

Backstage Heroes: Ms. Momo's Crusade for 'Not-Rock' in the City



By Hiya Swanhuysen
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“You can see drag mariachi, and then two hours later you can listen to vintage reggae. An hour later you can listen to Balkan music,” laughs Ms. Momo, describing the San Francisco she loves.

More accurately, it’s the whole Bay Area she admires: “The next day you can go to early music in the East Bay. You can go to Alameda to listen to swing. You can go to Sebastopol and listen to jazz. You can go to Oakland and listen to alternative music, accordion music, classical music, hybrid music, experimental music. There’s just a wide range of opportunities!”

She’s not exaggerating in the least. The rich cultural landscape here is important to a lot of people, of course, but in the case of Momo, a DIY producer/curator based in the Mission District, the independent music and performance scene is something she doesn’t merely enjoy — over the past decade, she’s helped create it as well.

By day, Momo is the event and membership coordinator at a national nonprofit, a job she loves. But Momo — activist, singer, visual and performance artist — is perhaps best known for her ongoing

production outfit the [Songbird Festival](#), booking shows at the Milk Bar, the Red Poppy Art House, the Make-Out Room, Amnesia, Viracocha, the San Francisco Community Music Center, Revolution Cafe and El Valenciano.

The normally kinetic and chirpy 44-year-old becomes preternaturally calm and focused when describing her motivations, her priorities, and why she does what she does. She was, she says, “super-inspired” by (current owner of the Rite Spot) Annie Southworth, whose independent music booking at small Mission District venues resonated with Momo, at the time a young transplant from Denver.

Momo mentions memorable shows at music-friendly places like 12 Galaxies, the Attic (now the [sterile](#) 24th Street Bar) and Balancoire, the still-dynamic home of the aforementioned drag mariachi shenanigans. Like Southworth, Momo’s focus veers even further away from mainstream than you might think possible: The music she likes is, for the most part, “Outside of the normal rock ‘n’ roll grid. I curate shows where it’s trying to mix genres, to mix age ranges, to bring different communities together.”



Ms. Momo.

To give an idea of the typical Songbird show, consider Aug. 22, 2010, at Amnesia. That night, the music was in two parts: An early show with “Americana Roots, Jazz, and Blues Songbirds,” including Emily Anne’s Delights, featuring Emily Anne Reed, who would go on to appear on *American Idol*. Reed is more successful and polished since that experience, but even back in ‘10, the Amnesia stage found her bouncily singing standards, flirting with the audience, and, frankly, killing it. So that was part one. Part two, the late show, was called “Guitar Heyday: Funk, Soul, and Rock Rock Rock,” and had a young Con Brio opening up for a supergroup of sorts called Shake Well.

Made up of twin attention-getters Robin Coomer and Eric McFadden, the band was baldly aiming to get everyone horny. Coomer’s Farrah Fawcett hairdo and McFadden’s swaggering look-at-my-big-talent attitude had the room — including Momo, found that night as usual dancing

right in front — in their thrall. This was a typical Songbird Presents show: Many things to many people. Momo’s approach, this combination of musical styles — it could be called “not-rock.” Collectively, the genres are so marginalized that most venues won’t accept any type of music mentioned in this article.

Brass bands, for example, are party music in other parts of the world, but you won’t find them in many U.S. venues. Same goes for choirs. Happily, you can find both of those in the Mission District, thanks to

Momo and a small army of like-minded backstage types. Of course, she loves to rock, too. And across the board, acts she promoted or booked years ago are continually growing, like the Ray-Charles-inspired R&B of Quinn Deveau, national touring funk-soul band Con Brio, or potential not-rock poster girl, Ethiopian-American folk-jazz chanteuse and TED fellow Meklit.

One of Momo's most frequent co-conspirators is the owner of Amnesia, Shawn Magee, who enthusiastically books not-rock. He pays for it, literally, via lower attendance, but he wouldn't have it any other way. In the sweaty basement "green room" of his bar, I find him getting ready to star in and direct an all-male strip revue; it's a benefit for the rebuilding of an elementary school in Mexico. He seems relaxed, and he's glad I'm writing about Momo.

"She is the most pumped and enthusiastic supporter of live music and performance that this neighborhood knows," he says. "Hands down, there is nobody who loves it more than she does." We're frequently interrupted by extremely nervous young men filing into the basement while he reiterates the importance of Momo's offbeat choices. "It's easy to book a popular band, and have them come down and fill a room. I think she's more interested in people's projects," he continues, "and she pulls from all kinds of weird performance." He observes that before social media, place-based cultural communities had an easier time forming, that people tended to trust a place and its offerings, rather than counting "likes" beforehand. Of Momo particularly, he says, "I used to give her just carte blanche, because I trust her taste and we agree about performance... and people would just come." But his larger point is slightly different — as both bookers and bar owners know, "The best shows that happen here are sometimes the least attended."

Magee, it turns out, is leaving the business. He's recently sold Amnesia and plans to move to Mexico, with no word on whether the new owners are into not-rock.

When I ask how she got started, Momo says one major push came from another Amnesia stalwart: former bartender, booker, janitor, performer and jack-of-all-trades Sol Crawford, since transplanted to Portland. He pointed out that she was already doing the job — "connecting bands, handing out fliers, promoting them online and verbally" — and she should put her name on it, get credit. She took him at his word. And although Crawford has lived in Oregon since 2009, he remembers exactly where Momo sits in the local culture's family tree when I get in touch with him.

"If there were a grand equation," Crawford says, "to express all the variables that went into creating the vibrant music community of San Francisco for the past 10-plus years — not a music 'scene,' but a gathering of people who truly love and live music, making it, sharing it, enjoying it, breathing it — then Momo would be a constant in that formula."

<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2015/07/26/backstage-heroes-ms-momos-crusade-for-not-rock-in-the-city/>