

School's in session (Excerpt)

By Billy Altman, L.A. Daily News

While the recording industry continues to grapple with the weight of corporate shuffling and file-sharing problems, the SXSW festival -- in which more than 50 venues present on-the-hour sets by different performers from 8 p.m. until 2 a.m. for four straight nights (not counting numerous afternoon and/or after-hours mini-sets) -- continues to soar on the strength of the indefatigable spirit and energy generated by live music.

Fittingly, in a year sporting an appearance by Little Richard ("I'm so old school the building wasn't even there yet"), SXSW '04 seemed to be about history: preserving it, respecting it and, yes, perhaps even making it.

Performers with resumes stretching back through each of the past five decades of rock, country, folk, blues and world music mingled on stage and off with young artists whose work more often than not displayed a healthy understanding that the best music exists in neither a vacuum nor a bubble. Continuity and community were unmistakable themes. Here's a sampling of some of the voices that came through the loudest and clearest:

Gary U.S. Bonds: Responsible for some of the greatest party records of all time ("New Orleans," "Quarter to Three"), Bonds disappeared from the charts for 20 years before fan Bruce Springsteen -- greatly influenced by Bonds' sound of sax and pounding drums -- helped revive the r&b vocalist's career by penning and producing his 1982 hit, "This Little Girl."

That another 20 years has elapsed without another hit has done nothing to diminish the power or the infectiousness of Bonds' music: Previewing material from an upcoming new CD -- titled, appropriately enough, "Back in 20" -- his showstopper was, of all things, a searing rendition of his old friend Otis Redding's "I've Got Dreams to Remember." School is out? School is in.