



Maubilans and their paintings after Civil War event at Kentuck.

Chief Tuskaloosa's image and legend are etched into Alabama's cultural memory. Every kid and her grandpa knows that the great warrior gave his name to a certain west Alabama settlement on the Black Warrior River, and some like to think his strategic prowess and regal bearing flow from those waters into the veins of the coaches and athletes who continue to grace its streets.

One of the Chief's defining moments, though, came more from his brilliant subversiveness than his military know-how. Tuskaloosa and his tribe ultimately lost, but the Battle of Mabila still sits at the head of the mythological table, arguably alongside *The Iliad*. Tuskaloosa used Mabila, a fortress disguised as a settlement, to give Hernando de Soto one of the fights of his life, and in the process sealed the Chief's own place in history as a fearsome "black warrior."

This rebellious brilliance

lives on in Tuscaloosa's Maubilans Art Kollektive. The brainchild of Cory Patton, this group of cutting-edge artists takes its name from the Mabila battle and what Patton calls Chief Tuskaloosa's Trojan horse concept.

"We bring you in expecting one thing, but you get another. Same as the story of the fort village of Mabila. Instead of arrows and bullets, though, we give you art, music, laughter, and purpose in a city that is reinventing itself," Patton said.

Founded in 2013, the Kollektive began with a simple idea: to bring artists and musicians together. Patton and several others asked each other, "What would you like to see done here in Tuscaloosa?" Not a new question, but one many have asked. Even more have answered it, but this idealistic, creative gathering of kindred spirits actually made something happen.

They held their first meeting at Grace Aberdeen Habitat Alchemy, a local lifestyle concept store owned by Jamie Cicatiello, also a photographer and Maubilans. A haven for artists, musicians, and cultural events, Grace Aberdeen remains their planning headquarters. The founding Maubilans set a few goals: to create events to showcase their work, to provide a variety of artistic styles to attract a wide audience, and to expose people to art and music that they might not otherwise experience.

Patton considers the group to be a tribe, yet another homage to Chief Tuskaloosa.

"The thinking is," Patton said, "you can break a single stick, but put a bunch together and it becomes a harder task to break them. A cluster of artists will succeed over a show with only one artist. Combine that with young, talented musicians and you create a completely new

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED:

THE MAUBILANS

ART KOLLEKTIVE

by Bebe Barefoot Lloyd

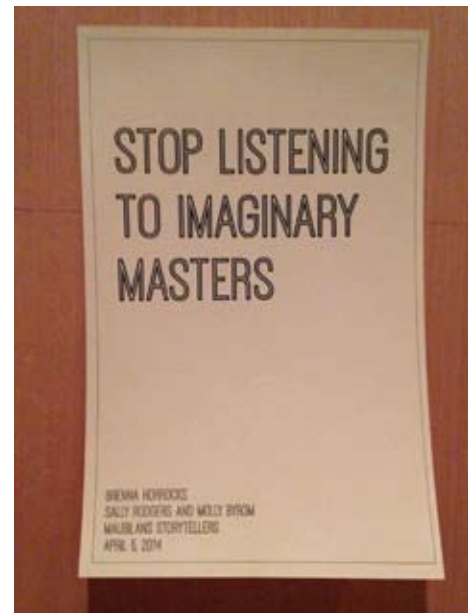


From second show at Twin, February, 2014.

tribe of people. Maubilans.”

Art collectives have been around in some form for centuries, and their objectives vary as much as their aesthetics. Not surprisingly, some of the notable groups in recent memory emerged during the 1960s. Fluxus, one of the most well-known from that period, was Yoko Ono’s artistic home, and its influences included such heavy hitters as John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. The Guerrilla Girls, a collective formed in the mid-1980s, continues to receive widespread attention because of its political agenda. Formed initially

to address sexism and racism in the art world, the group maintains its activist work while producing a large body of protest art. On a local level, Kentuck was arguably a collective in its early days, back when local artists organized a small block party in Northport to showcase and sell their work. The still-thriving Kentuck Festival of the Arts serves as a great example of how a small group dedicated to art and culture can grow into an international phenomenon. More recently, the Alabama Art Kitchen operated in Tuscaloosa as a collective for



“Stop Lisening to Imaginary Masters” from second Storytellers event.

about three years, sharing space and equipment as well as hosting events and exhibits.

From their inaugural meeting in March 2013, the Maubilans Kollektive moved quickly and, three months later, enjoyed smashing success with their first show. Founding members Neel Alexander, John Williams, Jude Weaver, Steven Harvey, Kay Leigh and Piper Walder, Kat Snyder, Raquel Duplin, Kurt Key, Matthew Yoakum, Patton, Cicatiello, and others took full advantage of the upstairs space at Mellow Mushroom on University Boulevard in Tuscaloosa. Using portable walls and other innovative design strategies, they transformed the open floor plan, created an edgy gallery vibe, and booked bands that enhanced the energetic atmosphere and drew a diverse crowd.

Alexander, a self-taught artist who focuses on illustration, print-making, and painting, says that he had been trying to become involved in a collective for awhile when he and the others decided to make it happen.

“Cory [Patton] and I had



Organic Android performs at first show at Mellow Mushroom.

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just done a joint show at the Grace Aberdeen First Friday that month. That’s when we began talks with up-and-coming artists who wanted to exhibit their work more often,” he recalled.

Alexander thinks it is especially important for all collective members to have equal responsibility, and that can be daunting.

“A lot of work goes into planning and executing events on the scale that we have been doing. Creating new and original artwork to present each time is also challenging,” he said.

Williams, whose interests range from drawing and ceramics to screenwriting and directing, became involved because of Patton’s and Alexander’s First Friday exhibit.

“The inspiration and energy I took from their show weighed heavy on my heart, so I seized a moment to share that with them,” said Williams, who believes that art is integral to a thriving culture.

“Art is sacred,” he said, “and I believe when you have a talented and committed group of people who collectively generate their visions and participate in what is one of

the greatest rituals of all, there is a powerful and exciting outcome.”

Harvey, a sculptor, likes being a Maubilan because it builds creative community, provides inspiration, and is a safe space.

“Our collective is a perfect opportunity for new artists to show their work without the fear of being rejected or misunderstood,” he said.

Harvey also enjoys the positive impact their shows have on the community, and sees their efforts as a way to entertain a diverse audience.

“One of the things I love



Other works by
The Maubilans Art Collective:

Top left, Cory Patton, second show at Twin
Top right, Neel Alexander, second show at Twin
Middle, Jude Weaver, February 2014

Background:
Painting created by Maubilans at
Civil War event at Kentuck Gallery

All images courtesy of The Maubilans

about it is the fact that even if someone doesn't really like art, I'm ninety-nine percent positive that they will enjoy something at our shows," he said. "They are always judgment-free and filled with so many different people."

Cicatiello echoes this sentiment, and thinks that bringing people together is as important as anything else they do.

"I love the way it makes people react," she said, "and I love the way it makes people interact with each other. Going to an art event expecting one thing only to be exposed to something else that you might not have considered to be 'art' is very important. It keeps your mind open."

The Maubilans expanded both scale and audience with their second show, which they held in what is quickly becoming their new exhibit "home," Twin Restaurant at the old Tuscaloosa Country Club site. All of the Maubilan Collective's members praise Twin's owners and management, and are grateful for their support.

"The good people at Twin are so helpful," said Patton. "They believe in our movement and in what we would like to do in the future. We are interested in other venues, but right now that space is perfect for us."

Twin works so well for the Maubilans because of the layout. The group uses several rooms, and they like being able to separate the aspects of their events. The art exhibits are in one space, the music in another, and bars are set up in two

different places.

In early April, they used the space to spectacular effect for Storytellers, their third show, an ambitious collaboration between the Maubilans and local creative writers. Sally Rodgers, a writer pursuing an MFA in the University of Alabama's program in creative writing, met Patton and immediately the two began brainstorming possibilities for merging literary and visual art.



"Life as an MFA student feels so disconnected from the rest of Tuscaloosa," said Rodgers. "I know many people in the program search, with varying results, for ways to become more involved in the larger community."

Both Rodgers and Patton saw the mutual benefits of a merger, because the Maubilans' shows attracted a community crowd but hardly anyone from the University,

and the standard MFA and other English Department readings around town brought in a University crowd but not many "townies." After a few meetings, they realized that the best way to create an event would be to pair writers and artists. According to Patton, this challenged the group to create a range of work. For Storytellers, there were twelve collaborations, and each artist interpreted visually his or her partner's written work.

Painter Tyler Key collaborated with poet Jenifer Park. Key says that he is "deeply attracted" to portraits. When Park wrote a poem inspired by The Odyssey with a female rapper named Pony replacing Odysseus, he painted a portrait of Park as Pony and included the poem's images in the painting.

John Williams partnered with fiction writer Travis Turner. Their collaboration, "Table for One," resulted in an incredibly detailed installation piece that complemented one of three stories Turner presented to Williams for interpretation.

Neel Alexander partnered with Eric the Red, a local musician. They were one of the few collaborative pairs who knew each other before Storytellers. Eric wrote a story-song about a character named Reverend Alabacious T. Bartholomew, and Alexander completed the project visually.

"The song told the story of a creative songwriter with a messy life," said Alexander. "I chose to do an illustration with an old fountain



Top left, Maubilans in action at Civil War event at Kentuck.

Bottom left, Art from storytellers event.



ink pen to help represent this fact.” Steven Harvey collaborated with poet Megan Plummer, and says he enjoyed the planning process as much as the collaboration.

“We shared our inspiration and motive, as well as how our artistic experience has evolved and built on itself,” said Harvey. “Then we shared some of our works to get ideas of how to team up.”

Cicatiello paired up with writer Shaelyn Smith, and their planning process was mostly via e-mail.

“I gave her some photographs and trusted her to use her words,” said Cicatiello. “We talked about how to display the words with photographs and decided to use transparencies. She designed her words to fit against my photos. I was beyond pleased with the outcome.” Smith, Cicatiello, and Hunter Rayfield then collaborated and used sticks and small branches to create 3-D frames for the photos/texts, adding a sculptural element.

As the collaborators hoped, Storytellers attracted a cross-section of the community. University students and professors sat side-by-side with locals of all ages from every neighborhood and profession, everyone listening intently as the writers read from their work. During intermissions, the crowd and its palpable enthusiasm spilled into the gallery and bar areas. After the reading, several local bands performed. All agree Storytellers opened the door for similar collaborations that will continue to build community.

“If we are really going to integrate art scenes here, we need to cultivate an environment where everyone feels welcome,” said Rodgers. “People need to hang out more and exchange ideas, just to get to know each other. Once that happens, I hope collaborations will arise naturally.”

Patton agrees, and was pleased with the Storytellers event.

“To see what this talented group of people came up with was amazing,” he said. “Everyone brought their ‘A’ game. I can’t wait to do one again.”

The Maubilans have done other, smaller events, most notably “Civil War” at the Kentuck Gallery space. A sort of creative battle of the sexes, Patton called it a “girls vs. guys art off.” Kollektive members created artwork on the spot, to the delight of onlookers. There are plans for another improvisational event on a much larger scale, as well as more frequent smaller events.

With this many creative people working together, there is no shortage of ideas. Williams describes their very first meeting as having a “hair-on-the-arm intensity that carried us and the conversations way too late into that delightfully intoxicating evening.” This energy and enthusiasm continue, and as momentum builds with each show, Tuscaloosa and West Alabama will reap the cultural benefits of these creative warriors’ idealism.

Patton believes that the Maubilans’ sincerity and openness are two of their greatest assets.

“Be true to yourself, and the rest will follow,” he said. “That’s what we preach.”

He also believes art has the power to erase barriers.

“Our shows are a vehicle that brings different demographics

together. We like that there are old, young, rich, poor, black, and white at Maubilans events,” he said. “It’s about bringing people together to talk. We are all one tribe. You don’t have to be an artist or a musician to be a Maubilans. Everyone already is.”



Freelance writer Bebe Barefoot Lloyd lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches in the Blount and New College programs at the University of Alabama.