



Dancing in the Street

Three local bands on the thriving San Francisco music scene.

by Juhi Gupta

To listen to the playlist that accompanies this piece, open the search bar in Spotify, tap the camera icon, and point it at this code:



Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Santana. At one point in the not-so-distant past, San Francisco was home to a burgeoning music scene—one ripe with potential, with images of young people dancing in the street drifting across the national airwaves. Fast-forward to today, and it's become

a common refrain that musicians, like other artist types, are fleeing the city for more wallet-friendly locales. Even our very own hometown publications herald the demise of the arts in San Francisco, frequently posing the question, Is SF's music scene dead?

The answer is a resounding *no*: what you don't get from the mainstream media is that hundreds of musicians live, record, and perform in San Francisco, comprising a tightly knit social fabric that you can catch a glimpse of in the wild at local venues like Amado's or Rickshaw Stop. Due to no one reason in particular, the current scene is largely underground; shows at dive bars or people's houses, lightly publicized via Instagram or word-of-mouth, often draw upwards of a hundred people. New bands form from the rubble of old ones in a constantly regenerative cycle, creating the modern-day version of the San Francisco sound. I sat down with a few of the bands who have been making waves to get their take on what it's all about.

HIT ME, HAROLD

On a Tuesday evening in late March, I pull up to a quirky four-bedroom in foggy Parkside. The house is perched at the top of a hill at 28th and Quintara, with an unbeatable view of the sunset over the Pacific. A wooden sign hangs above the garage door, pronouncing the building "The Harold Hut."

Interior design-wise, The Harold Hut exists somewhere between DIY music venue and postgrad apartment. Multicolored lights illuminate all sorts of paraphernalia rescued from the street, from a weathered Burmese harp to a chalkboard deli menu to a working light-up Subway sign. In the kitchen are the boys of SF-based math-rock band hit me, Harold—drummer Max Volen, vocalist/bassist Chris Lee (known as "Tofu"), and vocalist/guitarist Jack Connor, all twenty-five. They're blasting Nir-

Jon Kruppe, frontman of Plum, drones on his Stratocaster on stage at the Knockout on March 31, 2022.

vana's 1992 *Live at Reading* over a Bluetooth speaker while they cook a hearty dinner of shrimp and chicken tacos. A broken red clock fails to tell the time as they open their Estrella Jaliscos with a wall-mounted bottle opener shaped like a face—they call it “Emperor Norton,” referencing that one-and-only eccentric from nineteenth-century San Francisco.

As we dine, the boys regale me with the origin story of hit me, Harold, which begins in La Mirada, California—around four hundred miles south of San Francisco on the border of Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Max and Tofu have known each other since kindergarten; they were introduced to Jack when he transferred into their third grade class from Australia.

They began playing music together in 2013 as basically the only band at their Southern California high school, caught up in a pay-to-play promoter-based scene that was more trouble than it was worth. That is, until a guy from a local band called Hillary Chilton started talking to them outside a show and invited them to play at a house venue called the Palisades.

“They’re the only reason we’re doing this,” maintain the boys.

The fact that someone took a chance on them when they were in high school set them up for success: when they all moved up to San Francisco for college in 2016, they had already spent four years cutting their teeth in the Inland Empire’s robust DIY music scene.

They started by playing “shitty blink-182 covers”—indeed, in their middle school class photo (pinned up above the couch in the living room), Max and Jack stand in the front row wearing complementary blink-182 graphic T-shirts. In the almost ten years that have transpired since they started playing, their sound has come a long way. Drawing from a mix of pop-punk, melodic hardcore, and Midwest emo influences (The Wonder Years, Stay Ahead of the Weather, A Great Big Pile of Leaves), the band deftly navigates musical territory familiar to anyone with an iPod and a side bang in 2010 (catchy,

upbeat verses, melodic guitar riffs, emotive vocals verging on sentimentality) while avoiding being typecast as just another emo band. Part of this is due to their math-rock bent: the band contrasts their signature silliness with a rhythmic complexity common to more prog rock-oriented bands, to great effect. Hit me, Harold songs don’t have any parts that repeat, keeping the audiences at their live shows constantly moving.

The band estimates they’ve played somewhere between two hundred and three hundred shows, touring along the coast and playing gigs at makeshift venues, from auto-body shops to friends’ garages. For many years, hit me, Harold played constantly, doing a show almost every week. This inevitably got exhausting, especially alongside their day jobs—Max is a geologist working in residential construction, Jack works in childcare at an elementary school, and Tofu does sound design. Now, they take it slower, playing fewer shows in order to, as Max says, “soak ’em up a li’l more.”

For a band that’s been playing together so long (and so well), one might wonder why hit me, Harold hasn’t made it big. One answer, from Jack, is that “it would take effort in areas we are not good in”—notably, self-promotion, social media marketing, and generally being hustlers. But another more compelling reason is that it’s just not their project.

“It depends on your intentions,” Tofu says. “Some people play to try and get big, whatever that means. Some people play to be a part of a community.”

At the end of the day, hit me, Harold is a band born of a genuine friendship between three guys who just enjoy making music together. “I would never refer to these guys as my bandmates, or even my roommates,” Tofu says. They echo the DIY mentality of other local bands, like Burd, Mint, The Brankas, Buzzed Lightbeer, and Juicebumps—“dudes that do it because they love playing music.”

For hit me, Harold, it’s all about the community. They have found themselves part of a group of like-minded creatives across state lines dedicated to the DIY ethos. The boys have the most fun when they’re meeting new musicians that they vibe with—when “hanging out” isn’t just a drink at a bar but a shared effort to pull something off. At any given show, they generally recognize a large fraction of the audience.

“I can just be like ‘Hey, you’ve been at every show we’ve played in the past three years, but I don’t know your name, what’s up?’” Jack says. He and the rest of hit me, Harold see themselves as first and foremost a live band. “Having a recording is cool, but we exist to play shows and have fun with people,” Jack says.



We move to the living room, where on the wall hangs a collage that Jack made from an old photo album of a stranger's trip to Japan. A basketball hoop sits above the entryway, a pair of underwear clinging to it tenuously. Under the TV is a glow-in-the-dark bong in the shape of Scrat from *Ice Age*. In the stairwell hangs a cryptic garage-sale painting of someone's grandfather, which doubled as the cover for hit me, Harold's first album in 2019, *Jebon Lames*.

The pandemic hit hit me, Harold hard. "COVID fucked up our plans for music that year," Tofu says. The band had a series of shows lined up that had to be canceled due to the lockdown. However, the free time meant they could hunker down and write most of their new record—of course, alongside a healthy dose of Wii Sports, pinball, and bocce ball.

The upcoming record, their second, is titled *Performance Enhancing Drugs*—borrowed from a line from a YouTube video, just as the band name itself is borrowed from sketch comedy show *The Whitest Kids U' Know*. ("The entire band is based on inside jokes," Jack says.) When asked when the record will be released, Tofu says, "Never"; Max says, "End of this year"; and Jack says, "When it's done."

PLUM

On the other side of the bay, in Longfellow, Oakland, Jon Kruppe pours a cup of Earl Grey tea, a lazy light streaming into his kitchen. The songwriter, guitarist, and third-year physics PhD stands a towering six feet five, casting a shadow on the makeshift kitchen island. Along with mismatched socks and slicked-back hair, wet from a shower, he wears a beige T-shirt reping Bad Dog Jump—a local band that his friends play in.

Jon is the frontman of Plum, an up-and-coming East Bay indie rock band. Plum is centered around Jon's melancholic, reflective songwriting, involving

September

I bought whole beans by accident & spent the morning sanding them down to their simplest parts. The Ziploc's insides dusted black. I brought out the rolling pin, blunt end of a knife. I admit all I want is convenience, coffee dripping straight to my tongue. I want simple. Outside is the hottest recorded day in San Francisco, or the conclusion of the coolest summer for decades, depending on how precisely I can angle toward the future from my elbows, their precarious balance on the kitchen counter.

—Alli Cruz

heavy use of drones and space, as well as dramatic emotional builds. Their songs can be thought of as fleshed-out singer-songwriter music that draws from varied traditions—from ambient to emo, shoegaze to drone, Slowdive to Sparklehorse. In many ways, this inventive approach to songwriting, alongside the members' deep knowledge of and affinity for different genres of music, creates a band that is hard to pin down to one subgenre of indie rock.

Growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, Jon got into music early on, when his brother came home from college with an iPod armed with thousands of illegally downloaded rock songs. Despite his having focused seriously on guitar through high school and college, Plum is the first band he's ever played in. In college, Jon stopped playing music for a bit. "I got intimidated and self-conscious, and convinced myself that I wasn't good at writing music," he recalls.

Luckily, at his UC Berkeley orientation in 2019, Jon met drummer and fellow graduate student Alex Liebman-Peláez. Jon complimented Alex's Big Thief shirt, and they "sat there for two hours talking about music and *Das Kapital*," Jon says. Shortly after, they started jamming together. In early 2020, they began renting their current

studio, where Alex finally had access to a drum kit. "The first time we played there, it was just a completely different thing," Alex says.

Later that year, bassist Daniel Mamane happened to move into Jon's house after finding it on Craigslist. Jon and Alex invited Daniel to play with them soon after, and Plum was born.

"During the pandemic, playing with Plum was something to do," Daniel says. "I was working at The Complex [a music studio and performance space] and had no job. I'm a live sound engineer, and there was no work." While Plum is Daniel's first experience playing in a band, he brings a wealth of experience in music production. Soon after starting school at SF State, he got a job mixing bands at on-campus venue The Depot, and he further honed his skills in the Department of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts (BECA). In addition to Plum, he plays bass in SF-based rock-and-roll band Goodworld.

As a newer band without roots in the Bay Area, breaking into the music scene and organically developing an audience was tough for Plum—especially during the pandemic. They had to get creative: with venues still shuttered due to COVID-19 in early 2021,

friends of the band began putting on a local outdoor showcase in Oakland called Porchfest, which soon became Plum's de facto venue.

"Porchfest ended up being a small community event that really extended beyond the confines of nerdy physics grad students, really involving the rest of that block and neighborhood," Alex says. Porchfest has since expanded to San Francisco, popping up at a backyard in the Mission earlier in the year. "The scene is still pretty insular, but we've started to be recognized by bands in SF that we really like," Jon says.

Since beginning to play shows last year, Plum has been steadily growing in popularity. Their past few shows were "weirdly well-attended," Jon says, with the last one netting almost a hundred people. Their live show at The Complex in February 2022 drew some of the highest viewership of the last year.

Jon guesses their nascent success might be "a reflection that we really care about this a lot, we put in a lot of work, and people recognize that." He adds that Plum is lucky to exist "within a community of friends, acquaintances, colleagues, musicians, young people, artistically minded people, and supportive people that not only want to see us succeed but like what we do."

It's clear that integral to the rise of Plum is their steadfast dedication to building and investing in the local scene. A big part of it is musicians supporting musicians. "Music is one of the strongest ways I know how to connect with people," Alex says.

"We go out of our way to go to other bands' shows, and they go out of their way to come to ours," Jon echoes. "We also try to make our shows inclusive and welcoming for people to be at, like by trying as much as possible to not book all-male bills."

When it comes to gaining traction as a newer band, Plum often finds itself navigating unfamiliar terrain. "We're always trying to home in on what we care about, what our principles are, and it can be stressful at times," Jon says. "We see all these bands promoting

themselves and getting social media followers, but we have to ask ourselves, do we care about getting big, or do we care about making the art that we actually believe in? We always try to follow what sounds most exciting to us."

Asked for advice for other bands starting out, Jon furrows his brow. "The thing we're constantly reminding ourselves of is that just doing something is better than thinking about it or perfecting it. Just sit down and do it—write music, email bookers, reach out to other bands, play shows with the songs you've got, accept who you are."

Plum released their first single earlier this year, an earworm of a track called "Shirt Off," and they are now recording the rest of their upcoming album, to be released over the summer.

MEDSCOOL

On a Saturday night, throngs of young people with piercings, neon hair, and leather boots gather at Milk Bar to mosh to the musical stylings of Medscool. Crooning, folksy, sentimental, angst-ridden—front woman Maria Doncajour merges punk sensibilities with catchy melodies, alternating between "screamy and slow and singy" vocals, in her words. To her right, a stack of old TVs morphs the band into abstract purple blobs that are projected

back onto the stage as part of an elaborate lo-fi visual setup.

Medscool is made up of Maria on vocals/guitar, Autumn Carroll on lead guitar, Marika Stuurman on bass, and Abri Crocitto on drums. I catch up with Maria, Autumn, and Abri at El Farolito on 24th and Alabama, where we munch on chips and salsa under fluorescent lights while it drizzles outside. (Marika isn't able to join us—she's driving back from performing at a festival in Idaho.)

Maria wears her sky-blue hair in two messy space buns. She has an industrial piercing in one ear and a turquoise stud in her nose, and dons statement earrings of gold-painted leaves. Beneath an oversized windbreaker, she wears patterned cuffed jeans that she refers to as her "clown pants."

Medscool is primarily a vehicle for Maria's creative expression as a songwriter and multi-instrumentalist. She describes the music as indie with garage-rock tendencies, referencing late-2000s San Francisco sweetheart Ty Segall as inspiration. Originally interested in theater and dance, Maria began her music career at nineteen, when she picked up playing drums in local indie band Lofi Legs, through which she met Marika. Eventually Marika invited Maria to jam with her (Marika wanted to get experience playing with more women) and in 2017, they started playing together in a band called Secret Secret.

THE PAINTED LADIES





Over time, Maria began to focus on her own songwriting. “I wanted more of my own thing where I could make the decisions,” she says. She started Medscool to bring her songs into the world and to create a group to lift up queer and femme musicians. That’s how she found Abri and Autumn.

Abri, with unnervingly green eyes and a bleached-blond pixie cut, has a shyness about them that could be mistaken for standoffishness. They explain over their Super Burrito how they grew up in Reno, moved here to study sculpture at the Academy of Art, and now live in Pacifica. Alongside Medscool, they’ve been the drummer in UMB, a “dreamo slunge” band, since 2017. They say they feel much more comfortable being openly queer in the Bay Area. “Going to public school in Reno, no one talked about that kind of stuff,” they say.

“Nowhere else in the world could be better for being a trans chick,” agrees Autumn, scarfing down a taco. She sits next to me in an orange letterman jacket and bold winged eyeliner, with a spiked black fanny pack and myriad facial piercings. Autumn began playing guitar in high school in a garage-rock band called The Twitches. Besides Medscool, she heads up her own outfit as Autumn Carroll. When she’s not playing in bands, she does sound at The Knockout and likes to work on

machinery, motorcycles and cars—she even made a glove that shoots fire. Autumn’s always been the lead person in the bands she’s been in, and she likes that Medscool has given her the opportunity to step back a bit.

Later that week, Marika meets me at the Martha & Bros. in Noe Valley wearing dangly earrings, a couple of layered sweaters, and Doc Martens mary janes. She is primarily a guitarist and songwriter, but she studied classical singing in high school at SF’s Ruth Asawa School of the Arts (SOTA). After graduating from SOTA, she studied audio engineering and radio broadcasting at SF State’s BECA. She plays in her own project under the name Marika Christine, in which Maria plays bass.

All of Medscool agrees that playing in an all queer/femme band is markedly different from other settings. For one, the members feel safer expressing themselves during the creative process. “We are all way closer, and so much nicer to each other,” Maria says. Marika adds that “working with non-men is a totally different experience musically. Jamming with guys can feel kind of intimidating sometimes.” Abri agrees, coming to the indie scene from the adjacent punk scene, where there was “very little female expression.” Autumn feels that, unlike other bands she’s been in, creative differences in Medscool are

dealt with easily, with respect and without ego. An added benefit is that people are “just more stoked when femmes play music.”

Maria, Marika, and Autumn were all born and raised in San Francisco; Maria was homeschooled and grew up in the Balboa Park area, while Marika was raised near Mount Davidson. Autumn grew up in the Sunset, moved around the Bay Area for a bit, and now lives in Berkeley. Since the summer of 2021, Medscool has been playing shows in SF roughly once a month, with appearances at Bottom of the Hill and The Knockout. They’re currently working on their upcoming album, *Raw*, which they hope to have out by the end of August. Maria notes that the album is about the intense feelings she experienced over the course of last year, a difficult one for her. Her lyrics speak to finding strength in vulnerability:

Rocks they crumble off the side of my head

Karma never could have said what I said

Earth is shaking, cracking under my feet

My body’s failing, hold me now until the pressure’s gone.

The web of the SF music scene grows more intricate the further you zoom in: Maria has fond memories of sliding down the stairs at The Harold Hut on a cardboard box; Alex helped create a DIY venue in Portland that hosted touring SF bands; Jon met Marika when Secret Secret played at Porchfest last year. The local music scene is an abstract rhizome, affected in every direction and dimension by a fickle apparatus of musicians, bookers, fans, and venues, against the backdrop of an ever-changing city.

Without a doubt, local bands want to see new faces at their shows—but there may be some obstacles to getting there. Maria and Autumn are the first to admit that the SF indie music scene can be cliquey and somewhat insular. Autumn quotes a fellow musician friend,

Refloating

The gray whales, the great whales,
linger below the bridge that woos tourists,

fog like a shawl on the hills.
In the 1800s the grays dropped

to two thousand. Now, says the *Chronicle*,
they count tens of thousands,

minus nine who died in San Francisco Bay
last winter, emaciated, ship-struck,

stranded. Onshore, their internal organs
crush beneath the weight of themselves

as volunteers cover them with blankets,
wait for high tide, form a bucket brigade

and a human wall in the shallows.
It's called refloating, when they find the deep again.

—Susie Meserve

Scarlett Levinson, a member of local psych-rock band Fauxes, as describing the scene as “ten bands cosplaying as thirty bands.” Frequently, local colleges are the progenitors of the scene—at SF State, but also at UC Berkeley and USF, many bands form while members are undergraduates.

Reinforcing these preexisting subgroups can be hard to avoid. “Bands will know each other, so they book each other,” Maria says. “But that’s why bookers are cool—because they survey the whole scene and put together bills representing a lot of different genres.” In particular, Abri shouts out Psyched! Radio, a local station that recently booked Medscool at The Knockout alongside freestyling rappers and some R&B.

“If people care about bands, they find them in their local town, not on

Spotify,” Daniel tells me over a Hamm’s at The Knockout just after Plum performs. His recommendation? “Go to shows you don’t know. See music you’ve never heard before. Give it a try. I would love to see live music being enjoyed by people who just want to go out.”

George Rosenthal, producer at local recording studio and streaming venue The Complex, recommends a “super cheat—this weird, Web 1.0 aggregate website” called foopee.com that lists shows for every day of the week at every venue in the Bay Area. Local musician Oso de Oro also has a Bay Area Rock and Indie playlist on Spotify that is updated frequently with new local music.

Despite it being a little tougher than it should be to be in the know, it is affirming to recognize that the music scene in San Francisco is still flourish-

ing. The hit me, Harold crew agree that there are more house shows now than there used to be, and the crowd keeps getting younger and younger. Before moving to the Bay Area, Jon had read “all these *New York Times*-type articles about how the Bay Area is dead, tech people are uninteresting, and all the culture has been driven out.” There are some elements of truth to this, he says. “There is massive gentrification pushing out people of color, and the indie music scene is largely white, but there are still a ton of bands and artists in this area. People are doing cool stuff and going for it, and everyone really supports each other.”

Maria, Marika, and Autumn all refute the claim that artists are leaving the Bay Area. In their experience, musicians in particular tend to stick around because of the thriving DIY scene here. “There’s such a good musical and artistic community here,” Marika says. “That’s a big reason I never wanted to leave San Francisco—all my friends are here.”

These young musicians have all stuck around because of a deep love for San Francisco: the hit me, Harold boys, originally from SoCal, consider the city their home, a place where they “genuinely feel like a part of it.” As Tofu says, “In downtown LA, you smile at someone and they look at you weird. Here, you can start talking to a random person on the bus and have a whole conversation with them.” The band members reminisce fondly about a now-shuttered venue called New Judnich’s, a “shitty dive bar in Portola where you’d call an hour before and ask, ‘Can we play a show tonight?’”

However tangled the network of the San Francisco music scene may seem, with its myriad cast of characters and overlapping connections, new and old pressure points and scrappy DIY ethos, it is at its core a very simple thing: a social scene based on real relationships between everyday musicians who are just trying to figure out how to do what they love in the city they call home. ♦