

ARTS

“Time flies over us, but leaves its shadow behind.”
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE THE MARBLE FAUN

REVIEW

Battle of the Bands brought funk and energy to Yale Farm

BY ANNA ZOLTOWSKI
STAFF CRITIC

There is perhaps nothing that better encapsulates American alternative collegiate culture than a battle of the bands. Students cheer for their friends, bands strive to out-shred other bands and, despite the competition, the community is united by a shared desire to support independent student music.

That sense of community became all the more evident at the Yale Farm on Saturday, when students basked on picnic blankets under much anticipated April sunshine at Yale’s Battle of the Bands, where six bands vied for one of two spots available to open for Zara Larsson, Sheck Wes and Aluna at Spring Fling. Spring Fling announced on Sunday evening that the student bands Couples Therapy and Sunday Scaries won the competition.

The first of six bands was Assistant to the Professors, a quartet of faculty members. They opened their act with “Little Wing” by Jimi Hendrix, followed with “Where Is My Mind” by The Pixies. Their smooth and funky dad-rock beats serenaded the audience and their children, who ran circles around the stage. The faculty members’ attempt at getting hip with the kids underscored that Battle of the Bands was an event for the whole Yale community, toddlers included.

Sunday Scaries, the largest of the six groups, played next. Beginning with “Locked Out of Heaven” by Bruno Mars was a fantastic choice to establish a high-energy vibe. Lauren Walker ’27 and Erin Kearney ’27 sang a beautifully harmonized lead vocal line, especially in their rendition of Sara Bareilles’ “Love Song.”

Sunday Scaries was the only band to include a violin, which,

at first, felt like a gamble. Would it remind the audience of sitting in stiff Woolsey seats rather than mosh pits on Old Campus? But the risk paid off: Justine Xu ’27 nailed her violin solos and supported Sunday Scaries’ big band sound with her constant bowing.

Third came the band Bird. Mila Volpe ’28 on lead vocals was a clear standout of the afternoon. Her voice was lush and jazzy, an unexpected complement to blues-rock standards like “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival. Bird’s setlist, although entirely made up of cover songs — like every other set of the afternoon — felt uniquely fresh and exciting.

Grove Street Band performed fourth. Driven by a constant beat on the bass drum, they seamlessly transitioned from “Ain’t No Sunshine” by Bill Withers into “Crazy” by Gnarl Barkley. This genre switch-up was unexpected, yet their growly rock tone persisted throughout. Although proficient and consistent musicians, more flexibility in their tone would have better showcased their skills as performers.

After four musically-proficient bands, Couples Therapy brought all that and then some. Joey Cumpian ’26, who sang lead vocals alongside Pilar Bylinsky ’26, shouted for the crowd to get their “booties up” and come dance in front of the stage. With a mass exodus from the picnic blankets spread out on the grass, it was clear that the party had started. The two former Whiffenpoofs harmonized through “WHERE IS MY HUSBAND!” by RAYE and “You Go Down Smooth” by Lake Street Dive.

Supporting singers of such a caliber required an adept band. Greg Mann ’28 on drums backed each verse, chorus and bridge

with a reliable, steady beat. Closing with “Ain’t It Fun?” by Paramore, Couples Therapy solidified itself as a band full of capable, flexible performers who know how to bring the energy.

Couples Therapy’s party of a set was a tough act to follow, but Don’t Sell Me the Dog put up a good fight as the last band to perform. Their first song, “You May Be Right” by Billy Joel, had a folk-rock feel, enhanced by Hugo Lehrach ’26’s husky lead vocals. The band was precise in a comfortable, worn-in kind of way. They closed out Battle of the Bands with “American Girl” by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

A 1970s upbeat hit was a perfect choice for the last act.

Battle of the Bands reminded me that Yale students are eager to support one another, whether it be at the Yale Farm or on the stage. However, the afternoon wasn’t simply a chance to listen to friends shred the electric guitar — or violin — but a high-stakes competition.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the Spring Fling committee revealed on Instagram that Couples Therapy made the lineup. Their funky, groovy style will nicely complement Larsson’s popstar vibe. Don’t Sell Me the Dog was my second

pick, for their reliable folk-rock sound which has been a student favorite for years. But students voted instead for Sunday Scaries, whom I still trust to deliver a rocking set at Spring Fling.

Undercutting the integrity of the event was the fact that any student could vote to determine the winners, even if they didn’t attend Battle of the Bands. Despite that, this year’s lineup is funky and full of energy. I eagerly await their performances at Spring Fling.

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Of the six bands that performed on Saturday, Couples Therapy and Sunday Scaries won the chance to perform at Spring Fling.
ANNA ZOLTOWSKI / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

REVIEW

‘Once’ captures fleeting intimacy in ballad after ballad after ballad

BY CAMERON NYE
STAFF CRITIC

As one descends into the Saybrook Underbrook, New Haven is suddenly transformed into the heart of Dublin.

Dated beer and tobacco advertisements form a pasted collage on the wall. Glass bottles line a dilapidated mahogany bar. Empty stools beckon, inviting patrons to pull up and crack a Guinness. What completes the alehouse immersion is the cohort of live performers. Twanging guitars and mellow fiddles are accented by a thumping seat drum. Their players bellow beloved Irish anthems, laughing and carrying on while fumbling through ‘The Pogues’ “Fairytale of New York.”

It’s clear that “Once” takes place across the pond, but just in case the audience hasn’t been clued in, the obligatory preshow announcement is delivered in a thick Irish inflection.

The musical — directed by Will Sussbauer ’27, a Yale Herald editor-in-chief and a fellow theater critic — opened Thursday night, but, as a special treat, I was allowed

to attend the show’s invited dress rehearsal on Wednesday.

“Once” centers around the relationship between a 30-something Irish busker and vacuum repairman, referred to as Guy, and a witty Czech pianist, referred to as Girl, who takes a liking to him and the tender ballads he writes. Together with a motley crew of friends, they record a demo of his songs, forming an intense emotional connection that eventually shatters, highlighting the beauty of love in a single, fleeting moment.

Based on John Carney’s film of the same name and featuring music by Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, this ballad-driven musical finds a new space in the Saybrook Underbrook that, despite my own proclivities against contemporary musical stylings in theater, gleams as a stellar display of vocal talent.

What makes “Once” so different from a traditional musical is its central gimmick: The actors are doing double duty as both the cast and the orchestra. Throughout the show, they strum acoustic guitars

and grasp fiddles, accompanying one another through prolonged anthems and the occasional jovial ditty. The ensemble, composed of Celtic and Czech confidants, add an integral lilt to the production’s pub-like atmosphere. Their commitment is commendable. Acting alone seems tough enough without playing an instrument.

While “Once” certainly is not the first musical to experiment with this styling, it does feature a more contemporary sound that can make this musical device more palatable. It also helps that most of the music is diegetic, so it makes sense that these characters are constantly playing music: They are at an open mic night or in a recording studio. Music represents one of the signature unifiers of the show.

I’ll be honest. I tend to prefer musicals with full orchestral pits, bombastic overtures, electric dance numbers and heart-wrenching torch songs that are performed in the textbook musical theater styling.

“Once” has none of those things. Instead, its score centers primarily on instrumentally stripped, emotionally intense ballads. “Once” leans hard into the coffeehouse, live-music atmosphere — the kind of bar scene where, for some, the draw is a guy with a guitar trying out his new material. For me, that’s usually a cue to leave.

That live-pub energy initially gives the show a sense of spontaneity, until the setlist begins to settle into something far more uniform. At the beginning, the characters blaze through these numbers with a kinetic rush, but by the middle of Act 2, the sheer volume of slower ballads made me feel like I was being forced to watch “The Voice.”

The plot itself glistens as a gigging musician’s wet dream. Act 1 opens with a man pouring his heart out on the side of the road. He’s observed by someone who resolves herself to see him achieve stardom and dedicates herself both financially and emotionally to realizing that goal. Along the way, he solves every hurdle by whipping out his trusty guitar and serenading his antagonists until they are overcome by his musical capabilities. Every time he sings, onlookers ogle with puppy dog eyes, staring in disbelief that they have the opportunity — nay, the privilege — of witnessing God’s gift to music perform.

Then, finally, after she begins to let her guard down and allow herself to love again, he jets off to New York City to rekindle an old flame, losing the love of his life in the process.

Yes, I’m being cynical, and these qualms are not necessarily the fault of Sussbauer & Co. Carney’s cheesy book just wasn’t my cup of tea. If you’ve ever thought about busking or are a fan of Mumford & Sons concerts, then you will love this show — I won’t deny that.

Also undeniable are the performances of John Colbert ’26 and Sadie Pohl ’26 as Guy and Girl. Colbert brings a guttural yet delicate edge to Guy. One moment, he wails while seemingly beating his guitar, his gorgeous tenor invading

your eardrums until your bones begin to quake. The next, he retreats into a lofty falsetto that heals the very air through which he just sliced. His tantalizing yells and enthralling riffs seize the audience from the very first strum of his guitar.

On the other hand, Pohl’s soprano unfolds with urgency and contemplation, straining for a dream that lies just out of reach. Her initial fragility morphs into strained introspection, all while perched behind a baby grand piano. Her rendition of “If You Want Me” feels taut, sometimes blooming with soaring high notes, sometimes splintering with sentimentality, but always searching for the meaning in her life.

The pair is the engine driving the production. When they sang together, I set aside my qualms and sank deep into my chair. For a moment, I understood why “Once” is so critically acclaimed. I understood why it swept the 2012 Tonys. I understood why its song “Falling Slowly” won an Academy Award.

Pohl is undoubtedly the star of the show. For as impassioned and breathtaking her vocals are, it is acting that serves as the show’s emotional heart. It’s clear she has a deep understanding of her character. Her honest, heartbreaking and at times refreshingly comedic performance illuminates the underlying tragedy of her character: a single mother who, despite her best intentions, deprives herself of any sympathy.

“Once” may never fully win me over. Its earnestness still veers dangerously close to being saccharine. But in the intimate confines of the Underbrook, it doesn’t have to be. When Colbert and Pohl sing, the show sheds its clichés and becomes something far more immediate: two people, a handful of instruments, and a fleeting connection. The production invests in the ephemerality of love, and, ironically, that message remains permanent.

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COURTESY OF ANGELICA PERUZZI
The 2012 musical turns the Saybrook Underbrook theater into a Dublin bar and the scene of triumphant singing.