

TITLE: Indie acts rock for cancer research

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By Kelly Kraemer

Crowd attendance failed to reflect the performers' talent at a Sept. 23 benefit concert for cancer research.

The concert, which was held at the Pioneer Arts Center in Easthampton, was headlined by some of the most promising Indie female artists in conjunction with the Indie Music For Life non-profit organization. Denise Barbarita, Vicki Blankenship, and University of Massachusetts Amherst alumni Jess Yoakum proved that the rise of the female soulstress is underappreciated.

Few artists can claim their voice to be as gracious and commanding as Denise Barbarita. As the first act, she stole the show following the standards set by such singer/songwriters like Ani DiFranco, Sheryl Crow, and at times even Fiona Apple. The New York-based vocalist has been involved in music since she was a child, and cites her music to be "a cross between Tori Amos and The Pretenders." Her performance proved to be just that, as her stage presence produced a different mood in every song. In songs like "Hush, Hush" where she sings "Hush, hush, just shut up, take control of your life," Barbarita's voice is imposing and she sings with a desperation that appeals to the listener. Her fervor for music was matched by her passion to raise awareness and money for cancer research. "I believe in the cause, and if you're touring anyway, why not tour to be something bigger than yourself?" she said.

The much sweeter, power lyricist Jess Yoakum embraced that passion of Denise and elegantly lured the audience to her heavy vocals. The UMass Amherst alumni got her bachelor's degree in Latin American Studies while doing music on the side. Now employed by Berklee College of Music, Yoakum is still indecisive about her career as a musician. She is a fan of the Indigo Girls, Paul Simon, and "old-school" female powerhouses like Aretha Franklin and Joni Mitchell, but relates her music as "Patty Griffin meets The Sundays," which may be more accurate than not. Her lyrics were as piercing as her voice, as shown in songs like "The Leaving Song," "Escape Route," and the particularly powerful "Emily's Song," which explores her view of her sister's childhood. Jess's lyrics are self-demanding and pressing, yet she is truly humble. "It's hard to write about life experiences without getting self-absorbed," she said. One of her favorite parts of being a musician is being able to play benefit concerts, and as a local artist, she enjoys playing in the region. "Venture out; there is so much to do in this region. [The region] is such a rich area arts-wise that you miss out on a lot of opportunities if you don't," she said.

Like Yoakum, there is something about Vicki Blankenship's personality that seems to produce generosity in everything that she does. As a victim of cancer herself, she has toured many times along the East Coast and given the proceeds to the American Cancer Society. Blankenship disapproved when she learned that much of the money being raised was fed into therapy and care centers for patients rather than to research. Blankenship

began her own non-profit organization now known as Indie Music for Life. Her music is her passion, and her giving personality unfolded itself the minute Blankenship took the stage. Her opening song, "1 in 8," a tribute to the fact that one in eight Americans will die from cancer, compelled the audience to the cause. Her rich country and bluegrass background was evident in the second song. "My two greatest influences were my great grandfather and my grandfather," she said. Both of them started Blankenship's musical career early, and ended up dying from cancer.

The concert delivered three musically different acts, each fulfilling the Indie Music For Life slogan, "fighting for cancer one song at a time." They played an exceptional show, each creating their own mood and urgency for the cause. The saying "everyone knows someone who has had cancer" failed to be represented in the concert's attendance, however. It was a concert with heart that should have captivated more people than it did.

For more information on shows and giving to the Indie Music For Life fund, visit [www.indiemusicforlife.org](http://www.indiemusicforlife.org).