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## Philadelphia's X-factor

Xfinity Live from Cordish is latest entertainment venue in city that rocks more than American history

April 13, 2012 | By Erik Maza, The Baltimore Sun

Toward the end of their concert in Philadelphia this month, First Aid Kit addressed the crowd: "We want to try an experiment."

For the past hour, Klara and Johanna Soderberg, the two Swedish sisters who make up the band, had been performing the kind of music that can be best summed up with the word "lovely." It is Americana by way of Stockholm, pretty ballads and melancholy anecdotes sung in two frail, harmonious voices over quivering basslines.



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The Philly MarketPlace is the heart of XFINITY Live! Philadelphia's... (Xfinity Live! Philadelphia,...)

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The duo was playing Union Transfer, a cavernous former rail baggage depot and my second stop on a visit to Philly's abundantly rich music scene. The trip had been prompted by the latest live music venue, Xfinity Live, the new Power Plant Live-esque mixed-use emporium by Baltimore-based Cordish Cos.

Open for a little over two weeks, it is Cordish's acknowledgment of Philadelphia as a city with a musical heritage that stretches to Colonial times, a loud, relentless, let's-hit-three-shows-in-one-night music town.

Union Transfer was crammed with people, and each one of them hung on the sisters' every word. When they proposed an experiment, it felt as if the whole concert hall leaned in to hear a secret.

The sisters, who had been standing a few feet apart, one before her keyboard, the other with her guitar, left their microphones and met at the center of the stage. We want you all to be quiet, one of them said. They wanted to sing a cappella and depend strictly on the acoustics of the place to carry their voices. When a hush fell on the place, and the sisters began singing "Ghost Town," it was an unnervingly communal moment, one where the audience was as responsible for a song as the artists who'd produced it.

First Aid Kit is hugely popular in their native Sweden. But abroad, they're unknowns. I hadn't heard of these girls, and it's likely a lot of other dweebs like me hadn't either, and yet Union Transfer was brimming with people.

To my surprise, so were the other live music venues in Philadelphia I hopped to later that night, each one catering to a different sound, and each one with its own faithful constituency. There were dance-hall fans at Barbary, hip-hop scenesters at Kung Fu Necktie ... and then there was Xfinity Live.

Xfinity Live, my first stop, is a trek, far from downtown Philadelphia. Though sandwiched by Lincoln Financial Field, home of the Eagles, and Wells Fargo Center, where the 76ers and the Flyers play, the buildings are far from each other, separated by vast parking lots and industrial zones. The walk from the subway station is so long it recalls those long excursions in Orlando, Fla., from parking lots to the theme parks.

Maybe that's appropriate, because Xfinity is a kind of theme park, a temple to indoor sports-watching that revolves around one loud and flashy atrium, a cacophonous thunderdome that swells with the noise of ESPN and hundreds of people cheering.

At the center of it all is an Olympic jumbotron that broadcasts sports games — that Saturday night, it was an NCAA semifinal game, Louisville vs. Kentucky — and dominates the room like the spaceship in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." Upon walking in, everyone had their heads craned up to the screen, hypnotized by the game, or maybe just by the glare of such a giant TV screen.

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Every restaurant and bar in the joint revolves around this atrium, and so it is the center of attention and a gathering place, where everyone inevitably ends up.

The noise, so deafening you can barely hear yourself think, is not the only thing that overwhelms at Xfinity. The venue is an attack on all senses. There are logos — for Comcast Sportsnet, Pepsi, NBC Sports, 1-800-Gambler — screaming from every corner; TV screens, big, small, gigantic, flashing everywhere; streams of people lurching from one corner to the next; and from outside, the blare of muscular rock music.

There's an apocalyptic, disorganized madness at this place that will be familiar to anyone who's been to Preakness, when [Pimlico Race Course](#) takes on the look of a mobbed arcade.

Cordish has several venues like this one around the country — in St. Louis and Kansas City, and of course, Power Plant Live in Baltimore — but Xfinity is unusual because it's mostly indoors. From its central pinball machine-like atrium, guests can be bounced and kicked into any of the surrounding restaurants and bars, like Spectrum Grill and Victory Beer Hall, a restaurant with long banquet tables that was helped by the namesake beers of the Pennsylvania craft brewer.

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