

ROCK 'N ROLL WILL SAVE YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD



Chris Schadler, Senior Consultant, Community Building institute

Introduction

I live in Cincinnati, Ohio and I've seen several of its neighborhoods transformed by rock and roll. I live in one of those neighborhoods and own two live music venues in another. Both neighborhoods have changed for the better now that a music scene flourishes within them. Sidewalks once sparse and dangerous at night are now filled with chatter, bodies, energy and EYES, as people make their way to and from new night time destinations that come with the territory of live music culture. Formerly dark, empty parking lots filled with broken glass and trash are replaced by cars, lit up by overhead lights, and generating revenue. Stores once vacant and foreboding now bare names of new businesses selling food, coffee, records, and whatnot. Local media outlets now report positive stories about each neighborhood and their events. People from other neighborhoods start talking about coming to these neighborhoods or about their recent experiences of having been to them. Perceptions change. A new nighttime business opens up. Another new band and scene surfaces. The neighborhood keeps seeing new faces. The streets become busier and busier, safer and safer.

I live and work in neighborhoods like this because of rock and roll. It's the energy and the culture that provides a quality of life I'm attracted to. One thing I've seen is that a music scene plays an important role in providing a higher quality of life within urban neighborhoods. It plays host to the passion of people, to their identity, purpose and sense of place; to the sights, sounds and energy of the night.

Live music culture is born and grows in bars, taverns, pubs, galleries, warehouse spaces, living rooms, basements, etc. All of these venues make up a scene for a city's musical capital to play out. The music scene provides a context for people to stumble upon unique and shared experiences. It supports a forum for cultural expression, serves as a tool for economic development and, most importantly, provides an element of inbuilt safety.

Purpose

I'd like to shed any doubt, if there is still any out there, about the importance of live music culture and how it is a vital social asset to urban communities. And while references to the benefits of music and art are plentiful I'll try to get to something a little different yet very specific. Take as a starting point the statement from a Harvard University Saguaro seminar article entitled *The Arts and Social Capital*: "the arts offer a unique means of connecting us to our common humanity. Whether visual, musical, dramatic, or literary, the arts allow us to 'create together' and to discover shared understandings ... the arts are a superb means of building social capital." ⁱ

What is being said here gets very close to my point. But the focus of this paper is not necessarily about the benefits of music or the arts in a traditional sense. It's more specifically about the positive benefits of live music and the nightlife culture it generates. It's about a music scene that is mostly urban, underground and nocturnal; an underground scene that can be found, to some degree, in every big city; a rock and roll scene.

Certainly, rock and roll has had more than its fair share of criticisms over the years, perhaps sometimes for good reason. But a good live music scene has profound effects on a community and there's a lot more to it than what its 'sex, drugs, and rock and roll' moniker entails.

What I'm talking about isn't necessarily a new idea but one that I believe needs to be brought center stage into the spotlight. What I've experienced in more formal circles, often as an urban planner, is that it's hard for people see the entire value of something like rock and roll. Mentioning the phrase "rock and roll" in the context of community or culture conversation often elicits a tone generally reserved for something like a dinner party or a game of cards. That is, it's not taken very seriously. But when considering a music scene's full value to a city it's unfortunate and wasteful to not take it seriously because it carries its own specific type of social capital. And it's important because it is something of deep value that goes mostly overlooked by people who make influential cultural decisions about our cities.

My own passion is in supporting and sustaining a context within which creative and original works will thrive. From my experience this context exists in urban neighborhoods that support a live music scene. This live music culture in turn gives something back to the community that supports it. As a rock and roll promoter of almost 20 years at multiple venues in multiple neighborhoods I've witnessed how people grow in places that support the music scene. And now, as the co-owner of two new live music venues in a once neglected neighborhood I'm seeing it anew. The positive effects are undeniable.

Cultural Support & Identity

A music scene is an outlet for creativity and cultural identity to anyone regardless of race, class, gender, sexual affiliation, etc. It provides an outlet for creativity on two levels. First, the availability of a diversity of venues provides musicians of all levels with a stage to present to the public the songs they have created. Secondly, the scene creates culture. The fact that a scene exists can be enough to intrigue, coax or empower potential musicians and non-musicians into being a part of it. A music scene is not only a magnet and support system for existing talent but an incubator of new talent. As it grows the scene provides a proliferation of original works, and for those within it –the music-makers, concert-goers, promoters, bar-owners, etc.– the scene is vital.

Original music and going out to see it and to be a part of it is important. The culture can help us find differences and commonalities among one another and help define our individual and shared identity. Venues, be it a concert hall, bar or a basement, provide a place for formal and informal meetings. As the number of live music venues in a neighborhood increases so too does the variety of musical opportunities and cultural settings for people to become engaged in. But pulling off one good show, a free show in a neighborhood park for instance, is enough to unite members of a community and assist in the development of, otherwise unlikely, social experiences.

Live music is increasingly seen as an important aspect of a community's cultural identity. Jim Tarbell, a former Cincinnati City Council member and long-time resident of the historic Cincinnati neighborhood of Over The Rhine (OTR), has seen the music scene of Cincinnati ebb and flow over the last 50 years. The thing that initially brought him into the inner-city and held him there as a teenager was the music scene in OTR. A highlight he recalls of those earlier years is when there were “six to eight great live music venues presenting a diversity of music all within a few blocks of one another in the heart of the city.” *ii*

In Northside, an inner-ring suburb of Cincinnati and my neighborhood of residence, the music scene is vibrant. Jim Blase, co-owner of a record-store in Northside called Shake It Records, says that the music scene has helped build the community's identity and bring its residents together. Live music culture, he added, drives up the brand and appeal of the neighborhood. He said it puts the neighborhood on the map by bringing people in who normally wouldn't have had a reason to come. *iii*

Research that seeks to understand how live music impacts a community is gaining popularity and many communities include the aspect of access to live music as a primary indicator of quality of life. The city of Austin's self-proclaimed official slogan is the 'Live Music Capital of the World'. There is no question that music is a defining element of Austin's culture. *iv* Nashville, TN is another great example. The city is internationally known for country music but its music scene is really much bigger than that. In an effort to expand the city's musical capacity and influence the Nashville Music Council was created in 2009. What's one of the top four priorities of the council: “growing the live music scene.” *v*

Yet a fascinating development that sometimes occurs is when a music scene and the culture it brings to a neighborhood starts to devour itself through over gentrification. In an interview with Robin Taylor and Joe Price of Inland Empire Touring -a boutique rock 'n roll booking agency in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn- they describe how in a very short period of time Williamsburg has become too expensive for the culture of people that are responsible for its recent renaissance. This is happening because as the scene gets bigger the level of popularity increases which then starts to displace the culture that created the scene in the first place; thus coming full circle attracting a new culture of people with more money to the area. *vi* Jim Tarbell too has witnessed this paradigm over the years, albeit over a much longer time frame, in Cincinnati neighborhoods like Mt Adams and Clifton.

Economic Impact

New York City nightlife, a business that attracts more people into our city than the NY Yankees, the Giants, the Rangers, The Mets, the Jets, all of the Broadway shows put together, and all the Film and Television Industry. *vii* – NYC Nightlife Preservation Community

A good scene attracts people. Neighborhood residents come out of their homes and people from other neighborhoods, other cities and other states drive in. I've witnessed people who've flown in from other countries to see a rock show. The economic impact of that attraction extends well beyond live music venues. A good nightlife scene, be it a rock and roll scene or what have you, will affect other nighttime businesses. This is no big revelation. But how significant can the economic impact of a music scene be? A report from the city of Austin, Texas' website provides a good picture. It states: "The measurable economic and fiscal impact of music in Austin is significant, as more than \$616 million in economic activity, almost 11,200 jobs, and over \$11 million in City tax revenues can be attributed to influence of music on the local economy." *viii*

I interviewed two business leaders in Northside about the music scene and its economic impact. Bruce Demske, former President of the Northside Business Association, stated that increased exposure and economic activity are brought in by live music. The music scene, he said, brings people in from other neighborhoods to see the shows, and these visitors then frequent shops and restaurants before and after shows. *ix*

Jim Blase said he and his brother opened Shake It in Northside for two reasons: one, cheap rent and two, because The Comet, a live music venue, was there. Shake It is now an economic hub and one of the most popular destinations in the neighborhood. *x*

A neighborhood is more enjoyable if it tends to be able to provide good experiences, and a place that produces good experiences attracts people to it. Good live music events attract people. They do so to such a degree that they can persuade a person's choice on where to live. I've witnessed this directly on several occasions. In one instance I met a man who said that Northside was on their list of places to buy a home but after one night in the neighborhood during a big rock n roll event in the park they decided to move there because it was such a great experience.

Safety & Perception

This is something everyone knows: A well-used city street is apt to be a safe street. A deserted city street is apt to be unsafe. xi — Jane Jacobs

One of the allures of the city is the edge and energy that comes with it. This is one of the driving forces that motivate some people to it. There are characteristics of a city's culture and economic state, like a music scene, that are a product of that allure. But a neighborhood needs to be safe before it will see any significant cultural and economic growth. Safety is the foundation to all other quality of life attributes.

A healthy nightlife increases the safety of the neighborhood it occurs in because it gets people out on the streets. Without venues and nightlife the streets would be mostly empty. The opening of one good venue, when before there were none, will change the dynamic of the street dramatically. It becomes much safer because now criminal elements have to worry about someone at any random moment in time coming from their home or car to the venue or vice versa. When all others business close down at the end of the day the live music venue is just getting started and brings with it a different set of people and a different set of eyes. As Jane Jacobs describes in her book *The Death And Life of Great American Cities* when a city street is filled with people police aren't necessary because the 'eyes on the street' keep it safe. People come out excited for something worthwhile to do, for something worthwhile to see. And when these people are on the streets coming and going they are helping keep it safe. xii

In a description of living in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City the website StuckInNewYork.com, a website to help people make decisions about where to live in the Big Apple, it states: "Despite the neighborhood's notorious violence in previous decades, Hell's Kitchen is a generally safe neighborhood today. Because of the busy nightlife, people are out and about well into the night (even on some weeknights) that sends a sense of safety while walking home." xiii

I asked Bruce Demske what he thought the most important thing live music culture brings to Northside. Bruce said flat out that, 'more positive activity at night speaks directly to safety.' Bruce was also a member of the neighborhood's Citizens On Patrol and said that when the Northside Tavern, an 150 capacity live music-venue, opened nighttime activity went from a 'few of the wrong kind of people to a whole bunch of the right kind of people.' xiv

Jim Blase opened Shake It Records with his brother in 1999. He said that before the Northside Tavern opened the streets were deserted after 5PM. "Now it is much safer. 10-years ago the parking lot across from the Northside Tavern was fenced off because the neighborhood could not afford to light it or maintain it. Now there are serious parking shortages during dinner, on weekend nights, or anytime there's a big show." xv

Dan McCabe, music director of the Midpoint Music Festival in the Over The Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati says that “each year the feedback is overwhelmingly positive as the neighborhood is injected with thousands of vibrant, music-loving adventurers. Crime reports come up blank after the event. The neighborhood traffic picks up and sustains for months.” *xvi*

How people within and outside of a neighborhood perceive neighborhood safety is a serious factor. And that perception can be manipulated by one good event. I once did an event featuring 5 venues and over 20 acts in a 4-block entertainment district. The area was suffering economically and was only a shadow of its former self. (Coincidentally its downfall was initiated by the departure of a vibrant music scene.) The event was planned in conjunction with the neighborhood’s business association. The event came and went and did OK. Attendance was barely adequate, but there was one big hit in all of it, the press. One of the bar-owners and members of the business association said it was the 1st piece of good press about the neighborhood he had seen in 7 years.

Final Thoughts

In 2010 I took a trip to the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and was fortunate enough to get time to pick the brains of some of the staff there. Dr. Lauren Onkey, Vice President of Education and Public Programs, explained that one of the biggest hurdles of her job is that educators still have a hard time finding any value in the history of rock and roll. *xvii*

Here too there is an obstacle in the way. And that is getting people to understand the value a live rock and roll music scene brings to the quality of life of a city. And while funding for the fine arts is prolific in cities like Cincinnati there is no funding for its live music scene. Why is that?

There should be funding to help develop a city’s music scene. It would benefit urban neighborhoods by increasing safety, cultural capacity and economic growth. What would happen if a city’s rock and roll scene got a quarter of the funding that the fine arts did? Being from Cincinnati that’s an interesting question to consider because not only is its current music scene vibrant but its history unparalleled. It is one of three American cities that ‘can legitimately claim to be the birthplace of rock and roll.’ *xviii* Cincinnati could’ve been a music-city at or above the level of Nashville or Austin had the people running it not been so freaked out by rock and roll. Many of us in Cincinnati would love to see that change because our live music scene and the culture it supports continues to have significant positive impacts on our urban neighborhoods and the quality of our lives.

Bibliography

Arts and Social Capital. "Bettertogether: The Arts and Social Capital." Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Accessed December 29, 2011. <http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Arts.pdf>

Austin. "The Role Of Music in the Austin Economy." Accessed January 10, 2012. <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/telecom/downloads/musicstudy.pdf>

Blase, Jim. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, December 10, 2011

Demske, Bruce. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, December 8, 2011

Hell's Kitchen. "Living In Hell's Kitchen." Accessed December 28, 2011. <http://www.stuckinnew-york.com/new-york-area-guide/living-in-hells-kitchen.php>.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House and Vintage Books, 1961.

McCabe, Dan. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, January 13, 2012

Nashville. "Nashville Music Council." Accessed November 15, 2011. <http://www.nashville-chamber.com/Homepage/AboutUs/ChamberInitiatives/NashvilleMusicCouncil.aspx>

NYC Nightlife. "Introducing the NYC Nightlife Preservation Community: Set To Save The Industry." Accessed January 8, 2012. <http://guestofaguest.com/new-york/nyc-nightlife/introducing-the-nyc-nightlife-preservation-community-set-to-save-the-industry>.

Onkey, Lauren. Interview by author. Cleveland, OH, October 18, 2010

Stewart, Terry. Interview by author. Cleveland, OH, October 18, 2010

Tarbell, Jim. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, January 15, 2012

Taylor, Robin and Price, Joe. Interview by author. Brooklyn, NY, October 15, 2014

Notes

- i Arts and Social Capital. "Bettertogether: The Arts and Social Capital." Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Accessed December 29, 2011. <http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Arts.pdf>
- ii Tarbell, Jim. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, January 15, 2012
- iii Blase, Jim. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, December 10, 2011
- iv Austin. "The Role Of Music in the Austin Economy." Accessed January 10, 2012. <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/telecom/downloads/musicstudy.pdf>
- v Nashville. "Nashville Music Council." Accessed November 15, 2011. <http://www.nashvillechamber.com/Homepage/AboutUs/ChamberInitiatives/NashvilleMusicCouncil.aspx>
- vi Taylor, Robin and Price, Joe. Interview by author. Brooklyn, NY, October 15, 2014
- vii NYC Nightlife. "Introducing the NYC Nightlife Preservation Community: Set To Save The Industry." Accessed January 8, 2012. <http://guestofaguest.com/new-york/nyc-nightlife/introducing-the-nyc-nightlife-preservation-community-set-to-save-the-industry>.
- viii Austin. "The Role Of Music in the Austin Economy."
- xiv Demske, Bruce. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, December 8, 2011
- x Blase, Jim. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, December 10, 2011
- xi Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House and Vintage Books, 1961.
- xii *ibid*
- xiii NYC Nightlife. "Introducing the NYC Nightlife Preservation Community: Set To Save The Industry." Accessed January 8, 2012. <http://guestofaguest.com/new-york/nyc-nightlife/introducing-the-nyc-nightlife-preservation-community-set-to-save-the-industry>.
- xiv Demske, Bruce
- xv Blase, Jim
- xvi McCabe, Dan. Interview by author. Cincinnati, OH, January 13, 2012
- xvii Onkey, Lauren. Interview by author. Cleveland, OH, October 18, 2010
- xviii Stewart, Terry. Interview by author. Cleveland, OH, October 18, 2010