

[City Stages](#) rolls around and I remember the first time I ever visited Birmingham in 1998. That year is known among those that have attended the festival for some time as the year that Phil Collins didn't sing (among other things).

He headlined the Coca Cola Classic stage that year, back when it still sat in that weird position next to City Hall so that you were looking at the signage of Boutwell Auditorium while you were trying to figure out who was playing next. I remember how Collins was almost booed off-stage since he didn't sing any of his hit songs with his orchestra, much less perform one until late in the set.

It's become more about being sentimental and contemplative than anything else. When reminiscing, I must also remember one of my more nervous moments in 2000 just because I wanted to see James Brown. I remember using CS to sell my girlfriend on letting us move here in 2004, even though we had no idea what we were going to be doing or where we'd live once we got here.

I've had the opportunity to have conversations with off-duty county sheriffs, construction workers, bankers, college students and lawyers. All of them were downtown safely enjoying the sounds of one of the few remaining large scale music festivals in the Southeast. Some of the other ones are no longer with us.

Music Midtown [met its fate in 2006](#) and there are those that would like to predict a similar fate for this festival.

The better question to ask may be "what kind of festival does Birmingham, Alabama want, if we really want it to continue?"

I'm a product of an urban environment; as much as I've tried to seek out the suburban oasis there's a pull that draws me back to the core of a region. That said, there's no reason why several festivals cannot continue to exist in town (as they already do), whether they're the Function at the Junction, the Southern Heritage Festival, the Crawfish Boil or City Stages. If it is meant to die, then it will. If it does survive, then we need to know how and why current decisions are made and we must be provided with more information to make our choice about whether or not to attend. We need to know if we're going to try to pull the big bands of a [Bonarrou](#) or if we're going to live with the 300-mile/60 day act embargo and go in a different direction.

Those that go out of civic pride have probably been going for all of the wrong reasons for a long time. I go out of a sense of having my heart strings pulled years after I ventured into town for the first time. I go because as much as I've always had the inner battle about whether or not to go, I enjoy the new sounds that reveal themselves to me each year, whether it's Rantings of Eva in the middle of an afternoon or Brandi Carlile doing an incredible performance (still have the pick I caught at the end of her set last year). I go because I get to see Man or Astroman? eight years after I helped book them for a show on campus in Savannah and watch the Squirrel Nut Zippers jam out in the dark for an encore set after their generator caught fire.

Do I think that the festival has problems? Definitely. The need to take advantage of new technologies in order to reach out to area residents seems to continue to evade CS organizers despite the best of intentions. It may also need to take a look at how it operates in general, despite efforts to reduce the operating budget and trim corners. The festival has gone down in size from 15 to 7 actual stages, not counting Friday afternoon's performance in Harbert Plaza.

That existence of technology is why we've taken it upon ourselves to build (or piece together with tape) [our first experiment](#) - **an online guide to the festival that is accessible via your cell phone or PDA**. It allows you to make comments during performances at the festival, though you will

be able to make comments up until the end of next week if you want to think about what you want to say. It will also allow you to comment from home if you check out a few bands and determine that this year's lineup is not for you.

We'll probably still be building until Friday night most likely, but the hope is that it will serve as one of those conversation starters [that I eluded to in my last post in this section](#). If it's successful it may also lead to the use of a similar tool next year to provide us, the public, with more information to make a decision, no matter what it is.

We no longer have powerful signals necessarily providing an independent source of music over the terrestrial airwaves in our region ([save for a few hours on Sundays thanks to Reg](#)). We have a city where there is limited mainstream media coverage for, prior to and during the event, on purpose no less. We get information about the show bombarded with just weeks to spare, though we don't have an idea of what the acts sound like and, if available, what others thought of them.

We do have MySpace profiles and band websites available. We have word of mouth and reviews. And hopefully, you'll enjoy the mobile guide that you now have access to. And even though I didn't mean to do it, the basis for it is quite similar to how Bonnaroo organizes their performers list currently.

Have fun this weekend, no matter what you do!