

Connecting Art & Commerce: The Economic Potential of Ottawa's Music Scene

Prepared for Councillor Jeff Leiper

by

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INTRODUCTION

Three chords and a guitar – how far can that take you? That was the type of question young musicians like Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, and Guy Clark grew up with in the 1950s, a decade before they became founders of a stridently iconoclastic music scene in Austin, Texas.

Today, Austin is the gold standard for economic output from local music. Its music scene generates an estimated \$1.9 billion annually – a staggering \$10 per capita each year. Given its unique past, few cities can hope to approach Austin’s achievements, but the city serves as a model of how a multi-faceted music scene can coalesce and collaborate with city officials, tourism authorities, and others to reach a common goal.

Although, as a centre of government with a strong technology presence and a population of under two million, Austin shares some characteristics with Ottawa, any comparison of economics is likely specious. Based on information available from public sources (e.g., published economic impact figures supplied by Ottawa’s major music festivals) a rough estimate of the amount of economic activity associated with the city’s music scene – including concerts at local venues, festival revenues and related tourism spending, instrument sales, recorded music sales, etc. – is \$120 million annually.

How large could that figure grow? Looking beyond Austin, there are a number of other models that hold more plausible examples of how Ottawa’s music scene could contribute to local economic development if vision, leadership, and collaboration are applied as inputs.

This report examines the relationship between music and commerce in eight cities in three countries. Each of these cities – Dublin, Halifax, Quebec City, Oklahoma City, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, and Portland – have found ways to build sustainable local music scenes that contain various genres (and other art forms, in some cases), fuel growth in the local economy, and add to the city’s quality of life.

In its second part, the report projects some of those results onto Ottawa’s current scene and speculates some ways in which the growth of the scene – following the recommendations of *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries* and some observations of *The Next Big Bang* – could help drive economic growth in Ottawa, and

affect three key areas: population retention and attraction, music tourism, and neighbourhood concentration and animation.

MODELS OF SUCCESS

Restaurateur Gino Ste-Marie grew up in Quebec City, in an era when residents of the working-class neighbourhood of St-Roch proudly compared its central street – rue Saint-Joseph – to The Main, Montreal’s famed rue Saint-Laurent. Ill-planned urban renewal turned Saint-Joseph into a forbidding hangout for prostitutes and drug addicts. Twenty-five years later, the *New York Times* was hailing St-Roch as the hip home for musicians, digital artists, and technology workers, and tastemaker restaurant critic Anthony Bourdain was extolling the street’s virtues.

What happened in the intervening years is a lesson in the power of merging art and commerce. Embracing rue Saint-Joseph, even while it was still stumbling back to its feet in the early 2000s, Ste-Marie opened a restaurant on the street, hung local art on the walls, encouraged patrons to hang around the neighbourhood, and championed local musicians. His restaurant, Largo, became the launching pad for an annual music festival, just one of many initiatives that have benefitted from Mayor Régis Labeaume’s ongoing program of investing in cultural activities and artists’ ateliers. Today, rue Saint-Joseph is a buzzing thoroughfare, home to forward-looking places like Le Cercle – a combination restaurant, gallery, and performance space – as well as Bourdain-recommended bistros like L’Affaire est Ketchup.

“Opening a restaurant and music venue here was a big dice throw,” says Ste-Marie. “but this city, this street, it’s my heart.”

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In 2003, bassist Steve Kirby had a bustling career as a freelancer on New York City’s jazz scene, playing regularly with Wynton Marsalis and saxophonist James Carter. Looking to diversify into education and settle down with a growing family, he applied to the University of Manitoba to develop a new degree program in jazz studies. His friends thought he had lost his mind; moving from the nexus of the world’s jazz community to a remote city he had never even visited. Eleven years later, Kirby finds himself at another nexus.

“I lead five bands, I’m constantly fielding requests from the Chamber of Commerce and others to collaborate on projects. My jazz students have gone on to create rock and folk bands, they’re accompanying dancers and poets. I see all kinds of hybrid projects happening – what I call millennial music. All the arts mix together here. The same people who used to think I was crazy now come here, and they don’t want to leave. Lots of other people are coming, too. Music is a big part of what makes Winnipeg what it is, and the city is booming.”

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Bill Royston had years under his belt as a successful dance and music promoter in the arts-rich Philadelphia area when he moved to Portland, Oregon, to launch a new music festival. Portland – then just beginning its rise as the über-hip capital of the Pacific Northwest – presented unique challenges for growing a local music scene. For one thing, few people considered it a winter destination, due to its gray, wet weather.

Royston’s strategy was to develop the tourism and his festival in lockstep, lining up hotels, a regional airline, and local restaurants as partners in his new venture. “Partnerships, both within and outside the community, are very important,” says Royston. “Externally, cultural tourism efforts represent some of the most pivotal efforts to reach new audiences.”

Twelve years after Royston’s bold move, and four years after he retired as head of the festival, Portland is one of the most-desirable cities for young people looking to relocate from crowded, high-priced places on the east coast or California. The city’s vibrant, year-round music scene – and the interaction with Portland State University (alma mater of Grammy Award winner Esperanza Spalding) – is viewed as an important draw as its bicycle-friendly streets, award-winning food trucks, and coffeehouse culture.

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What do Quebec City (metropolitan population 766,000), Winnipeg (730,000), and Portland (1.8 million) have that Ottawa (1.2 million) does not? How have the three cities successfully made music something people think of when their names are mentioned?

While the 13 “weaknesses” identified with Ottawa’s music scene by *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries* cover some critical areas, Ottawa also boasts a lengthy list of “strengths” and “opportunities.” Indeed, the capital seems to have more present and potential musical assets than any of the three cities had a decade ago. What’s

more, Ottawa has three well-established music festivals that, collectively, showcase a broad range of musical genres, and several urban neighbourhoods – the ByWard Market, Little Italy, Hintonburg, and Westboro – that hold enormous potential for becoming the focal point for a renewed music scene.

How might a rejuvenated, sustainable music scene fuel the economic growth of these neighbourhoods, with ripples outward to the city and region as a whole?

The models for economic development through live music are well established in Winnipeg, Quebec City, and Portland, and beyond them, to comparably sized cities such as Dublin, Halifax, Oklahoma City, Calgary, and Edmonton, each of which has a vibrant music scene.

Dublin: The U2 Effect

Few cities illustrate the effectiveness of a highly interlinked music scene as Dublin. With an metropolitan population of 1.8 million, the city was the most obvious symbol of Ireland’s so-called Celtic Tiger economic boom, which coincided with the explosion of U2 and Sinéad O’Connor on the global music consciousness. The city’s Temple Bar district swiftly transformed from a grungy waterfront collection of derelict warehouses to an upscale cultural centre with a Bono-owned hotel (The Clarence) as its symbolic focal point. Even after the Celtic Tiger bubble burst, Temple Bar – and Dublin in general – wear the rock connection proudly, with a statue of Thin Lizzy founder Phil Lynott and a wall plaque celebrating guitarist Rory Gallagher. The area remains chockablock with live music venues, and now that rents have returned to levels that reflect market realities, musicians live in the neighbourhood again. Tourists continue to flock to the area, and young Irish musicians continue to regard a career based in Dublin as a critical step.

Halifax: Echoes of the Explosion

Like Ottawa, Halifax does not need music to attract tourists and keep its large student population partying happily. Pier 21, Citadel Hill, and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic are popular draws on their own, and young people have clamoured for admission to Dalhousie University for decades before Sloan was conceived. While many cities with Halifax’s characteristics are filled with bars featuring recorded music (even the “student ghetto” adjacent to New York University – an area the size of a mid-sized city – offers few live music venues) Halifax has a relatively high number of venues that support live music, the 22-year-old Halifax Pop Explosion, and the presence of a provincial music association. As *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries* notes, “music is a core element of the city’s culture.”

Oklahoma City: Bouncing Back

Oklahoma City, which has a metropolitan population of 1.3 million, has a strong history as a “territorial” music mecca. Its vibrant music scene in the first half of the last century turned out a number of world-class musicians – foremost among them, pioneering electric guitarist Charlie Christian and iconoclastic world music champion Don Cherry. After World War II, that changed, and it took decades for the city’s music scene to come back. In the 1990s, the city’s decision to provide tax incentives to help rejuvenate the abandoned warehouses in the Bricktown district provided significant impetus for change. In the same spirit, the president of the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), Roger Webb, conceived of the idea to create a multi-purpose jazz facility (including performance, rehearsal, and recording spaces) in suburban Edmund. Now, in addition to Jazz Lab, the city supports six full-time jazz venues, and UCO music students perform regularly at venues ranging from churches to casinos in the metropolitan area. The entire city wears its jazz heritage proudly.

Calgary: All Boats Rise

A strong second place in the Music Industries Index in *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries*, Calgary has many things going for its music scene, and the economic benefits that flow from it are amplified by the way the city has approached its overall arts community. In 2004, the city created Calgary Arts Development (CAD), and placed it under the leadership of Terry Rock, an academic with a strong affinity to Richard Florida’s theory about the power of creative cities. CAD provides granting programs for more than 190 arts organizations, and in 2012, Calgary invested some \$3.7 million in this manner. Among other initiatives, CAD also coordinates the Cultural Space Investment Process, which evaluates arts infrastructure projects on behalf of the city. In conjunction with the Calgary Foundation, CAD also runs a program that provides “stable, affordable, and suitable” spaces for artists and non-profit organizations. This strategic approach to supporting cultural initiatives has ensured that all boats have risen during Calgary’s boom years.

Edmonton: Planting Seeds

Despite the fact that it is perhaps the only large Canadian city that has a park named for a musician – American expatriate blues singer Clarence “Big” Miller – and one of North America’s longest-running jazz clubs – Yardbird Suite – there is not much to indicate that Edmonton has as strong a music scene as it does (#3 in the Music Industries Index of *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries*). The city’s strong scene can be traced largely to the innovative Jazz & Contemporary Popular Music program at Grant

MacEwan University. For more than 40 years, the institution – which, during that period transformed from a community college to a university – offered a two-year program that was one of just a handful to offer intense study in jazz, rock, and popular music. In 2010, the university began to offer a four-year degree program in the same course of study. The program offered an education in the music industry as opposed to performance or music pedagogy as many other courses do, although many students did pursue studies in either of the latter. Consequently, the institution has seeded Alberta’s music scene with dozens of highly skilled music practitioners, who have opened private music schools, instrument stores, and recording studios. MacEwan alumni include musicians as diverse as country singer Corb Lund and avant-garde trumpeter Lina Allemano.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Despite being mid-sized cities with urban populations under two million, the eight cities cited above would appear to have little in common. Each has followed a very different path to making live music a critical component of its economy and civic identity, as well. In four, post-secondary institutions have played an important role, three have had strong leadership from city hall, and entrepreneurs have made significant contributions in two of them. It is interesting to note that singular events – U2’s rise from the streets of Dublin, the musical equivalent of winning a lottery – played a role in only one city, and that city already had a strong history of supporting live music. In effect, U2’s global success only amplified what was already there.

The common threads are vision, leadership, and collaboration. These cities have come together at various internal points to ensure that the proper ordinances and licensing agreements are in place, that the right people are at the tables where decisions are made, and that infrastructure like rehearsal spaces, backline providers, and publicity channels are in place. The musicians of these cities share enough of the vision to want to work together, even when they are not the star of that night’s show, and the people of these cities put their bums in the seats – still, always, the most important component of any live music scene.

It would be naive to think that any of these cities has not faced opposition from within: Dublin is rife with those who believe U2 and Ireland’s tech boom ruined Temple Bar, just as surely as there are those who believe Oklahoma City is masking the tragedy of its 1995 terrorist bombing, or Winnipeggers who feel the city should devote more attention to its

ongoing flood issues. But those jealousies are set aside, or overcome, in favour of getting the job done and ensuring that economic benefits flow.

How would this look in Ottawa? Who would benefit? How much money would flow?

Frankly, there are too many intangibles to even guess at this point. No one can pre-determine how a music scene will grow, or by how much. But, based on the findings of *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa's Music Industries* and close to 40 years of observing the scene as a journalist, festival executive, and occasional promoter, a number of likely scenarios in three key areas are clear.

Population Retention and Attraction

The story of migration related to Ottawa has traditionally been that artists go, and bureaucrats come. The truism is that it is rare to find someone who has lived in Ottawa their entire life. For decades, if you sought a career in music, dance, film, theatre, or magazine journalism, you left town. If you wanted a career in public service, Ottawa was the place to come. The technology boom of the 1990s changed that to a certain degree, but as a government-focused city in close proximity to Montreal and Toronto, Ottawa is destined to struggle to find ways of keeping – and attracting – energetic young people who add to the city's arts-related economy. A vibrant, well-connected music scene could be a positive force in that struggle.

The attraction of music for creative, young people is well documented in the work of urbanist Richard Florida and others. What is often not stated is that the music scene needs to be both broad and deep enough to be effective. The presence of one good venue, specializing in one genre of music will not suffice; if so, Ottawa would have succeeded in this effort years ago. To be sustainable, and to appeal to the largest number of people, the music scene must be multi-faceted and well integrated into the fabric of the city.

“You need a music scene that tells a compelling story,” says Music Canada's Amy Terrill. “A scene with a strong identity can aid in community building.”

“Different cities have different sounds that define them,” adds Steve Kirby, Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Manitoba's Desautels Faculty of Music. “Any city that wants to develop a strong music scene has to find its own sound.”

Retention is also important for the musicians themselves. What does Ottawa lose when a Paul Anka, Angela Hewitt, Alanis Morissette, D.D. Jackson, Kathleen Edwards or Richard Reed Parry leaves town to pursue their career elsewhere? The result is immeasurable, and who is to say how each of their careers would have evolved if they had kept Ottawa as their home base? What is clear is what happens when a musician like bassist John Geggie, cellist Julian Armour, or guitarist Phil Hogarth remains: They create their own scenes, mentor younger artists, and encourage others to believe that you can have a fruitful career in music if you remain in your hometown.

Music Tourism

If Ottawa does any one thing as well as any other city does, it is tourism. Ottawa Tourism is highly effective at marketing the assets of Canada's capital, along with seasonal events like Winterlude and the summer festivals. The organization has developed strong relationships with hoteliers and restaurateurs who operate businesses that appeal to a tourist clientele, and experience has allowed it to target audiences using a variety of communications channels.

What is lacking is any sense of Ottawa's music scene beyond the presence of major, international-scale festivals like Bluesfest. There is no invitation to move beyond the obvious attractions of Winterlude or the national museums to any particular music venue or local music event. It is left to the visitor to seek these out.

Ottawa's failure to effectively promote its live music scene beyond the three summer festivals is not unusual, says Amy Terrill, Vice-President of Public Affairs at Music Canada. "City tourism often overlooks music," she says. "It focuses on festivals, which are huge assets, but doesn't often make the connection between other things that bring tourists to a city and live music.

"How do you motivate them to go out at night, or stay an extra day or two and get out to music venues? There's a huge opportunity for that."

Indeed, the potential exists to do exactly what Music Canada's report *The Next Big Bang* suggests when it concludes: "Municipalities and regions are well positioned to create robust music tourism industries that drive local economic activity by engaging existing festivals, venues, music production facilities, and a vast body of talent... Even small centres stand to benefit if they skilfully exploit their music assets."

To accomplish this, new collaborations – between the tourist authority, venues, and artists, at the very least – will need to be formed, and as noted above, a vision and leadership are essential to make it happen.

Neighbourhood Concentration and Animation

One of the weaknesses of Ottawa’s current music scene – and one that is not highlighted in *Connecting Ottawa Music: A Profile of Ottawa’s Music Industries* – is the lack of a single focal point, or several focal points. The strength of scenes such as those in Quebec City, Portland, Oklahoma City, and Calgary is that the principal music venues are concentrated within an area easily covered on foot, by bicycle, or with a quick cab ride. The economic impact of this is obvious: like attracts like, and concentration focuses spending. Patrons of popular music venues are more likely to spend money in areas they frequent regularly, and those popular venues are likely to generate buzz for the overall area.

That’s the case on Quebec City’s rue Saint-Joseph, where Le Cercle’s Director General Bruno Bernier says he has witnessed enormous change since his venue, Largo, and others began presenting music there. “It is obvious that it has created movement, different trajectories, opportunities.”

In Ottawa, those possibilities are diffused – as far north as Wakefield’s Black Sheep Inn and as far west as Burnstown’s The Neat. On any given week, those far-flung venues might be host to the most interesting artists in town, while other shows might be spread between The House of Targ in Old Ottawa South, The Rainbow in the ByWard Market, and the Bronson Centre in Centretown. Compare that reality to what was arguably the golden age of live music in Ottawa, when venues like the Black Swan and Squire’s Tavern were concentrated on the downtown stretch of Rideau Street and Barrymore’s was a nightly draw on Bank Street. It was possible then to catch several acts in one evening, or grab a bite to eat between sets.

There currently is no vision of concentrating a music scene in one area, and seemingly no incentives to attract entrepreneurs to offer live music in one area. Building a live music focal point takes coordination, with possible impact on noise ordinances, etc., but cities around the world have demonstrated the positive affect it can have on local businesses, and the way such concentration can be used to market a music scene through tourism outreach.

One example of what is possible in Ottawa was offered during the summer of 2013, when a wine bar/restaurant in Hintonburg stepped forward to host the late-night jam sessions

during the Ottawa International Jazz Festival. The buzz on the street was palpable, and music fans could be seen flowing between the jazz venue, the Hintonburg Public House, and other adjacent businesses.

CONCLUSION

Assuming that a successful music scene, with economic benefits flowing to a variety of recipients, could develop without planning, leadership, and collaboration between many players would be akin to believing in the theory of the overnight sensation.

Asked to comment on his meteoric success in 1975, Bruce Springsteen said that becoming a star was “like catching lightning in a bottle,” but he neglected to mention the 10 years of multi-set one-nighters, single-minded focus, and determination that led to his breakthrough with the album *Born To Run*.

Every successful music scene needs a spark, and the right combination of factors.

“This emergent Dublin ‘scene’ of the late 1970s possessed little in the way of a rock music infrastructure of recording studios, rehearsal rooms and dedicated venues... the founding of *Hot Press* in 1977 and the establishment of RTÉ’s pop station, Radio 2, in 1979, were two of the most significant factors in boosting and developing an Irish rock culture.”

(Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone in *Rock and Popular Music in Ireland: Before and After U2*)

It has been established that Ottawa has a number of existing strengths, as well as opportunities that can be exploited. Turning those assets and potentials into a sustainable scene with benefits for all it touches appears just out of reach.

We have rehearsed. We have paid our dues. Now is our time to hit the stage.´

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Hale has been involved in Ottawa's music scene since 1978, when he became the assistant editor of a monthly arts publication. Since then, he has participated in the music community as a radio host and producer, president of the Ottawa International Jazz Festival (1986-88), and newspaper columnist and critic (1991-2007). James is also the author or co-author of nine books and the proprietor of James Hale Writing & Editing, which provides services to clients in the public and private sectors.