

Who speaks for local music scene?

Chicago has a rich music heritage. So why is the city not among 'music capitals'?

September 2, 2007

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According to a recent study conducted by the University of Chicago, the Windy City "is a music city in hiding."

Although the music business here generates \$1 billion a year and employs 53,000 people -- ranking behind only New York and Los Angeles -- other smaller cities such as New Orleans, Nashville, Memphis and Austin are much better known as "live music capitals." One reason is they have active governmental offices and vibrant community organizations aggressively promoting their musical treasures, while Chicago does not.

But not only is this city's music scene under-appreciated; in recent years, it's actually been under siege. After 21 people died at the E2 nightclub in 2003, city agencies began what club owners call a well-meaning but overzealous crackdown on live music venues, with effects that linger today. Before that, city officials passed the so-called anti-rave ordinance in 2000; tightened restrictions on all-ages licenses prohibiting young music fans from clubs that sell alcohol, and barred several major rockers including the Smashing Pumpkins and members of the Grateful Dead from performing in Grant Park.

Too often Chicago government has demonized live music in the name of public safety and slighted or ignored musical accomplishments that other cities would have trumpeted. What music lovers have lacked is a strong voice to make their case, and the question remains: Who speaks for the local music scene?

Leadership emerges

In the wake of E2, two credible organizations finally emerged to fill that role. One is the League of Chicago Music Venues, a loosely knit coalition of 11 of the city's best clubs. With members such as the Hideout, Buddy Guy's Legends, the House of Blues, Metro and Schubas, the League introduced itself by sponsoring the Hawk Winter Music Festival in February 2006, but it hasn't been publicly active since.

The other organization is the Chicago Music Commission, which paid for the new economic survey. Its executive director, veteran rock photographer Paul Natkin, said the group can't claim to be the authoritative voice of the local scene yet. But it hopes to be.

"We are a group that's trying to get the music community organized," Natkin said. "We hope that one day we'll speak for the music community, but the first step was putting out this study, because there have been many people in government who've told us that until

we prove that we mean something, we don't mean anything. And what has meant something as long as I've lived in Chicago -- and that's 55 years -- is money and jobs."

The CMC stumbled by initially announcing its findings via an exclusive release to one local newspaper -- a press conference at a club like Legends hosted by a local giant such as Buddy Guy or Mavis Staples would have done a much better job in spreading the word -- and city officials were quick to point out a significant flaw in the study, which did not account for the impact of free city-sponsored events such as Blues Fest, Jazz Fest and Gospel Fest. (U of C Professor Lawrence Rothfield says income generated by those festivals was too difficult to quantify academically, given the CMC's current budget.)

Nevertheless, the survey, which Rothfield describes as the first comparative study of the music industries in the 50 biggest U.S. cities, provides an avalanche of data asserting that our music scene ranks third in size, third in the number of concerts and fifth in the number of artists employed.

And by commissioning it, the CMC became the first musical advocacy group to accomplish something, instead of just talking about it.

Questionable membership

Who, exactly, is the CMC? According to Natkin, the group does not have a regular membership, just a growing roster of volunteers led by a board of directors that also includes Walter Dale, an entertainment attorney who teaches music business at Columbia College; another attorney, Daniel Lurie; Bruce Iglauer, president and founder of the independent blues label Alligator Records; Chris Schneider, manager of Pressure Point Recording Studios, and Mark Roth, a founder of CenterstageChicago.com (a property of the Sun-Times Media Group).

In addition to lacking any women, the six-man board doesn't include any club owners, though some of the venues that are part of the League contributed to funding the study. There are no members with close ties to the city's thriving house- or dance-music, hip-hop, alternative-country, punk- and indie-rock, avant-jazz or Latin/worldbeat scenes.

And, most glaringly, there are no musicians.

Progress slow

Natkin says it would be difficult for the board to include musicians from all of the city's many genres. "We have the Musicians Union on our side, which is an incredibly powerful organization, and we're not just six people sitting around a room saying we're going to do something. But we definitely want to expand the board. The biggest question we always get is, 'Are you representing all of Chicago?' That's what we want to do, but it's not going to happen overnight."

"To what extent can we say the CMC speaks for everybody? Not as much as it intends to," Iglauer adds. "We've been working strictly as volunteers, scuffling to get money, and we haven't been in a position to do as much public outreach as we'd like to. Hopefully,

not only will the study give credibility to what those of us in Chicago have been saying for years about this huge, vibrant engine and wonderful music scene, but it will give credibility to the CMC so we'll be able to spend more time doing outreach."

Since the release of the study, CMC board members say they've heard from three powerful aldermen (who they decline to name) who are eager to work with the group. The CMC also takes credit for slowing down legislation proposed by Downtown Ald. Burton F. Natarus (42nd) last October to create a new promoters license that would curb dance parties that he says "raise havoc" in the Loop. (The Department of Business Affairs & Licensing has asked the CMC to make suggestions for revising the proposed ordinance, and city officials have agreed to seek more public input. The League also has been active in opposing the legislation.)

What's next

Having shown the dollars-and-cents impact of music in Chicago, the other question for the CMC is: What's next?

"You're asking the exact question that should have been asked last week [when the study was released], because the fact that the study is out there is just the first tiny step," Natkin says. "What the study does is it quantifies what we are, and it puts a series of numbers behind it, making it easier to deal with government agencies, because we're actually an economic powerhouse. Our goal is that we want to be the liaison between the music industry and government, so that rather than everybody working against each other, we're all on the same page."

Iglauer adds, "In our ideal world, what happens next is we make enough connections with city government so that we can start discussing an independent music office for this city. I stress 'independent' because we believe firmly that this should be a cooperative effort between the public and private sectors. It should not be governmental only, because government serves the interest of government, and not the private sector."

Iglauer envisions a Chicago Music Office that would represent the music scene the way World Business Chicago, the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau and the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center represent other business and cultural interests, with funding partly provided by the city and partly by local industry. If that happens, the CMC then hopes to focus on the three goals expressed in its mission statement, which Iglauer synopsisizes as "shining the spotlight on Chicago music, easing and improving the relationship between the private-sector music presenters and city government, and doing music business education."

The U of C's Chicago Music Economic Impact Study is available online along with more information about the Chicago Music Commission at www.chicago-music.org.

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