

AUSTIN MONTHLY



HEALTH CARE FOR MUSICIANS

THE LIVE MUSIC CAPITAL OF THE WORLD RAISES THE BAR ON HELPING THE CREATIVE CLASS.

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From the days of the Chitlin' Circuit's star-studded acts to Willie Nelson at the Armadillo World Headquarters to Spoon playing South by Southwest, Austin's music scene has defined the city's creative spirit and formed its economic backbone. But with a skyrocketing cost of living and saturated market threatening their livelihood, many musicians are struggling to survive in the Live Music Capital of the World. Fortunately, they're getting by with a little help from their friends.

On a chilly February afternoon in 2009, AJ Vallejo pulled his car onto the shoulder of Interstate 35 and struggled to breathe. Lung capacity had never been an issue

for the frontman of the acclaimed Austin band Vallejo—which he'd started alongside his brothers, Alex and Omar—but the El Campo-born vocalist found himself unable to steal more than a few gulps of air at a time. Eventually, he blacked out.

When Vallejo came to, his girlfriend, Kaycee, was taking him to the emergency room. Doctors, concerned by his condition, placed him on a treadmill to perform a stress test. Less than four minutes in, Vallejo dropped to the ground from a massive heart attack. Soon after, he awoke in a hospital bed. “Rather than processing how close I’d been to death, the first thing I thought was, Holy sh*t, how am I going to pay for this?” says Vallejo, who was 38 at the time. “It’s screwed up, but it’s true. I’ve been fortunate to have made a hell of a career with my music, but, as a musician in this day and age, you’re always living on a razor’s edge and scraping by any way you can.”

As an established musician with well over two decades of late-night shows, touring, self-medicating from stress and depression, and grueling recording sessions under his belt, Vallejo was accustomed to pushing his body to the brink. Still, he’d never expected to go out like this, stuck in a hospital bed crippled by medical debt. Luckily, Vallejo had a safety net that musicians elsewhere in the country don’t: HAAM, or the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians, a local organization created in 2005 to deliver affordable health care to the people driving Austin’s renowned music scene.

Vallejo was enrolled in HAAM’s health coverage plan when he suffered his heart attack, meaning almost every cent of his hospital care, access to specialists, and surgery were covered. Others typically aren’t so lucky. “A musician is, in effect, a small businessperson; all their expenses come out of their salaries, from renting studio space to paying bandmates to employing booking agents,” says Reenie Collins, HAAM’s executive director. “That can leave even the most successful musicians with little money to put aside for their health, especially if they don’t have any immediate or pressing needs.”

Over the past decade and a half, HAAM has established itself as one of Austin’s top musician advocacy organizations. But, Collins is quick to point out, it’s hardly the only show in town. In fact, a wave of nonprofits has rolled into the city, each hoping to answer the same question: How can we make life easier for Austin’s musicians?

It comes down to affordability and access to resources, says Collins. “There’s 8,000 working musicians in Austin; 80 percent of them earn less than \$24,000 a year. I’m talking about artists you see on stage every night all over town, that are traveling, cutting records, and touring. The majority of our musicians are, all too often, being asked to sacrifice for their art.”

In many ways, this issue strikes at the core of the city’s ongoing growing pains: Faced with an ever-climbing cost of living, stagnant pay rates, and a saturated music industry, the performers who put Austin on the map can no longer afford to live here comfortably. It’s a sad twist of irony that Colin Kendrick and Matt Ott, who first bonded over live music as teenagers

in the 1980s outside of a Sixth Street concert venue, have sought to address since the early 2000s.

“This problem isn’t unique to Austin; any metropolitan center is experiencing a rising cost of living and, in turn, that’s placing immense pressure on their artists,” Kendrick says. “What’s different here is that people are taking action. There’s a history here that none of us can ignore.”



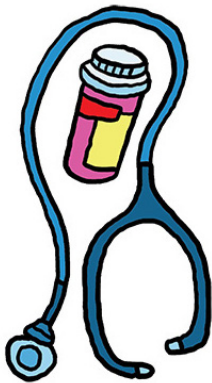
Over the past two decades, Kendrick and Ott have cemented themselves as two of the city’s key champions for local music. First, in 2002, Kendrick started the Austin Music Foundation (AMF), which has delivered career development training to more than 15,000 musicians and music industry professionals through educational panels, workshops, and tailored consultations. Ott was a founding board member. Since then, they’ve also founded Black Fret, which harnesses community support to provide Austin artists with grants that can fund their musical ventures. In the last five years, Black Fret has awarded the 82 bands that have passed through its programming (including Shakey Graves, Tameca Jones, the Peterson Brothers, and Riders Against the Storm) with more than \$1 million in grants. In turn, those funds have been used to write and record 300-plus songs and perform more than 750 shows around the world.

Providing artists the money they need to thrive and create is vital, Ott says, but at its core, music is about human connection. That’s why Black Fret’s variety of private and public events—which take place in special settings like members’ living rooms, recording studios, and downtown rooftops—have brought local artists and music lovers together in a way that wasn’t possible before. That’s the only way to honor Austin’s past while securing sustained artistic, cultural, and economic growth for its future, Ott believes. “Just like the opera, the theater, and the symphony, live music is art that deserves the support of the community,” he says. “The difference is, you don’t need a concert hall, an orchestra, or a set of dancers; the music and the magic can happen anytime and anywhere. We can’t take that for granted.”

Music can be magical, but its performers are often saddled with unique stresses, says SIMS Foundation executive director Heather Alden. Since 1995, SIMS (Austin’s first musician-support organization) has worked to raise awareness and provide resources for mental health treatment in the music community, which is often a magnet for conditions linked to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Every artist aided through the organization’s work is a living tribute to Sims Ellison, the beloved Austin musician whose tragic suicide inspired SIMS’ formation. The foundation has connected thousands of uninsured and underinsured musicians (including AJ Vallejo), music industry professionals, and their families to licensed

therapists, psychologists, and addiction counselors they couldn't otherwise have accessed—all at a significantly reduced rate. “Musicians have high financial stress, high work stress, and that leads to depression and anxiety,” Alden says. “It's not just that they're inherently crazy because they're musicians. If you're struggling mentally and emotionally, that's bound to bleed into your work.”

Graham Wilkinson is another success story of Austin's homegrown musician support system. A preacher's son whose easygoing melodies, seasoned voice, and folksy sound have made him a mainstay on stages since he moved to town in 2004, he's an independent artist who's responsible for every facet of his business. That means booking his shows, managing his band, writing his music, and performing. He loves what he does, but he admits there's far more grit than glamour in the life of a musician. “Some nights I fill up the Continental Club and it's unbelievable, and other nights I'm playing at a restaurant where I'm background noise and nobody's paying attention,” says Wilkinson, a 2014 Black Fret grant recipient. “That's fine, because that's what it takes. You've got to maintain, survive. It's a hustle.”



Sometimes hustling can only help you so much. One night after playing a show during SXSW, Wilkinson slipped and injured his hand while caring for his dogs at home. Uninsured and afraid of what his medical bills would be, he put off seeing a specialist even as his hand continued to swell. Finally, after nearly a month, his wife wouldn't have it; he had to see a doctor. The news wasn't good.

Wilkinson found out he needed surgery and that, with hospital and surgeon fees and other add-ons, it was going to cost him well over \$5,000. He didn't have that kind of money. “I freaked out and texted Reenie [Collins] out of desperation and asked if there was anything she could do,” he says. “Luckily, she had somebody who could help.”

That somebody was Dr. Alton Barron, an orthopedic shoulder, elbow, and hand surgeon who founded the Musicians Treatment Foundation (MTF). A deep music lover known for playing everything from Elvis Costello and Steely Dan to '90s hip-hop and R&B in his operating room, Barron started the organization to cover the costly surgeries that would otherwise bury an underinsured or uninsured independent musician. “Without insurance, a rotator cuff surgery [a common ailment for guitarists, fiddle players, and violinists] could cost you \$45,000 to \$50,000. Nobody can afford that, especially an artist without insurance,” Barron says. “A single medical problem like that will destroy your career.”

Since MTF's establishment in Austin last year, it's provided \$565,000 worth of free medical care to musicians—making it just the latest organization to try to crack the city's musician welfare problem. But even with its growing Rolodex of do-gooders, the Live Music Capital of the World is still struggling to keep the show going. Affordability continues to be an ongoing issue—one that's hardly confined to Austin's musicians—and consistent streams of revenue have been difficult for artists to access, especially in the era of digital streaming and low music sales. According to HAAM's most recent reports, more than 60 percent of its members are barely making enough money to get by every month.

These organizations aren't insulated from monetary challenges, either. As nonprofits, they're beholden to donations by supporters and exposed to fundraising fluctuations. To ease some of this burden, a new umbrella organization has been formed: ALL ATX, an Austin music education nonprofit founded by Gary Keller (of Keller Williams Realty) that supports HAAM, SIMS, AMF, and Black Fret through raising money and advocating for their causes. Collins is thrilled to see the city's top organizations come together around their common goals, but she admitted it'll be an ongoing challenge to serve the community to the extent they'd all like. "This city has to find a way to support musicians, not just through HAAM and our partner organizations, but at a molecular level. If our artists leave the city because they simply can't afford to live and survive here, Austin's going to lose a piece of its soul. We can't let that happen."

Each of these nonprofits has received nationwide recognition for their efforts, allowing them to rapidly extend the breadth, depth, and impact of their services. This increased exposure now has many of them (including Black Fret, MTF, and HAAM) either making moves to expand into other cities or helping similar organizations get off the ground elsewhere—a massive step since, to this point, none have a true parallel elsewhere in the country.

All of this puts the city at a bit of a crossroads. Despite their striking success and desire to expand, these leading organizations will readily admit the same thing: There's still more work to be done here. Some suggest local government leaders should take a more hands-on approach to stimulating the music industry; others wonder if more corporate sponsors could be the key; everyone agrees, though, that caring for Austin's artists is our greatest chance to fortify the city's cultural, economic, and communal foundation for years to come. "The impact of what we do day-to-day keeps folks alive, helps them get back to creating and sharing their gifts with so many of us," Alden says. "We all have a responsibility to support the culture that's fueled, and is still fueling, this city. It's a beautiful thing to be a part of, and we're all better for it."

No matter how you slice it, Austin owes so much of its success—not to mention its moniker of Live Music Capital of the World—to its musicians. We need to honor their sacrifices and all that they’ve given this city, says Collins. “There’s always going to be growth and fluctuation within a city. That’s OK, as long as you’re committed to nurturing and sustaining the heart, soul, and core of what sets that place apart, what makes it special. For Austin, it’s our musicians.”

Ten years after his heart attack, AJ Vallejo still can’t help but marvel at everything that’s happened since that day at the hospital. He now has two kids with Kaycee—a daughter, Rio Azul, and a son, Rocco Prince—and has taken on a healthier approach to life. He’s also more in love with music than ever, recording and touring with Vallejo, exploring a solo career, and starting a new Americana collaboration, Love & Chaos, with singer Kendall Beard (see “Bands to Watch,” page 87). None of this would be possible without the support he felt during and after his health crisis, he says: “My world was rocked by that heart attack, but it would have been in shambles without the support I had, which everyone deserves. Me, my family—we’re indebted to them.”



As for Vallejo’s kids? They’re both already playing guitar and piano, a prospect that brings him both pride and pain. “If my kids want to pursue a musical journey as artists, I’m going to support them 100 percent; but as a parent, I’m going to be concerned because I know they’ll have a long, hard road ahead of them,” he sighs. “Being an artist isn’t a cakewalk. This hasn’t been easy, nor will it ever be.”

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