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Music City Ecosystems: Spreading Austin's Model

The Texas capitol has a history of embracing its music community and addressing issues affecting it in innovative ways.

Written By [Lynne Margolis \(https://americansongwriter.com/author/lynne-margolis/\)](https://americansongwriter.com/author/lynne-margolis/) // March 27, 2018



Mobley performs at the Mohawk in Austin during Black Fret's 2017 kickoff event. Photo by Amy Price

For the past few years during South By Southwest, Austin's massive mid-March gathering of music, film and tech types, a small group of music-industry and government leaders have been convening to discuss one of the most pertinent issues music cities around the world face: how to protect and nurture the ecosystems that form the foundation of their identities as the "live music capital of the world" or "Music City" or "the home of the blues and the birthplace of rock and roll."

Those slogans may attract tourists to Austin, Nashville and Memphis, respectively, but the scenes they come to experience — communities comprised of musicians, venues, equipment and instrument suppliers, music retailers, recording studios, engineers, publicists, radio, music media and other supporting players, not to mention consumers — must be able to generate enough income to sustain those elements, while withstanding forces that threaten their stability, from skyrocketing real estate prices to harmful government regulations.

During the two-day Music Cities Think Tank, they examine what works — and what doesn't — and share ideas and practices to help those scenes thrive. This year, participants from San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Memphis, Toronto, New Orleans, Denver and Fort Collins, Colorado and Washington D.C. are discussing revenue and audience development, the role of non-commercial radio, exporting music, using streaming to promote local artists, crafting music-friendly policies and the importance of data collection.

Don Pitts, founder of the consulting firm Sound Music Cities, began convening the think tanks as "an informal coalition" of city representatives in 2014, when he was still serving as the founding manager of Austin's music office. The goal, he says, is "to learn from each others' mistakes and replicate successes."

It's no accident that they're meeting in Austin — and not just because they can conveniently piggyback on SXSW, which, like the iconic *Austin City Limits* TV series, began as a way to showcase the area's vibrant scene. The bigger reason is that Austin has a history of embracing its music community and addressing issues affecting it in innovative ways. In Texas' capital, private and public entities have developed programs and practices that now serve as templates for other communities, such as the SIMS Foundation, which provides mental-health services; the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians, which handles physical health care; the Austin Music Foundation, which offers programming and resources for Austin's music professionals and businesses; and advocacy groups such as Austin Music People and Music Venue Alliance Austin, an outgrowth of the United Kingdom's Music Venue Trust.

"Austin is incredibly unique is because it has all of the components that you need," says Brendon Anthony, director of the Austin-based Texas Music Office (the nation's first state music office). "It's got backstops, it's got patronage, it's got education. It's got serious systems built in at the city level to support the music industry."

The city's trend-setting efforts were noted in a 2012 Music Canada report titled "Accelerating Toronto's Music Industry Growth: Leveraging Best Practices from Austin."

In 2015, Pitts commissioned the Austin Music Census — another first — to assess the community's needs and develop initiatives to address them. Anthony, who also emphasizes the importance of data, is ramping up a program called Music Friendly Communities; San Antonio, Fort Worth, Austin and other participating cities have agreed to establish a liaison, conduct an economic impact study and share findings "to paint an accurate statewide picture" of the industry's economic impact so practices can be developed to create stronger environments for creators and

businesses. In a state where music business and education account for 95,000 jobs, \$3.6 billion in earnings and \$8.5 billion in economic activity, according to a 2017 economic impact study, it makes sense to examine how to preserve or increase those numbers.

As more cities seek to develop their creative economies, music is earning greater emphasis. Seattle, which now calls itself the “City of Music,” launched an initiative in 2008 titled “City of Music 2020 Vision.” It’s labeled as “an effort to celebrate and grow Seattle’s music culture.”

The story is similar in other cities. But Pitts cautions them not to think in terms of tourism. Their focus needs to be on job development and sustainable incomes, he says. In Chicago and Toronto, those efforts include venue preservation plans featuring large tax breaks. Nashville and Pittsburgh have created low-cost artist housing, and the Nashville organization Helping Our Music Evolve has developed affordable co-working and studio spaces for music professionals at Center 615 and Studio 615. All are parts of a web — one as strong as the forces holding it together or as fragile as those pulling it apart.

In 2012, the Future of Music Coalition published a white paper about artist revenue streams for MIDEM, Europe’s “international B2B music market.” It noted that artists are gaining more income from grants and fan funding than merchandise sales or sponsorship.

And in a 2017 music trends report by online ticketing agency Eventbrite, Anthony observes, “We need to encourage private sector investment in the music world, and provide them a solid perspective on how to do that.”

Pitts agrees, noting, “You have to have that partnership approach, with the public sector and private sector and non-profits.”

In Austin, one nonprofit organization, Black Fret, has developed a private-sector-fueled patronage model to fund large artist grants that has become so successful, it's about to expand to other cities.

The grant money comes from Black Fret members who pay \$1,500 a year for access to member-only events, from intimate house concerts to shows at recording studios, clubs and other venues, each featuring potential or selected nominees. Members also suggest nominees and vote on winners. In just four years, grants have grown from \$10,000 to \$18,000; the goal is \$25,000 (they hope to increase recipient numbers, too). At the 2017 ball, Black Fret awarded ten \$18,000 “major” grants and nine \$5,555 “minor” grants totaling \$230,000.

Blue October bassist and recording studio co-owner Matt Noveskey, a Black Fret advisory board member, was attending his first Black Fret Ball in December of 2015 when he heard a singer-songwriter who blew him away so completely, he knew he wanted to take the artist, Danny Malone, under his wing.

Because the board is comprised of music professionals who serve as mentors, Noveskey's goal wasn't a left-field notion — especially because he's also a manager and producer. Black Fret co-founders Colin Kendrick and Matt Ott put Noveskey in touch with Malone.

“This really grass-roots, organic thing happened,” Noveskey recalls. “Danny came out to my studio, I met his band, we hit it off, we recorded some songs live, and one thing led to another.” Malone signed with Noveskey’s management company and became the opening act on two Blue October tours, which instantly elevated him from 200-capacity clubs to 10,000-seat venues. He also received one of 19 artist grants awarded at the ball, which at the time were in amounts of \$12,000 and \$4,200. (The latter initially were \$3,000, but Shakey Graves had done so well that year, he declined his \$12,000 grant and divided it among the small-grant winners.) That helped Malone record a new album and hire Blue October mixing engineer Mark Needham, who’s worked with Imagine Dragons, the Killers, Fleetwood Mac and Dolly Parton.

Of course, arts patronage isn’t new, nor is its resurgence to help fill voids created by the industry’s evolution from label support and unit sales to self-funding and streaming (and microscopic royalty checks). Black Fret and similar initiatives hold so much promise because they’re sustainable, scalable models without the begging involved in project-based pledge campaigns — or the “ask fatigue” such campaigns can cause.

“When you say to someone that local music is art, they say ‘Well, yeah, of course,’” explains Ott. “‘Well,’” he’ll respond, “‘wouldn’t you agree that it deserves the support of the community just like opera or theater?’ They’re like, ‘Of course.’ ‘Well, with Black Fret, you get to become a patron of local music. You get to nominate the bands you love. You get to come to upwards of 30 events a year, you get to vote for the allocation of the grant dollars and you get to celebrate being part of a community that supports not only the musicians, but the city that we love.’ And it creates an amazing community in the process.”

Founded in 2013, Black Fret was modeled in part on New York City's multi-discipline Creative Capital organization, but Noveskey says he's never encountered anything like it. When he tries to explain it to non-Austinites, they ask, "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch," he says. "It works."

Adds Ott: "The music industry hasn't just gotten harder for musicians; it's gotten harder for everybody. When the bottom falls out of a revenue model and the value starts getting sucked out of an industry, everybody suffers. Black fret is a small attempt – what I hope is one of thousands – to instill value back into the industry."

Black Fret's revenue mix also includes sponsorship; recently, Gary Keller of Keller-Williams Realty, whose All ATX nonprofit raises funds for HAAM, SIMS and the Austin Music Foundation, added Black Fret to his list, earmarking \$100,000 for previous winners who might climb more career rungs with follow-up funds.

"We know that we've put more than \$1 million directly into the hands of Austin music businesses and artists," says Kendrick. They hope to award \$1 million annually in grants; as of December 2017, about 500 members had given \$800,000 to nearly 70 bands and solo artists, who receive additional pay for Black Fret gigs. To unlock grant dollars, artists must create and perform music. Members and the advisory board select 18 nominees from a pool they and previous nominees suggest; the top two Best New Band vote-getters in the annual Austin Music Awards also become nominees. All 20 receive grants and become "Black Fret artists," meaning they're in the fold and can work with 35 advisory-board mentors, including Spoon's Jim Eno and producer/mixer Tim Palmer (U2, Robert Plant, David Bowie, Pearl Jam).

Artists can't apply; they have to be nominated. But as 2017 winner Mobley explains, "You can position yourself near it."

Kendrick, who created the Austin Music Foundation with Ott in 2002 and still sits on its board, says 10 cities have been reviewed as potential Black Fret chapter sites so far; two have been chosen for initial expansion — partly because they can form a tour circuit for artists. (He declined to reveal which two because plans are not yet final.)

"When we achieve our national vision, we will have effectively created a minor league of music, a farm team for record labels," Kendrick says. "But our model is decidedly non-commercial. Bands aren't picked based on revenue potential."

Mobley, a Princelike dynamo who sings and plays guitar, keyboards and a drum machine while triggering lighting and visual effects, says his 2017 grant relieved major financial pressure surrounding the release of his new album. Not comfortable with crowd-funding, he figured he might have to find a label partner.

"Having that funding from Black Fret means that, at least for this record, we can do the things we wanted to do independently, without having to compromise in terms of who we partner with or in terms of cutting corners on costs," he says.

Wild Child, on the other hand, was thrilled to sign with Dualtone after unlocking funds that helped cover unexpected merch and van-repair costs. Without those dollars, they would have lost their first sold-out tour — and missed the show that got them signed.

The \$17,000 grant Wendy Colonna received in 2016 allowed her to release her 2017 album, *No Moment But Now*, just before giving birth. "I didn't have to choose between my career and my family during what could have been a rough time," she

says.

Keeping musicians thriving is key for any city that counts music as part of its identity, but in the “live music capital of the world,” that mission takes on particular relevance – especially with growth and gentrification triggering an affordability crisis for those who deliver the commodity on which that claim is staked.

In response to Austin Mayor Steve Adler’s Austin Music & Creative Ecosystem Omnibus Resolution, a 2016 directive to develop solutions for affordability issues plaguing Austin’s creative community, Austin’s new music office manager, Erica Shamaly, has organized a pilot busking project with developers of a new retail/residential area. In addition to creating a lively vibe and paying curated artists \$150 an hour for busking, it allows tipping, even providing a “Dipjar” – a machine that lets fans tip by swiping a credit card. The units, which retail for \$399, are also being tried out in some local clubs. Shamaly asked Dipjar, developed for nonprofits, to create software for payments directly to artist so clubs don’t have to sort it out – a problem with adding artist tips to credit-card receipts.

“We don’t want to lose people who really want to make a go of it in the music industry just because there aren’t essential services available for them,” says Anthony. But as Black Fret’s Ott notes, no one idea or program is going to solve the problems music professionals face.

“We’re not gonna put the big genie back into the big bottle,” he says. “But are there a thousand little bottles that parts can get back into so people can get value however they can.”

To do that, it takes a community.

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