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## Summer of Live!

Leading smash Summer Fest and grassroots-rock initiatives, Afra pushes H-Town as a live-music mecca | *By Peter Barnes | Photography by Debora Smail* |

**SOUND SAVIOR**  
A gadfly journo and godfather of Houston's finally emerging, indie-rock-driven live-music scene, Afra was an Iraqi citizen until he was 20. He expects to top 2009's Summer Fest turnout of 15,000 at next month's sophomore run in Eleanor Tinsley Park.

It's late Monday afternoon, but Omar Afra is nowhere near the middle of his workday, which is rife with duties and distractions but trained on a singular purpose—to see that Houston becomes a live-music hub to rival Austin. He pushes his agenda from the windowless, Westheimer Curve-area office of his irreverent *Free Press Houston* arts and music newspaper, amid the warm affections of an unkempt mutt named Lucy and a parade of musicians passing through (one of whom offers to buy Afra's well-worn bass amp in the hallway).

“The depth of talent in Austin is no more than in Houston,” he says ebulliently, sparing nary an f-bomb in his earnest presentation. “It’s not. It’s just they’ve got the f\*\*\*\*\*g platforms. They’ve got the venues; they’ve got the festivals. So considering the infrastructure and money we have in Houston, there’s no reason we shouldn’t have better platforms.”

And so, before he heads home to his mid-century Montrose bungalow to catch up with wife Andrea and their two young sons, Afra will oversee a music video for a local band, check in on his own live-music venue Mango's (403 Westheimer Rd., 713.522.8903) and negotiate with city leaders street closures for a popular block-party event. He'll also apply some finishing touches to plans for what may be the most important live-music festival to ever hit Houston—next month's Summer Fest, for which the 32-year-old has secured performers Flaming Lips and

Slim Thug to head a lineup of more than 70 local and regional acts on at least three stages.

Afra created Summer Fest last year and defied both skeptics and wilting heat by drawing 15,000 hipsters, punkers, metal heads and rap lovers to an event that garnered statewide notoriety overnight. This year's fest is all but guaranteed to top the first, with its Lollapalooza-level headliners, beer garden and vast food court in Eleanor Tinsley Park.

Propping his feet up and spinning in his desk chair, Afra seems at home in the tattoo-happy world he's created at the center of Houston's indie-rock scene, which is exploding lately, seeming poised to lead the city finally to prominence as a live-music destination. It's a distinction that's long eluded H-Town, even as it's developed a rep as an alternative to the East and West Coasts for hip-hop stars, and as a breeding ground for country artists.

“For a while it seemed that Houston was this weekend-warrior kind of city for live music,” Afra thoughtfully explains. But during events like Summer Fest and at thriving venues like Super Happy Fun Land, Walter's and his Mango's, “You can see music eight days a f\*\*\*\*\*g week. You go there on a Monday night, and there will be 12 f\*\*\*\*\*g bands. It's berserker.”

Not surprisingly, Afra's a longtime rock lover and musician in his own right, having taken in his first concert—ZZ Top at the Summit, now Joel Osteen's Lakewood church—when he was in fifth grade. Soon after, Afra and his pals started Delicious Milk, a band inspired by the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Faith No More.

Afra taught bass guitar for cash through college at U of H and then the University of Arizona, where he studied poli-sci until moving back to care for his ailing father. Shortly after his dad's death, Afra founded the *Free Press Houston* in 2003. Born in Beirut to Lebanese and Iraqi immigrants—Afra retained Iraqi citizenship until he was 20—he says it was harrowing for a lapsed Muslim to start an anti-war publication amid the second Gulf War, but the fledgling paper soon found its niche. “We see ourselves as not the newspaper about arts and music,” he says, “but the newspaper put out *by* artists and musicians.”

Recently he and his staff have had more to keep track of, due in part to Afra's own dogged efforts. “In any music scene, you have people always harkening back to ‘the good old days,’” he says. “For the Houston music scene, I think right now is the good old days.” ■