst for the arts in the most base of ways.

"Vegas needs a boost. Certainly over the last few years we have proved we need it. We have First Friday and Neon Reverb but aside from that the city is dehydrated with it comes to a strong entertainment community, so we will build it ourselves," explains Choudhry -- like it's just as easy as that to build an oasis...

Choudhry finds himself in our cultural desert, like the many others before him, with a big dream. Having left The Cosmopolitan to start Aurelian Marketing Group, he is the founder of the Life Is Beautiful (L.I.B.) festival which will take place throughout Downtown Las Vegas on the weekend of October 26 and 27. This won't be your average festival. According to Choudhry, it's going to be a highly curated experience offering live music performances, culinary demonstrations, art exhibitions and speaker forums across more than 10 city blocks in and around the Fremont East District with crowds expected to number between 70,000 and 80,000.

"It will be the best of Art Basel, Coachella, South Beach Food & Wine Festival and SXSW all coming together to share one passion," explains Choudhry of L.I.B. "I think it would inspire someone to do more. I am trying to inspire people to share with the broader community and share the arts."

Choudhry, however, is hoping it does much more than just inspire -- hence the name of the festival.

"My philosophy is the world wants everyone to be all they can be," Choudhry says of the festival's feel-good name. "Over the years I have had a good amount of people in my life go through challenges and I have found that people dig themselves in deeper and deeper. And in one case, I couldn't figure out how she couldn't dig herself back out. It took her years but now she embodies that spirit. My philosophy is the world wants everyone to be all they can be."

With such a beautiful and authentic premise, it seems almost too intangible to be realistically executed but Choudhry will not be dissuaded. "When you are six years old you have a dream. As you go through life you find more and more reasons to give up on that dream. Stuff gets in the way. Jobs get in the way. Throughout life there are more and more barriers. But the barriers are false. We just don't see that. This festival is a way to get back there and get inspired."

“

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Choudhry knows a little something about things getting in the way. "I wanted to be a musician," he explains of his childhood dream. "I played the guitar and piano. I didn't believe I could be successful at it so I dove into my studies rather than pursue music."

Instead Choudhry went on to work in IT, had a job with Homeland Security than went to Vanderbilt for his MBA. "My studies taught me to approach things from a case study perspective. I was working in Atlantic City and it wasn't flourishing so to solve the problem I created tent pole events to draw people in to get them familiar with the city." One of the events he founded was the Food Network's Atlantic City Food and Wine Festival which clearly set Choudhry on a path.

"I have been going to festivals for years. They haven't been defining moments in my life but for some people they certainly can be. I would love to hear ten or 15 years from now from a kid who was inspired by something someone said at a Life Is Beautiful festival. I would love to hear that it had an emotional affect," explains Choudhry.

To instill the emotional connection among festival goers, L.I.B. will have speakers take the stage to reveal their moments of epiphany or a successful backstory that was rife with obstacles. "What you will see at our festival are the most accomplished people in their fields. There are celebrity chefs out there who are the best not because they were the best, but

they were able to fight addiction and overcome failures and learned from those experiences to become very good at what they do.”

This is the Learning Is Beautiful aspect of the festival. “I wanted to bridge the gap between the big stage aspect and people’s experiences. I want people to recognize that the stage is only six feet high and that they can get up there too. I am trying to get the chefs, artists and musicians to speak and share their stories of how they got to where they are and the failures and successes they experienced. I want them to speak about when they realized life is beautiful and the barriers they had to overcome. People don’t realize that Steve Jobs failed far more than you think. He failed in his personal relationships, he got fired from his first job, his life story is full of failures. Those are the kinds of stories I want people to hear and people to tell.”

Cue the whole authenticity thing. How many festivals have you been to where you are apt to come away with a life lesson?

But it won’t be all feel-good stories and aha moments that will make L.I.B. different from other festivals. “Most of the big festivals are focused primarily on one category like music with food and art added on as ancillary offerings. All of our components are going to be equal. We are going to be a home for true foodies. We will have the best musical talent of any festival this year. And we will have great art. There

will be a nontraditional presence of street art including graffiti, chalk art, murals...a very nontraditional presentation with a high level of curation. We are trying to acquire theatrical presentations such as “Rock of Ages” but presented in three- to five-song sets. I want to have those types of performances in nontraditional ways.”

The same strategy will serve the food component as L.I.B. will also offer it in a very nontraditional presentation. “I was in Morocco on a family vacation in 2009. What I loved about it was it looked like total chaos. It compels you to try everything. I learned from Morocco that I hate doing giant tastings buffet style. At every station you are compelled to sit down. And there’s such an artistic flair,” he explains of his Moroccan experience. “L.I.B. chefs are each encouraged to come up with their own concept or layout for their area. A lot of them are getting really inspired by the concept. For instance, Scott Conant (Scarpetta and D.O.C.G.) wants to do pig on a spit and serve people.”

But Choudhry’s just not ambitious for the possibilities of L.I.B, he’s ambitious for you too. His goal is to expose people to more than just the specific interest they may come to L.I.B. to seek out or experience.

“You can actually bring these people who are hypersensitive about certain categories and expose them to everything else. For

instance, my mother, she loves food and will come for the food, but because the music is right there she will be exposed to that also.

“All of sudden you will have people who are siloed into one area that will become very wide-eyed about other areas like a big village of food. Scott Conant will be serving spaghetti and people will be taking photos of him and with him, which will cause those who don’t know who Scott is to want to check him out and see what he’s all about. They will be exposed to something they weren’t aware of.”

In five years Choudhry sees L.I.B. quadrupling in size and expanding out to the Arts District and including more of the Fremont Street Experience, The Smith Center, and Clark County’s Amphitheatre, which seems unrealistic but Choudhry is all optimism. “We are just not a city with a \$100-million-dollar stage for Celine Dion, I want to prove you can have a massive festival in a non-traditional footprint. I believe that this will help other cities to see they can do it too. Once we do that, we will prove to other cities, like Detroit, it can be done.”

As for L.I.B. expanding to other cities, Choudhry doesn’t dismiss it outright but instead says, “I want residents to take pride in this festival and know that it’s their own.”

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L.I.B. PRESENTS MONTHLY MUSIC SHOWCASE TO GET THE PARTY STARTED

Life Is Beautiful festival is presenting its fifth showcase in a series of monthly musical events. Each month, the festival hosts free local concerts at varying Downtown Las Vegas venues with the intent of showcasing and selecting a few homegrown acts to play at the highly-anticipated Life Is Beautiful festival October 26 & 27.

The June Showcase is being held at Downtown’s Beauty Bar located at 517 Fremont Street on Wednesday, June 5 from 7 p.m. to midnight and will feature:

Kid Meets Cougar - This duo is an “electro-organic” A/V collaboration. During live performances, Courtney and Brett multitask on multiple instruments, trade vocal duties, and trigger home-made projection mapped videos to accompany their special brand of tuneful, loop-friendly electro-pop. This will be the group’s first local show since June 2012.

Twin Brother - This Las Vegas bred experimental band pulls influence from bands like Fugazi, Flying Lotus, Aphex Twin, Mac

DeMarco, Tortoise, Burial, Grizzly Bear and Animal Collective.

XNY- XNY duo Pam and Jacob met in Boston while attending Berkley School of Music. They break genre boundaries, and create a unique and palatable sound that is a combination of passion and simplicity. Half of the group, Jacob, is a Las Vegas born native who graduated from Green Valley High School in 2008.

Cinematic - Formed at the Las Vegas Academy, the self-produced visual/instrumental musical group is a regular many First Friday events, and have even played throughout France.

Trevor and The Joneses - Formed in early 2012, this Las Vegas bred rock ‘n’ roll band has already played over 50 shows. Their sound has been influenced by bands like Oasis, Nada Surf and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

The Pax Trend - The Las Vegas indie rock band has been performing since 2009 and draw musical influence from bands like The Beatles and The Strokes. □