



## INDY LEVERAGES ITS MUSIC SCENE AS THE NEXT BIG ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

# TOWN

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On any given night of the week, Fountain Square's music venue, HI-FI Indy, is populated with young, educated tech workers. After a long day at Angle's List, Salesforce, or Cummins, it's their time to unwind, refresh themselves, and indulge a sense of adventure with live music that's new and different.

Their live concert habit is a well-known fact to many employers. When you're trying to attract and keep human capital, having a vibrant nightlife has become a valuable bargaining chip. The current and future workforce gives it as much importance as access to good schools, adequate housing, and public transit.

Serving this customer base with live music by local and regional artists and bands is an intense, heads-down experience that offers little downtime for business owners like Josh Baker, founder of HI-FI Indy, MOKB Presents, and Do317. Running three music-related businesses is demanding enough that Baker admits he hadn't noticed the natural affinity he shares with thought leaders who are planning one of the city's latest economic development strategies: to leverage the Indianapolis music scene as a magnet for businesses and the people they hire.

Baker's eyes were opened in 2017 when the Indy Chamber invited him to attend an annual conference in Memphis known as Music Cities Convention. Funded through a grant written by Michael Kaufmann, the trip included a mix of local people with a stake in the music business.

There Baker saw how other cities had connected all the dots – the philanthropic organizations, city government and ordinances, and businesses with jobs related to live music – all working together and having conversations about how to support the music industry.

"My takeaway was that we didn't have that, and yet we were further along than most of these cities in terms of the assets we already have," he says. "Great musicians, great songwriters, great venues, great nonprofits – we kind of had all these things. We just didn't have a plan."

Baker returned to Indianapolis enthused about the potential to raise the city's profile as a music city and what it could do for the local economy. His reaction was exactly what the Indy Chamber had hoped to stimulate.

### Measuring music's economic impact

"One of the major things that's happened in the last five to ten years is a fundamental change in our economic development focus," says Jim Rawlinson, regulatory and permitting ombudsman for the Indy Chamber. "The new model for economic development is understanding what companies you have and making sure their needs are being met locally, so they can grow, expand, and hire."

Rawlinson says this national and local trend attracts and retains companies that are more invested in community development, neighborhoods, and local quality of life.

Rawlinson and other local leaders like Mike Huber, president and CEO of the Indy Chamber, are also local musicians, and they recognized that the city had reached a pivotal moment. "We have a lot of local leadership with significant civic power who really understand what music can do for our economy and our quality of life," Rawlinson says.

From the mayor's office, to the city's most notable thought leaders and business owners, the Chamber found a surplus of people who were ready to help Indianapolis capitalize on its music scene – not as an arts strategy, but as an economic development strategy mobilized by the arts sector.

Anxious to see Indianapolis take the next step toward that vision, Baker approached Sound Diplomacy,

the Canadian strategic consultant that hosted the 2017 Music Cities Convention he attended in Memphis. He offered to host the next national convention in Indianapolis, and that resulted in a smaller regional conference held last May at HI-FI Indy, where influencers from all corners of the city gathered.

"The whole goal of this thing was to get people talking and to see if we had something worth pursuing," Baker says. "From the Chamber's perspective, that ultimately led to where we are now, with a legitimate economic development study that is going to give us a lot of data to show what music's impact on the city really is."

### Back to the future

The Indy Chamber recently commissioned Sound Diplomacy to begin a twelve- to eighteen-month study as part of Indy Music Strategy, an initiative Rawlinson compares to the one that made Indianapolis an amateur sports center in the 1980s. "Indianapolis economic development has always been based on strategically going after sectors of the economy, getting a good understanding of them, and finding out how to become a leader in them," he says. "We've done it with life sciences, with racing, with logistics, with healthcare, and with education."

The \$150,000 study, which officially started in February, is funded by a broad base of investors and stakeholders, most of which aren't typically approached for financial support. From Rawlinson's perspective, that's an important distinction. "There is a limited amount of money for arts organizations and artists, and the last thing we need to do is take money away from that pool," he says.

Since the Chamber first announced the Indy Music Strategy, some local stakeholders have expressed impatience and curiosity about why the project will take so long. "We have a fairly robust way of finding everything, and we work with local partners to help validate what we find," says Shain Shapiro, president and CEO of Sound Diplomacy. "We're asking local partners how many people come to their gigs and learning how networks work across genre and across sectors. It takes a while to get it right." Shapiro says the community development aspects of this project will be visible over the next six months.

The study will unfold in three parts:

- written music vision and ecological impact
- economic impact assessment
- music strategy and marketing plan.

What happens after the study varies from place to place, according to Shapiro. "Our job is to gather the data and produce an irrefutable, comprehensive baseline of the value of music across various sectors," he says. "In some places, we've been able to change laws and zoning ordinances that may not be supportive of music and music infrastructure as they could be. In other cities, we've seen new groups be formed and funded to support the music economy, whether it be through a commission, an industry group or something like that. In other places, we've seen city councils and chambers investing in permanent policy structures and strategies around music, such as music officers."

### How a plan comes together

It's premature to read too much into a study that hasn't been done yet, but everyone agrees that Indianapolis has some clear areas of opportunity to offer better support for its music ecology. Among them:

- Possible changes to ordinances that would give people of all ages access to local music venues where beer and liquor is served. Currently, people under the age of twenty-one can't get in or perform in many of the city's live music venues. Baker says

restrictive regulations prevent many young people from pursuing music careers and developing a taste for live music at the most formative time in their lives.

- Driving more income to locally based artists and music-related businesses. The Indianapolis International Airport, for example, has requested that the music soundtrack piped into the airport's terminals be at least partially native to Indianapolis musicians. Similarly, the city would like to see more advertising campaigns feature local music rather than going far afield to acquire music.
- Developing more music-oriented nonprofits. The city of Denver has over 200 nonprofit music organizations. Although Indy already has many nonprofits with a music slant, Baker says the city would benefit from more.
- Fostering the growth of new venues for music. Sound Diplomacy points to Huntsville, Alabama, where their work resulted in the construction of a new amphitheater. Shapiro says building new music infrastructure and repurposing existing infrastructure can spawn new music festivals such as Haller on the Hill, founded by Baker in 2018 and held at Garfield Park's MacAllister Amphitheater.

A city such as Denver, Colorado is a textbook example of how an intentional music strategy can benefit a local economy. The fastest growing job market in Denver is live music production – jobs for people who work on stages, festivals, tent building, and sound and lighting technology. Denver attributes these opportunities to its music strategy and growing music infrastructure, both of which formed as a result of the city's relationship with Sound Diplomacy.

A strategy strengthened by a broad base of investors and voices Alan Bacon, a musician who plays in one of the top cover bands in Indianapolis, Chamber Music Band Indy, has high hopes for what may happen here after Sound Diplomacy completes its work. A former campus president of Harrison College, Bacon is among a group of young leaders organized by the Indy Chamber to focus on the city's creative economy.

"Having these types of programs move forward really opens the doors for so many more youth, women, and people of color to get resources and have a stronger foundation to help build upon their art, which really contributes to the happiness and livelihood of everyone locally," Bacon says.

Bacon described the initiative as an unstoppable force built on vision, leadership, and inclusion. "I'm so glad that the city, the Chamber, and people like Josh Baker are involved," he says. "We have the right people at the table to make sure that this idea comes to fruition and doesn't die on the vine. The diversity element is important for giving everyone opportunity and access, which is beneficial to the city from so many different vantage points."

Making sure the Indy Music Strategy incorporates diverse feedback from multiple music genres, and economic and racial backgrounds is a major focus, according to Rawlinson. "It really has to have the doors wide open," he says. "I think there are probably people out there who feel left out because we haven't talked to them yet, but we're only at the very beginning of this project. There will be a lot of opportunity for people to tie in. If they want to be part of it, we want them to be part of it."

Once the data is gathered, the Chamber will begin to share talking points with businesses, stakeholders, and individual donors in hopes of securing financial support for implementation efforts. <