

THEO ADAMS climbs the stairs at La La Las to hear some emerging high school music talent.

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# Young Blood



Images: © Billy Aye

## Energetic, inspiring and original talents on show making local history

London, Paris, New York... Wollongong. When most people think of musical cities, historical global hotspots come to mind but on Australia's east coast a new musical environment is taking shape. Beneath the sand and salt of the coastal collective is an emerging music scene not to be understated.

Local bands such as Pacific Avenue, Hockey Dad, Teen Jesus and the Jean Teasers have latterly been making their names on the Australian stage and iconic local venue La La La's latest endeavour is determined to unearth more seaside stardom. In partnership with record label Farmer & The Owl and Bulli High School



teacher David Strange, up and coming talents were scouted to perform at the inaugural Young Blood event on 14 June which showcased 10 local acts in their iconic South Coast stage.

Upon entering Wollongong's busiest music venue, you are met with a sense of community and excitement for La La La's first Young Blood event, as muttering muffles the tweaking of guitar tunes, amplifier feedback and mic checks. The event, showcasing talent from numerous local high schools (Bulli High School, Kanahooka High, Five Islands Secondary College and Wollongong High School of the Performing Arts), is a demonstration of rich talent of students often muffled by the inner-city chords of capacious colleges.

First to the stage, Amelie Rojas, is a Year 12 student from Bulli High School, whose smooth, crisp voice flows through the audience. Starting with a rendition of Lizzy McAlpine's Soccer Practice, Rojas's control shines as she balances the strong strumming of chords with demanding vocals. However, it is her original song There's Something Funny, which resonates with the audience and myself. Raw and honest vocals match the simple yet poignant lyricism which cut through the crisp chords echoing from her acoustic guitar and confront the audience with visceral emotion.

Following that wonderful performance, Jesse Blanch and Henry Jergunsun jump straight into Pink Floyd's Wish You Were Here, where the pair's chemistry serves as

Wollongong's answer to a young Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, with subtle nods furthering confidence as the performance progresses. Blanch then leads solo with striking vocals and the strong strum of his guitar booming into the audience.



A short interlude ensues in the event's progress. Standing there, shoes sticking to what I'm sure is Friday night's lingering spilt drinks, there's a wonderful communal atmosphere which engulfs the air. Fellow students, parents and audience members spread amongst the ground floor and mezzanine, delighted conversations marvelling at the successes of the performers. It makes me wonder, why these events are not a regular occurrence within the area.

With an endless supply of creativity and talent, it's astounding to see the rarity of these events, which is all the more important why recognising and showcasing this talent is beneficial to both musicians and promoters alike. Chatting to Jeb Taylor (owner of Farmer & The Owl) he says that "it's important to develop artists and related jobs for young people in the

area they call home, rather than them having to relocate for opportunities".

Jeb has recently offered the NSW Department of Education a 75% discount on the production of 6 vinyl records, aiming to develop, support and bolster young talent within the state. This discount demonstrates the endeavour that musical organisations and companies such as Jeb's need to show, not only cultivating young local artists but also reinforcing their own companies in a harmonious musical environment.





Right, back to the show. Entering the stage, is Wollongong Performing Art's Sam Vukelic and her band ensemble, swaggering to the mic, drums and bass, it's clear we are in for a treat. Vukelic's vocals pluck stale air from the room and transform it into an energised environment. Her song *Lady in the Moon*, sings of escapism, linking the moon as a metaphor for attachment whilst her band members deliver slick bass lines and drum snares to match the unique lyrics. Their second song, *Touch*, exhibits the strength of the lead's voice, with powerful vocal delivery impressing the audience.

Two energetic bands, *Shadow of the Stone* (introduced by MC Ike Stroud as "straight out of Kanahooka") and *The Neapolitans* continue the strong sounds of band ensembles before star singer Alicia Barclay enters the fray.

Delivering a jazz-swinging rendition of *Seven Nation Army* followed by an acoustic cover of *Sweet Child O Mine*, Barclay's vocals remind me of a young Missy Higgins, with intent and strong delivery shining in her voice and cadence.

Finishing up the performances are three young students from Bulli High whose personal lyrics and musical ingenuity further the incredible talent on display. First up, Freya Peterson sings of loss and hardship in her song *Piece of Me*, where her smooth and fresh vocals aid the sincerity of her performance. Then, Year 10 prodigy Penelope Church delivers one of my favourite performances of the evening, *All My Friends Love You*, where her lyrics of confusion and determination to navigate isolation within relationships are both unbelievably mature and wise and, importantly, sound impeccable.

Before DJ Ralphie Scott finalises the evening with Fred Again-like beats, it is Alara Livingstone who shines as one of the standout acts. As she sings her original song Seasons, I hear a young Phoebe Bridgers, to which (as if she hears the jot of my pen on my dingy notebook filled with scrabble scores and smudges) provides a beautiful and emotive rendition of Bridgers Graceland Too. The room goes still as Livingstone's vocal range, tonal cadence and stage presence tricks you into thinking a Californian singer is in front of you.

The feedback cuts, and so does the show. Before I leave however, I snatch a quick chat with La La La's owner Nathan Stratton. "It's fantastic," he says as performers exit the venue with excited smiles, "young people playing music" is what he wants. Stratton explains how battling against a tough time for the music industry through young performers is the way forward, and when asked if these singers may well return to the Wollongong stage, he says "oh absolutely".

The event, in partnership with Farmer & The Owl - who have released iconic albums such as Hockey Dad's Blend Inn and aided Bulli High School in creating its own vinyl pressing - is one of the first of its kind in Australia.

Speaking more with Jeb Taylor, I understand what's next in this local music promotion: "Young Blood is really about providing opportunity to young people to get confidence in performing but to also understand the business side and realities of the industry...hopefully this can be the introduction and we see them playing their own shows".



It's this platforming that creates events like Saturday, which to Taylor, resemble similar pathways to previously managed bands. "The first time I saw Hockey Dad playing, there were only a handful of other people there, they were raw, but they had talent, like a number of artists that played on Saturday". Jeb describes that there are many facets to supporting young artists, "first and foremost is their own determination, drive and hard work" and that his biggest takeaways have been "keep working at your songs, take the opportunities that arise and be prepared to work hard and sacrifice plenty of your time".

It is so imperative to platform stages and events like this which showcase these talents and supporters who encourage young musicians which, as Stratton states, "get the foundations for grassroots music". Wollongong is a diverse city, where music runs down the Princes highway and through every suburb and classroom, and Young Blood serves as a triumphant success of this rich talent pool. It won't be the last time I visit, and it won't be the last time you hear from these singers.

-Theo Adams





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