

Charlotte has SCENE Better Days

by: Tommy Heffner

Everyone, who has ever lived in or grown up in a city, has, sooner or later, puffed up their chest and proclaimed to their friends, family, and fellow countrymen (and countrywomen) this profound epiphany that they, and they alone, have been enlightened to ... "the music scene in this city sucks!". Hell, people who have never lived in said city will also utter the same proclamation even if said person has only been in said city for five minutes. Now, as fortunate as we all are to have these delightfully, enlightened people around us, or better yet, perhaps we might be one of those specially chosen folks to issue out the enlightenment, it is ok to disregard or at the very least attempt to formulate an opinion using our own cognitive abilities. The old schoolers are going to tell you the scene sucks and the new transplants are going to tell you the same thing. You can't win for losing. So, what are we going to do? Well, I guess we are just going to have to think. I know it sucks, but it's ok. You and I will go down this weary road together... hand in hand.

I am not the oldest schooler in the town, by far. I am also not the newest schooler, by far, but, I've been here over four decades and have both played in bands and spent a great deal of my time either attending shows in the city of Charlotte or working at it's music venues. That being said, I've seen what I feel is a pretty significant portion of the Charlotte's music scene and it's evolution over the last twenty years (the amount of time I have been old enough to patron this city's music scene). Oh, by the way, if the use of the word "scene" makes you uncomfortable, feel disgusted, or if you just think it's lame, then that's cool. But do us both a favor and find something more productive to do with your time other than reading this article. Like perhaps, flossing your teeth... with a chainsaw.



Charlotte has had a music scene for a very long time... even far beyond the time frame

that I would be able to comment on from my own personal experience. Charlotte was growing to be a crucial hub for the recording and expansion of country music before Nashville became the center for country music. As far back as the 1920's-1940's Charlotte was a vital place for recording and radio exposure for country music. Recording and radio may not seem like important parts of a city's music scene the same way live music does, but the two are connected in defining what influence music has / had upon an area. But, you hate country music blah blah blah... so that just reaffirms your point that Charlotte's music scene sucks seeing as it's roots were in country, blues, gospel, and jazz... and that isn't *cool* music so.....Lighten up Francis, it isn't all about what you like. Point is, music has been here for a very long time. Granted, this town is a banking town and finance and business have, more often than not, defined it's presence and it's growth far beyond cultural aspects like music and art. But, that doesn't mean that Charlotte is void of culture. It's here. It has been here for a while, perhaps not the same level of culture as Austin, Nashville, or whatever town you think is the *coolest*, but it is and has been here. Nonetheless, the support of culture hasn't always been here, but we'll get to that in a bit.

If you've been in Charlotte for any length of time, then you've heard of The (World Famous) Milestone (Club). If you haven't, well, you just did. I'm not going devote this entire article to that venue, because one could devote an entire book to it. However, discussing live music in Charlotte and excluding a venue that has been there for decades, has survived numerous owners, and has crawled back out from nearly ceasing to be several times, would be ludicrous. They've provided a stage and a audience floor for touring bands that went on to be globally celebrated acts, to local bands playing their first gig, and everything in between... for a very long time. It is noteworthy because it is a key part for the music scene here in Charlotte. You may say, "well, other towns have 3-4 places like The Milestone". Awesome, you can count. Charlotte has one then and it's a good one, too.

Anyone who has been in Charlotte since, oh, say late 80's/early 90's, will also recall a number of other venues that gave Charlotte an outlet for awesome music; The Pterodactyl, 4808, Park Elevator, 1313, Rocky's, Jeremiah's, Heretics, Fat City, etc. All of those places were, at one time, sources for live music entertainment and they had the support of the people in Charlotte that craved it. There are still places in Charlotte that are or have recently provided the same outlets for great live music; Snug Harbor, Tremont Music Hall, The Chop Shop, Amos' SouthEnd, (Yeah, I mentioned that. Don't get smug, because chances are you went to at least one show there, too. Hop off of the self-righteous seesaw.), The Station, Tommy's Pub, and, of course, there are more.

Charlotte has always had good local bands here, too. I don't have the room in this article to discuss each of the ones I personally find appealing specifically, but trust me there were good bands playing this local circuit in the 80's-90's (and before) and there are really good local bands playing in Charlotte to this day. Yes, perhaps Charlotte doesn't have the amount of venues, or bands, or as rich of a history as other cities by comparison, but that doesn't warrant labeling Charlotte's current or past music scene as one that sucks. There have been venues, owners, bands, promoters, etc. that have sucked, but they don't define any part of Charlotte's musical culture as a whole. There have been a lot more of the good venues and bands than there have been bad. Charlotte has always had diversity in musical styles represented locally. There have been periods in Charlotte where the diversity seemed a bit out of proportion, but that fluctuates with trends and fads as it does anywhere with almost anything.



If it would tickle your fancy for me to be critical of Charlotte's music scene (I know that is important to many of you) then ok, I'll shoot. We lack in support from the fans and the people as the better part of their time is spent constantly crying about the state of culture in Charlotte. I'm not saying that no one supports music in this city. I'm just saying that a lot more could and should be done. If you want more, you have to put in more. Charlotte does get skipped over often for shows that go the Triangle area or to Asheville

because there is more assurance of support there. Demographics and location obviously play a big part in that. Those areas are located closer to multiple Universities and therefore a larger portion of younger people live there, nonetheless Charlotte has always been sketchy regarding consistently supporting bands and venues on a reasonably comparable scale to other cities in the state/region. There is a reason why people joke about the weather affecting turn out in Charlotte. It is because jokes are funnier when there is some truth to them. "I don't understand why more people didn't come out to this show!" "Well, it is Thursday night, it is raining, AND we are in Charlotte." I'm not trying to beat anyone over the head about supporting live music. There are already enough people doing that. I'm just saying that if you do love a venue or a band, then go out as much as you want to and can afford to. Go see the local band you really dig as much as you want to and can afford to. Do the same thing with the touring bands coming through. Buy some of their stuff if you have the money for it. Tell your friends about them. The thing you shouldn't do, though, is to complain about live music when you don't do the things I just mentioned. And don't even think about running your mouth about how Charlotte has no music scene. Lastly, don't bitch and whine about paying a cover in order to enjoy a band, venue, or environment. A cover charge is a necessary thing in almost every case and complaining to door staff about paying one pretty much tells everyone, "Hey I'm an a--hole, can I come in?" Thank you.