

Austin Music People's Music City Report Card for the City of Austin

A supplement to the AMP Biennial White Paper: 2015

REQUIREMENTS

Artists and musicians
Thriving music scene
Access to spaces and places
Receptive and engaged audience
Music-related businesses
Government support
City infrastructure
Music history/identity

COURSEWORK

POLICY	C
MUSIC OFFICE	C
MUSIC ADVISORY BOARD	B
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	D
SPACE	C
AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT	D
MUSIC TOURISM	D

AVERAGE GRADE: C-

Needs Improvement

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On June 5, 2015, Music Canada and IFPI released *The Mastering of a Music City: Key Elements, Effective Strategies and Why it's Worth Pursuing*. This comprehensive and deeply researched how-to guide was the result of forty interviews with music community experts, government officials, and community leaders in more than twenty cities around the world – including Austin.

The report defines a “Music City” as a community with a vibrant music economy, and that serves as a home for artists, musicians, and a broad range of professionals who support artist entrepreneurs in their career development. Music Cities contain spaces for rehearsal, recording, and performance, and fuel the live music scene with an engaged and passionate audience. Additionally, such cities' music industries generate economic growth, foster job creation, and sustain cultural development.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A MUSIC CITY

According to the Music Canada/IFPI study, the five essential elements of a Music City are:

- Artists and musicians
- A thriving music scene
- Access to spaces and places
- A receptive and engaged audience
- Record labels and other music-related businesses

Further, the study notes the importance of **government support** for music, a broader city infrastructure conducive to the sector, and **music history and identity**.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR MUSIC CITY SUCCESS

1. Music-friendly and musician-friendly policies

Government policies have a direct impact on the ability of music businesses such as live performance venues, recording studios and rehearsal spaces to operate sustainably.¹

In Austin, as in other Music Cities, permitting, event ordinances, transportation planning and parking, and even land-use planning impact our music economy. But currently our venues are struggling mightily with conflicting codes, inconsistencies in policy enforcement, and what census respondents consider a “confusing and arcane permitting process.”²

Given Austin’s recent and rapid population increases, a timely and modern revision of our decades-old land-use plan through the CodeNEXT process is critical to addressing the twin threats of gentrification and haphazard urban growth. **Every year, Austin loses iconic music venues, old and new.** It’s past time to explore active venue preservation options including cultural districts, merchants’ associations, and a shift to using the Agent of Change principle as a policy baseline.

GRADE: C

2. A Music Office

Thanks to the tireless work of the Live Music Task Force (2008) and many other dedicated volunteers and civic leaders, Austin can claim a City Music Office. The City’s Music & Entertainment Division opened in 2010 and is housed in the Economic Development Department, alongside the Global Business Recruitment and Expansion Division and other critical revenue-generating programs.

The Music & Entertainment Division is charged with leading the city’s music strategy development and serving as a centralized resource center for Austin’s music industry. In the absence of music industry hubs or clusters, the division has taken a leadership role in

¹ The Mastering of a Music City (2015).

² Austin Music Industry Census (2015).

the music business community by facilitating introductions and shaping discussions between music business operators, resulting in new business and connections.

Additionally, the division currently assists outdoor live music venues and small festivals with the city's labyrinthine permitting process and helps to mediate agreements between neighborhood groups and permitted outdoor music venues. Staff serve as an effective, approachable resource to all parties seeking constructive solutions for the increasing pressures between Austin's rapid population growth and its local music venues, particularly in the downtown corridor.

Unfortunately, while this Office has bootstrapped its way to a degree of effectiveness, it is severely underfunded³ and is consistently bogged down as a result of poor city management, which has created a disastrous bureaucratic morass that affects almost all City departments who try to work together.

GRADE: C

3. A Music Advisory Board

The seven-member Austin Music Commission was established in 1991 to serve as a link between the music community and City Hall. In Fall 2015, the commission will expand to 11 members, one for each of the ten new city council districts and an at-large commissioner appointed by the mayor. The commission's duties are advisory and include studying the development of the Austin music industry; assisting in the implementation of programs to meet the music industry's needs; and reviewing legislative and regulatory matters that may affect the music industry in Austin.

The Music Canada/IFPI study reports that such boards or commissions are conventionally "composed of representatives from a broad cross-section of the music

³ NOTE: The division's effectiveness in supporting a \$1.6 billion industry is severely limited by an annual operations budget of \$78,000 (FY2014-15). As modest as this number is, it nevertheless reflects a significant increase from their FY2013-14 operations budget of just \$38,000 - an increase due, in part, to a grassroots organizing effort led by Austin Music People that generated more than 2,500 individual e-mails from musicians and music fans to City Hall. **The budget support of this city office, given its direct impact on the General Fund and the overall regional economy, deserves immediate attention and a corresponding reassignment of city resources.**

community, but also often include professionals engaged in related industries such as tourism and economic development.” In past years, AMP has found the commission to be an excellent forum for the music community to frankly discuss complex issues and to build consensus, though public participation could be improved.

NB: Two (2) seats on the newly-reconfigured Austin Music Commission remain unfilled as of this writing. Further, only one of the commissioners appointed to date has served on the commission in the past; all the others are new and subject to a significant learning curve. Considering the commission only meets every other month, this lack of experience with city practices and policies may well limit the commission's effectiveness for a period.

GRADE: B

4. Engaging the Broader Music Community

“It’s easy to see how the local music community has been overlooked. It is an industry that grew organically with little help from the city. Members of the music community made little effort to communicate its needs, even when the fast pace of development began to affect it. With the information gathered in the Music Census, data validate the community’s shared struggles in a way that can be used to start **the much-needed conversation about how to preserve what Austin has built.**”

Austin American–Statesman Editorial Board (June 2015)

Involving members of the larger music community is vital to the health and prosperity of a Music City. However, as that study notes, “collaboration across the different segments of the music community doesn’t always come naturally as the sector is composed primarily of small and medium-sized businesses. Many operators of these businesses wear various hats, work only part-time in music, and struggle just to make a living.”

The Austin Music Census confirms this finding: 52.8% of respondents’ music industry businesses are proprietor-only businesses, and a total of 89.9% have between zero to five employees. The reports notes that, “Musicians and entrepreneurs seem to work inside their own niches, so ‘siloing’ seems to be an unintentional but very pervasive byproduct of this growth.”

Indeed, the Census' survey results, focus group responses, interviews, and text write-ins confirmed a sobering shared finding: Respondents across all industry sectors said that “lack of civic engagement to make changes that would benefit the music industry” was of great concern. Yet, respondents also reported that civic engagement was one of their weakest skills in the Skill & Expertise Areas.

Austin can also claim more than 135 music-based nonprofits among its community resources. But most census participants were unaware of the industry's expansion or of the many free or low-cost resources available to support them in their careers.

Clearly, any long-term plan for the Austin music industry needs to offer plans for increasing civic engagement. There is much work to do to build a shared sense of community, a shared understanding of our music industry, and a shared commitment to changing public policy that supports the interests of those who make Austin the Live Music Capital of the World.

GRADE: D

5. Access to Spaces and Places

From education to rehearsal to recording to performance, Music Cities require a variety of quality spaces and places to succeed.⁴

In Austin, musicians report that, of 12 potential revenue streams, “Live Performance Shows in Austin” contribute the most to their own individual income. To support and grow this cohort, then, Austin must first be home to an abundance and variety of performance venues, from tiny coffeehouse stages to amphitheaters and festivals – and the audiences to fill them. The City has not considered the effect of rapid development on creative venues at all, leaving them overly-susceptible to death by market forces.

Visitors and fans need to be able to access venues (and return home safely) by using public transportation, taxis, TNCs, and other options. Nightlife economy employees –

⁴The Mastering of a Music City (2015).

many of whom work for tips or minimum wage – deserve safe, affordable places to park during their shifts. Austin has much work to do in both these areas.

In North America, we are seeing a promising new trend in clustering music businesses together and creating industry hubs to build community and drive innovation. Projects in Nashville, Toronto, Chicago, New Orleans, Memphis, and Detroit are well underway and offer options for Austin to explore.

Our city has dipped a toe in this lucrative pool, starting with the remarkable shared campus for Austin Film Society and Austin Film Studios. The new “Innovation Zone” being designed around the future Dell Medical Teaching Hospital will bump up against the existing Red River Cultural District, hopefully to the benefit of both. It’s now time for Austin to make a similar commitment its music industry, and to support public/private partnerships for commercial music businesses from venues to small business hubs and beyond.

GRADE: C

6. Audience Development

Demographics play an important role in audience development; in particular, large student populations are identified as an advantage in many Music Cities.⁵

But a common challenge from Bogota to South Africa is building an audience for local performers, who often fall under the shadow of high-profile global stars.⁶ In Austin, a recurring theme from census respondents is that a “cover charge” for local Austin musicians has all but evaporated for many venues, despite the high number of quality local artists.

In fact, it appears that some local residents are less willing to pay a typical \$5 to \$10 cover charge for a night out of local live music than they have been at any time in the past decade.⁷ Census participants reported that cover charges have typically stayed the

⁵ The Mastering of a Music City (2015).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Austin Music Industry Census (2015).

same or declined from ten years ago, or in some cases, disappeared entirely. Generally speaking, the decline in cover charge has resulted in venues paying most local bands less than (or in the best case, the same as) they would have ten years ago.

GRADE: D

7. Music Tourism

Few Music Cities have leveraged their music branding to draw tourists as effectively as Austin, the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World.” The Austin Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (ACVB) has consistently marketed the city’s unique cultural brand for more than 20 years.

The foundation of any successful music tourism plan is, of course, a vibrant, healthy music ecosystem. Ideally, a city’s larger music-friendly policy and business environment supports music programming, which attracts visitors, who in turn help generate tax revenues to support additional creative product and infrastructure investments, in a virtuous circle. This is not the case in Austin, where there are very few creative-sector focused City initiatives. Indeed, systemic bureaucratic problems on the City side are threatening a number of Austin’s flagship special events, which are a main driver of Music Tourism and the resultant tax revenue to the City.

GRADE: D