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MUSIC

Unlikely allies

City, music scene to unite benefitting concert-goers

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After years of mistrust, fear, fines and music-club shutdowns, punctuated by the 2003 disaster at the now-shuttered E2 nightclub that claimed 21 lives, the City of Chicago and its music scene are for the first time taking tangible steps toward building a mutually beneficial relationship.

A multifaceted dialogue involving city officials, club owners, record-company and studio owners and music-industry veterans has created the Chicago Music Commission, which aims to raise Chicago's profile internationally, turn its musical variety into a major tourist attraction and bring millions of additional dollars into city coffers and businesses.

One city official called it the Chicago cultural equivalent of the Czech Republic's "velvet revolution," in which the communist regime quietly gave way to the coun-try's first free elections in 40 years.

"It feels like this silent change, where the work of a couple of individuals has quietly spread into the music community and the city over the last year, and now you've got people on both sides working together to make something positive happen," says Mike Orlove, planning director of the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. "It's a real turning point."

The ultimate beneficiaries will be Chicago's music fans.

"On a grander scale, if the city and the music community are on the same page, it creates a better quality of life for everyone in Chicago," says Chris Schneider, owner of Pressure Point recording studio on the South Side and one of the music-industry veterans who has been most intimately involved in discussions with the city. "There will be more things happening, a more open atmosphere for good things to get done. Musicians and people working in the industry are going to benefit, and

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that's going to be a great thing for the city as a whole."

In the works is a Web site that will serve as comprehensive information source for music lovers looking for everything from record stores in a particular neighborhood to the starting times of all the bands at a summer street festival. "For the consumer, this is an awesome prospect," Orlove says.

It all kicks off officially April 19, when an umbrella association representing all aspects of the Chicago music industry -- including musicians, club and label owners, recording engineers and studio proprietors, booking agents, entertainment lawyers and publicists -- will be launched during a concert and party at Martyrs' on Lincoln Avenue. The board of the Chicago Music Commission is made up of local music veterans representing a cross-section of the scene, including Schneider, photojournalist Paul Natkin, Alligator Records President Bruce Iglauer and Martyrs' owner Kate Hill. It has been meeting for nearly a year and aims to become a resource, advocate and lobbyist for all things involving Chicago music. To many observers, it's a long overdue answer to music commissions in Texas and Louisiana and a companion group to the League of Chicago Theaters.

"It's a necessary entity, and the speed with which it has come together in just the last year proves it," says Julie Burros, a city official with the Department of Cultural Affairs who has been consulting with the commission since its first meeting last winter. "When you look at how much the League of Chicago Theaters has done to raise awareness of that community, the merits of a music-industry group were really obvious to the city."

Chicago can legitimately claim to be the incubator for musical genres ranging from jazz, gospel and urban blues to house and industrial, as well as being a major national presence in classical music, alternative country and hip-hop. But the city has long ignored its music scene, and in recent years seemed genuinely hostile toward it, with ordinances cracking down on everything from the rave scene to rock clubs. "The result is that great stuff happens here, people get noticed, a certain energy happens, but because there's no infrastructure to support it, the second city syndrome takes hold and the success is never exploited," Schneider says. "It never translates into Chicago being recognized as a music town on par with Los Angeles, New York, Nashville or even Austin [Texas]."

The goal of the commission is to provide a central focus for a vast, fragmented scene that rarely shares information or pools resources, and to act as an advisory board for a city that in the past has missed opportunities to nurture its indigenous music resources.

It is expected to hire a salaried executive director, open a music office in Chicago and begin recruiting dues-paying members at the April 19 Martyrs' show. Membership will include not only music-industry professionals, but those who aspire to a career in music. Its mission will be similar to the League of Chicago Theaters, a 26-year-old alliance that promotes its industry around the world while working with 170 theaters, ranging from storefront companies to multimillion-dollar operations.

"We're building a community that will cross every musical genre," Natkin says. "People in the music business by nature are self-contained. But if the musical pie here is made bigger, everyone gets a bigger piece."

The commission will be designated a delegate agency, meaning that it will function as a private, self-governing non-profit group that will work in conjunction with the city and could be partially funded by the city. In that respect it differs from other agency groups such as the Texas and Louisiana

music commissions, which are fully funded arms of state government.

"We believe the music commission should be run by music-industry professionals, because we feel we know best what the interests of the music community are," Iglauer says. "At the same time, to move forward we need a formal relationship with the city, and need to work with them hand in glove."

That unprecedented step was green-lighted by Mayor Richard Daley last summer in a meeting with Iglauer, and the commission's early liaison efforts with a wide range of city officials have been shepherded by his chief of staff, Sheila O'Grady. Meanwhile, a group of some of the city's most prominent club owners and promoters has been holding regular meetings, and has had face-to-face discussions with O'Grady and members of all the city's licensing departments in an effort to improve a relationship that was in tatters only a year ago.

`Monumental' moment

"It's monumental," says Metro club owner Joe Shanahan. "A group of licensed music-club operators are sitting in a meeting with city commissioners and having a dialogue. This is the first time something like this has happened in the more than 20 years that I've been running a club in this city, and I can't applaud more loudly that it has finally happened."

Marguerite Horberg, owner of HotHouse, a respected club briefly shuttered by the city in 2003 for having an improper license, strikes a more cautious tone, but is also optimistic. "We're just at the very beginning of trying to establish some kind of trust, and it's still premature to see how the city will play it," she says. "But Sheila O'Grady sent a strong message setting up that meeting. It indicated to me that there was interest and willingness to have a dialogue, whereas I thought the relationship was adversarial before."

Only a year ago, if the owner of a music club in Chicago found herself in the same room with a bunch of city commissioners, it could be for only one reason: A penalty, ranging from a fine to a complete shutdown, was about to be meted out. E2 sent a chilling message heard by all club owners: Upgrade safety, or else. But veteran club owners also felt they were being scapegoated, branded as troublemakers even though they had operated for years, if not decades, with a clean safety record.

The pressure from the city was so intense that several prominent club owners contemplated closing, and the future of one of the best live music towns in the country became clouded.

"I wouldn't recommend that anybody try to open a club in Chicago now," said one blues club general manager last winter amid a wave of city inspections. "I'd like to own a club someday, but I'd never do it here."

"It was so easy to have everything taken away from you," says Kate Hill, co-owner of Martyrs', speaking of the mood across a city music scene scarred by the E2 disaster. "There was a feeling of fear that rolled its way through a lot of music venues, that at any given time you could be shut down."

Weekly visits by inspectors representing fire, police, building, liquor licensing and other city departments doubled. In 2003, the fire department alone conducted more than 2000 spot night inspections and closed 16 clubs at least temporarily, most for exceeding occupancy limits.

Martyrs' found itself facing a city hearing last winter when a concert by the Spanish band Ojos de Brujo was shut down for alleged overcrowding. The club was fined \$2,500.

But in the months since then, Hill says, the tide has been turning. "In past years, if a club owner was going through a problem, you felt alone," she says. "Now, we're all starting to realize that we face many of the same problems. We're getting organized and we've found someone in Sheila O'Grady at the highest levels of city government who is adamant about working together with us and finding solutions. We're trying to clarify and streamline the process of working with the city, and create a better business atmosphere that can benefit everyone."

Better for everyone

Orlove watched as inspectors shut down the Ojos de Brujo show, one his city department sponsored. "Both sides [the city and the club owners] made mistakes, and something like this club owners group needed to happen years ago," he says. "But I'm happy it's happening now. The fact that club owners sat with all the regulatory agencies indicates there is some serious intent on both sides to clear the lines of communication. That the club owners are organizing to voice their concerns in a collective way is long overdue, and something that the city will appreciate."

The group aims to provide a voice for the best-run clubs, the lifeblood of the city's night life and a destination for millions of music fans and tourists annually. "It's an indication that the city understands the importance of live music to Chicago, that the city wants to keep it going," Hill says.

The club owners plan to expand their group to include other venue operators soon, and aim to continue meeting regularly to discuss mutual problems. In dealing with everything from day-to-day business to a crisis, the group aims to act as a sounding board for club owners and work directly with a yet-to-be-named City Hall liaison to streamline communication, arrive at solutions and exchange information.

In addition, they are working with O'Grady to schedule at least one meeting a year with city commissioners. "We needed a dialogue, and we got one," Shanahan says.

Much of the agenda for the club-owners group and the music commission is still being determined. "A lot here is unpredictable and in a fragile state," Iglauer acknowledges. "We're still in the process of defining ourselves." O'Grady declined to be interviewed for this report because she said through a spokesman that the projects were still in their infancy, and that she preferred to wait until "plans become more concrete."

But there are signs that progress is being made. Already on the docket is a series of six nuts-and-bolts educational seminars for music-industry novices beginning in the fall at the Cultural Center that will be co-sponsored by the music commission, the city and Columbia College Chicago. In addition, the city and the commission are collaborating on a massive Web site that will serve as a central information source for music events citywide, "the Google of the Chicago arts community," as Natkin describes it.

"It will be very fan interactive," he says. "Tourists and music fans will be able to find out where and when every show and festival in town will be playing, what the nearest 'L' stops are, where to park, where to eat, discounts on nearby hotels, the names of nearby record stores."

In addition, musicians and others interested in joining the business or working their way up will find information on everything from rehearsal space and auditions to a guide on how to get a show in every club, he says. "It'll be one-stop shopping for all things music in Chicago."

The commission also plans to tackle a massive economic impact study with Columbia College to determine the financial benefits that the music scene brings to Chicago. Though arts-related tourism pours \$300 million a year into Chicago, there has never been a comprehensive study of the economic impact music has on the city. There's little doubt that the figure is in the tens of millions, and could be increased with greater promotion and exposure. Among the items being discussed are a music conference spotlighting homegrown talent, promotional CDs of Chicago's finest music in all genres, and a broader presence at international festivals such as the annual MIDEM trade show in France.

"We're juggling about 20 balls, and if we catch 10 of them we'll be in great shape," Natkin says.

For Iglauer and other longtime members of the city's music community, the commission's juggling act is a necessary risk. "We are faced with declining record industry numbers [CD sales for the first two months of 2005 are down 10 percent from last year], a lot of clubs have closed, club business is down, and the summer concert business is way off," Iglauer says. "I think it's not only possible that we build a better relationship between the city and the music industry here, but that it's essential that we make it happen. We need to do this to nurture our industry, because our industry needs help."

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