

Chicago music makes landing at airports
'TERMINAL TUNES' | Program for airports hopes to give liftoff to local artists

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BY DAVE HOEKSTRA dhoekstra@suntimes.com

In a departure from the norm, travelers this month have begun hearing nothing but local music in terminals at O'Hare and Midway airports.

The songs -- being played 24 hours a day, seven days a week -- come from a lineup of 330 songs from Chicago artists and/or Chicago labels. They were solicited by the Chicago Music Commission and programmed in a partnership with the city's Aviation Department.

The "Terminal Tunes" program began two weeks ago and will be announced formally Wednesday at O'Hare.

Songs are being played from 30 albums including "Alone & Acoustic" by Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, "Deep Blue Bruise" by the Deep Blue Organ Trio and "Chicago Country Legends" by the Sundowners.

"It covers alt country, klezmer music, blues, jazz, polka, classical, big band," said commission executive director Paul Naktin. "We're promoting the Chicago music community."

The music is "mostly instrumental," added Jill McGee, deputy commissioner of marketing and communications for the Aviation Department.

There's no alt rock, punk, house, rap or metal on the premise that travelers are agitated enough.

And although Chicago is the birthplace of gospel music, religious content makes those songs difficult to be played in an airport setting.

"The music is intended for travelers of all ages from all parts of the world," McGee said. "I love the Smashing Pumpkins, but this is background for ambient noise that doesn't bother people. We don't want to take anything away from musicians, but we have customers and employees working at the airport and we have to be doing the right thing by them, too."

Alligator Records president Bruce Iglauer is a commission member and point person for the project. "The Department of Aviation asked us to have music that is more relaxing," he said. "We were also sensitive to the fact that lyrics have to be family-friendly. Some music is not included because of the specifics the airports gave us. We leaned heavily to classical music because it fills the bill."

"They did say overtly religious material could be problematic. Probably mentioning any particular deity would not be something we could easily do."

The exclusions trouble Chicago house music producer-remixer-songwriter Steve "Silk" Hurley, a four-time Grammy nominee. "It's thinking pretty small," he said. "House would be great as background music. Any type of music that Chicago is known for should be represented because you have different types of people coming through the airport. I've never been agitated by background music. And now Madonna, Kanye [West] and Ne-Yo are putting the house touch into their music. Its roots are definitely from Chicago. Why not be proud of that?"

The Chicago-based Buckingham (named after the fountain) would be a natural with their '60s pop hits like "Kind of a Drag" and "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy." Co-founder Carl Giammarese said, "I'd like to hear our music played in the airport, and something like 'Don't You Care' would come across good in that environment. I've never heard any original recordings in the airports I've been in."

The tunes are being played at random. Travelers who hear a song they like can visit the Web site flychicago.com/terminaltunes and review the songs. A link will be provided to the artist and/or the label's Web site. The current roster of music will be played for four months, according to Iglauer. A new batch of music will then be played.

The Chicago project is groundbreaking. In Iglauer and Natkin's extensive travels, they have heard ambient local music only at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas. New Orleans also plays local music over airport speakers.

"We don't necessarily prohibit genres of music," said Nancy Coplin, music coordinator at Austin-Bergstrom International for the past nine years. "We have rock, reggae, country, all genres of Latin music and blues. We don't have metal, rap and hip-hop."

"The volume of the music is more background. We have gospel music. We probably have 2,300 CDs in our library that are Austin-related musicians. We try to use recent product. You can be listening to a local radio station, come into the airport and hear the same music."

Natkin added that callers to the City of Seattle hear local music while on hold. Through a taped greeting, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels directs callers to a Web site where they can purchase local music.

McGee said the Chicago Aviation Department is looking to add more live concerts and sell local music at the airports.

So does this mean the end of "Rhapsody in Blue," written by New Yorker George Gershwin and used as the theme song in United Airlines' ads, at the United terminal?

"That's a very good question," McGee said with a laugh. "I don't know how often United has been playing 'Rhapsody in Blue.' "

But for many Chicago musicians, blue skies will become a familiar tune.

Local musicians interested in providing airport songs may send a CD to the Chicago Music Commission, care of Bruce Iglauer, Box 60234, Chicago 60660. CDs will not be returned.

The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.

hdwest wrote:

What a breath of fresh air to have Chicago celebrate its very own...particularly The Buckingham, who've never failed to talk up sweet home Chicago in concerts around the country; they originated the 'Chicago horn sound' with Bucks music from the 60s and even more recently as 2008 with their new Reaching Back CD...that's what I want to hear when I'm sitting and waiting on American to let me board. Way to go, Chicago Music Commission!

4/18/2008 2:43 PM CDT on suntimes.com

Recommend

chloe wrote:

Too bad the song selection is going to be so "picky". Lots of great music came out of Chicago, and should be heard regardless if it may rattle some people. How can you not play anything from Chicago (once known as the "CTA")? Or the Ides of March? Along with the Buckingham, there were some great local bands from the 60's. Don't forget ALL of the great blues artists. Good idea, this music in the airport, but way too selective. If they're going to do something like this, they should do it right.

4/18/2008 12:10 PM CDT on suntimes.com

Recommend

ahzroc wrote:

Magic SAM! "WEST SIDE SOUL"!!!

and many many other spectacular selections!

(sounds of standing ovation)

BRAVO!!

I can't remember being this impressed with a decision coming from a Governmental Agency.