



# Bring the Music Home

Austin is *the* place for music. You can make the tunes even more personal by attending or even staging a house concert.

BY S. KAY BELL

**A**ustin, the Live Music Capital of the World, offers hundreds of places to see some great shows. But there's just something about sitting down to a performance in the comfort of your own home.

No, we're not talking about watching *Austin City Limits* or METV on your television. We're going to a house concert!


You may have heard of these affairs – relaxed, comfortable events at a private residence. The setting is intimate enough to make you feel like the musician is singing to you personally. Even better, when it's break time, you get to rub shoulders with some of

your favorite artists or meet new, up-and-coming singers.

Yes, it really is like going to a really great party at a friend's house. That's exactly how Paul Barker of Westlake Hills got into the house concert business.

Actually, it's not a business. Although house concert hosts typically collect a nominal fee, usually around \$10 per person, all the money goes to the performer. Technically, the admission price is voluntary, but Barker says he's yet to have someone take in a show for free. Those few who forgot to pay the night of show have mailed him the money later.

Rather, opening up your home to musicians and fellow music lovers is a passion. That's how it started for Barker, a sociable sort who over the years has entertained lots of friends. This being Austin, that meant that many of those friends would bring their instruments and end up serenading the party.

From those casual beginnings 15 years ago, Barker's house concerts have evolved into more structured affairs. With the internet and email, Barker can post announcements ([barkerhouseconcerts.com](http://barkerhouseconcerts.com)) and provide links that let folks get a taste of the featured performers. 

## Finding Top Talent

And while he has a dedicated core of folks who'll come to the concerts just because he's the host, Barker doesn't take them for granted. "There's a huge trust factor with the audience," he said. "You just cannot have a dud. You don't book on the basis of friendship, or who's the son or daughter of a friend. They have to be topnotch people."

Because of that, Barker knows better than to rely solely on his personal musical tastes. "You have to like the music, but you have to think

about your audiences all the time."

Still, he does enjoy challenging folks' musical tastes and introducing them to new sounds. "But that gives me all my gray hair," he admitted.

The follicular changes, however, haven't stopped him. He has, in fact, expanded the house concert concept, partnering with Wild Basin. The nonprofit nature site in northwest Austin offers a larger venue for acts with bigger followings. It also gets a chance to introduce itself to people who might not have visited otherwise.

And it gets part of the show's take. Barker, however, is quick to point out that "the artist still gets the same amount as if it's in our house."

For more than a decade, Barker also has hosted a "mini" South by Southwest during that festival's annual March run. He presents 30 or so artists who aren't part of SXSW over five days at Artz Rib House. Again, paying admission is voluntary. "Just come down, buy food and put money in the tip jar," said Barker.

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## Being a Good House Concert Host

And if you're interested in being a host, ConcertsInYourHome.com offers some guidelines. Here are some basics:

- Make sure you have a place in your home that can comfortably seat between 25-to-40 people. If you don't have enough seating, round up some folding chairs.
- Be prepared to absorb ancillary costs. This is important because it ensures that only the artists are doing business, a distinction that keeps house concerts from running into trouble regarding zoning or other restrictions. It's customary to ask attendees to bring food or beverages for potluck snacking before the show, during breaks and afterwards. However, you'll need to provide napkins, plates, utensils, glassware, ice and the like.
- Make sure your neighbors know about the shows and that your guests know about parking restrictions, such as using only one side of the street to keep the road open.

- Don't overdo it. While successful house concert hosts offer shows on a regular basis, that doesn't mean you have to turn your home into a stage every weekend. If you have a favorite artist who comes to town once or twice a year, consider arranging a show at your house in conjunction with his or her schedule to get started. Then as you get a feel for the shows, you can increase the concerts.
- Begin booking by starting with your favorite performer. Most independent artists love to hear from fans, so a simple e-mail or comment on their website is a good place to broach the possibility of a house concert.
- You also can follow Barker's example. He attends music conferences that are much like a buyers' mart for department stores. Artists perform brief showcases in various hotel suites for promoters and concert hosts. The performers are all looking for places to play. Your living room just might be their big break venue. *aw*

*S. Kay Bell's book, The Truth About Paying Fewer Taxes, offers readers 52 truths about how they can find tax savings in our complex tax code.*

### Resource Guide

If you want to attend one of Barker's concerts or the similar shows in and around Austin, a quick internet search of "house concerts Austin" will provide several options.

HouseConcerts.com lets you browse by venues, as well as by artist.

