

directions: a road map to the central Texas economy
April 29 - May 5, 2005

A new tune? Industry observers fret about sustaining live music venues

Live music. It's not just for tourists anymore.

That's the message Austin musicians and music promoters want to amplify throughout central Texas.

Austin is justifiably proud of its reputation for live music and legendary artists. But there's concern among some voices in Austin's music community that there's too much emphasis on the big festivals than the smaller nightly performances around the city.

"South by Southwest and the Austin City Limits Festival are wonderful events for attracting tourist dollars to the city and for increasing our brand name as the 'Live Music Capital.' But we also have to be diligent about the sustainability of the live music venues and artists during the other 350-plus days of the year," says Nikki Rowling, executive director of the Austin Music Foundation.

Without a doubt, music makes cash registers sing in Central Texas.

This year's South by Southwest conference contributed an estimated \$31 million to the local economy from the 22,500 attendees that ventured to the music conference, as well as the film and interactive conferences.

Likewise, the Austin City Limits Festival in 2004 made a \$23 million economic impact on the city. More than 75,000 people attended per day, and 51% were from out of town.

The Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau cites the economic impact of music as \$616 million a year. But those numbers are from a report filed back in September of 2001. A lot has changed since then.

The live music scene is often listed as one of the top reasons for visiting Austin, and calling Central Texas home. But some worry that residents are taking their city's status as a music mecca for granted, and aren't doing what it takes to ensure the road goes on forever and the party never ends.

When the economic downturn hit Austin, live music didn't emerge unscathed. Fewer people went out, cover charges went up, and some clubs closed.

"When the economy goes bad, the customers don't come out as much," says Graham Williams, a promoter at Emo's.

Emo's hosts live music five to six nights a week. Williams says business is improving, but notes how the economy and the war made for hard times at the local club.

In recent years, when popular clubs like Steamboat, Liberty Lunch, and Black Cat each closed their doors for their respective reasons, a sense of loss reverberated among music lovers.

Meanwhile, Austin's music industry is trying to fight the impression that live music is less lively — an impression left by subdued support for the Austin Music Network and other music projects.

Local musician John Pointer, a winner and finalist for many Austin Music Awards, contends that many people who have recently moved to Austin may simply not know what they're missing.

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“My feeling is that we have more and more people moving to the ‘Live Music Capital of the World’ who are not used to coming out and having music available to them,” Pointer says.

“The City of Austin spends a lot of money promoting itself as a tourist destination for music, but audiences should be careful not to become tourists themselves.”

In 2005, the Austin Music Commission is tackling many issues that may be keeping music lovers at home with their iPods—issues such as downtown parking and soundproofing of downtown residential projects.

“Hotels build around airports all the time, so there must be precautions that can be taken when building near our entertainment districts,” says Teresa Sansone Ferguson, chairwoman of the Austin Music Commission.

Jason Shepherd, who’s the frontman for the local band Downliners, echoes the frustration of many music lovers over the city’s noise ordinances, which restrict volume and the length of bands’ sets.

“It’s contradictory to have the issue of noise ordinances and be the ‘Live Music Capital of the World,’” says Shepherd.

A bright spot is the Austin Music Foundation, a non-profit organization working to “unite, ignite and revolutionize” the local music community.

Founded by Nikki Rowling and Colin Kendrick, the foundation has borrowed the technology incubator model and applied it to music through the Austin Music Incubator program.

The Austin Music Incubator seeks to develop artists who can build sustainable careers in music. Each artist selected for “incubation” is placed in an 18-month program of professional training, financial assistance and mentoring to gain the skills needed to develop their careers, as well as to produce and market CDs.

Rowling stresses the importance of having venues that serve bands and audiences alike.

“Think about the venues that everyone associated with discovering new music like Liberty Lunch, Steamboat, or Black Cat – venues that are no longer here. Those venues need to be replaced. We need venues here to help develop and break new artists.”

Ed Bailey, vice president of brand development for the ‘Austin City Limits’ show at KLRU, says Austin still “walks the talk” when it comes to live music.

“If we’ve lost clubs and that’s made the opportunity go down in some people’s minds, you can’t prove it to me by looking in the back of the *Chronicle* each week. I’m blown away by how much music is coming into this town,” Bailey says.

John Kunz, president and owner of Waterloo Records and Video, Inc., agrees that there’s plenty of music being played in Austin, but he warns music lovers to remember why Austin calls itself the “Live Music Capital of the World.”

“Some people take it as a birthright. Others realize that we do have something special here and that it has to be nurtured and taken care of like a garden if you want it to continue to grow,” Kunz says.