MAGAZINE

Musicians will play an open-air venue in Philly this summer: The top level of double-decker buses. And city history is part of the package.

Charles Cohen at the sound board on a tour bus in October 2013, the first year of the event. Subsequent series went much better. SCOTT TROYAN

UP ON THE ROOF

Among the acts featured this year are, from left: The Sun Flights folk duo of Natalie Butts and Claire Duncombe, and electronic musician King Britt.

By Shaun Brady
FOR THE INQUIRER

The sight of double-decker tour buses circling the streets of Center City is hardly uncommon. But this summer, the sound of some of those buses will be unusual indeed. With the Double Decker Music Series, tour guide/sound artist Sebastian Petsu and presenting organization Bowerbird will host five concerts on the open-air upper level of a moving double-decker bus, interspersed with a singular tour of Philadelphia history.

The series, in its first full season after three previous events, will offer five intimate concerts, beginning this weekend with sets by former Man Man drummer and beat-maker Christopher Sean Powell and experimental folk duo the Sun Flights.

Future concerts, happening monthly through September, will include producer/electronic musician King Britt, saxophonist Keir Neuringer, unconven-

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tional folk singer Weyes Blood, West Philadelphia Orchestra vocalist Petia Z, Buchla Music Easel synth experimentalist Charles Cohen, multi-instrumentalist Rosie Langabeer, found-object artist Joo Won Park, and avant-garde pop duo Myrrias.

Petsu says he was a "burnt-out social worker" assisting formerly homeless people suffering with mental illness when he took his first tour guide job. "The woman I was dating at the time lived in a third-floor apartment along the route of the tour buses," he recalls. "We'd hear them go by, and I would think, 'I could do that.' It was just a stopgap because I hadn't worked for a couple of months, but I fell in love with it."

A native of Bridgewater, N.J., Petsu moved to Philadelphia to attend St. Joseph's University. He is also an experimental musician and sound artist who works with cassette-tape collages and tape feedback. Despite the seeming disparity between avant-garde music and city bus tours, Petsu says he finds satisfaction in his new day job.

"I like to perform," he says. "I like to be in front of people. There's a lot of improv in the tours. You have to be on your toes because it's always changing. There are detours, so you might not be going the same way each time, and you have a lot of freedom with what you talk about, while staying within the bounds of Philadelphia history."

Petsu never thought to combine his two pursuits. That suggestion came from Charles Cohen while watching the spectacle in the parking lot before a 2009 Phish concert. "I'm actually a big Phish fan," Petsu says with a hint of the confessional, "and I ended up with an extra ticket at the last minute. So I called Charles, because we're good friends and he's always up for weird stuff. Just seeing the carnival that was happening in the tailgating scene, he turned to me and said, 'Did you ever think about renting one of the buses and having a live music event?' "

The Big Bus Co.'s sound systems weren't sufficient for live music at the time, but upgrades made the prospect more realistic.

Petsu hosted his first event in October 2013, featuring Cohen (naturally) and singer/songwriter Birdie Busch. Thanks to a mix-up at the garage, the bus on that first tour broke down 15 minutes after it set out, making for a somewhat inauspicious beginning. But two concerts in 2014 were more successful, leading to this year's full series.

The unique setting has provided for some memorable moments, Petsu says. "There've been times when it's just worked perfectly. There might be a sound from a passing car horn or a train noise, a siren, urban sounds that fill in the spaces in the music. You'll see the performers smile and realize how it fits. It's not something you can plan for, it's just serendipity."

As one tour passed east of the stadiums in South Philly, electronic noise artist Rat Catching was doing her set, and, as Petsu puts it, "the weird warehouse wasteland fit with her industrial-noise sound.

"One of the high points of the series," Petsu says, "was when guitarist Chris Forsyth was playing and we passed under an I-95 overpass just before the sports complex. The sound of the reverb when we went under that bridge was a peak moment."

Petsu has yet to perform his music on his own series, which he designs in double bills to combine "weirdness and more song-based acts." But he does offer abbreviated tours before and between sets, provided in the loose spirit of the BYOB events. "The most fun I have is commenting on stuff that's right in front of me — an event, a press conference, a demonstration, a guy in a bear suit playing a keytar. Sometimes there's a ripple of laughter and sometimes it falls flat, but that's the danger of improv."

Tour guide Sebastian Petsu, who's also a sound artist, will cohost the concerts. SCOTT TROYAN

MUSICAL BUSES

▶ Double Decker Music Series

Buses board at 7:45 p.m. at the northeast corner of Fifth and Market Streets for 8 p.m. departure.

Tickets: $25 (advance tickets only).

Information: www.sebastianpetsu.com/doubledecker

May 31: Christopher Sean Powell and the Sun Flights

June 28: King Britt and Keir Neuringer

July 26: Weyes Blood and Petia Z

Aug. 23: Charles Cohen and Rosie Langabeer

Sept. 20: Joo Won Park and Myrrias