

MUSIC

Living Room Concerts Return Live Music to its Roots

By: Dana Seith | Jul 9, 2014

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'Swear and Shake' perform at Grocery on Home, an intimate music venue in Matt Arnett's Atlanta home.

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About four years ago, Matt Arnett, a self-described curator of art and music, had a few friends who happened to be musicians staying at his house. On a whim, he invited a handful of folks over, some to hear his houseguests play, others to perform alongside them.

What transpired that night was the beginning of the **Grocery on Home**. Arnett's intimate, in-house music venue, located just a few miles from Coke's Atlanta headquarters, is responsible for creating one of the most back-to-basics concert experiences around.

This not an ordinary club. There is no will-call window for ticket pickup. No confirmation number to write down or print out and keep track of. No assigned seating in neatly arranged aisles matched with alphabet letters and corresponding numbers. No crowd talking over the musicians on stage. This is as stripped down as music can be without listening to a group of teenagers rehearsing in their parent's garage for all the neighbors to hear.



Morgan O'Kane performs at Grocery on Home.

The stage is makeshift. And drinks, well, you can help yourself to what you bring. There's a collection plate or bucket for a suggested donation to give to the artist. There is likely a decent sized-open space, perhaps a few couches, small tables, a few folding chairs, that and some creative soul, not unlike Arnett, spearheading it all and opening their homes to create magic.

In Waverly, Ala., Scott Peek's backyard in the heart of a posh residential neighborhood is peppered with Edison string lights. Fans dance under the soft luminescence on a summer Sunday night. By day, the space is home to the Standard Deluxe design and silk screen shop. By night, it transitions into the Little House Listening Room, a hotspot for live music and arguably one of the coolest non-traditional spots anywhere around.

Living room concerts are also happening in New York City with Parlor Jazz at Marjorie Elliot's Harlem apartment uniting music lovers from the anything-goes East Village to the tony Upper East Side. And of course in Nashville, with the definition of country cool, clothing store Imogene and Willie hosted impromptu shows in an old gas station storefront until noise complaints stopped the music, literally.

Pop-Up Shop Meets Underground Supper Club

The living room concert concept bears some resemblance to the pop-up shopping experience, but with an aura of mystery similar to an underground supper club. You never quite know what you'll get when you arrive. The reason Arnett thinks the home venue is so special is that there was an untapped void he saw in the industry of fans who just wanted to hear the music, nothing else. His place, like the many others across the country, delivers the no-frills authenticity people are craving. On any given night, he opens his home for people to experience music in a new way.

"I couldn't find the place where I could hear great, diverse music and actually sit down and listen to it in a way that would allow me to just enjoy the music," Arnett explains. "I can expose people to new music and new things they didn't know about and, at the same time, I'm also exposing them to each other."

Arnett's venue is not genre-specific. His only criteria? "I have to think the music is great," he says.

The Grocery on Home has hosted gospel quartets, a jazz piano player from New Orleans, a duo originally from Kansas City accompanied by a singer-songwriter from Louisiana, and just about anything else you can imagine.



Lonnie Holley, Marshall Ruffin, Jon Batiste and Gatt McCreary onstage at Grocery on Home.

Peek's house venue seats about 50 folks expecting to have a great time, no matter the performer. One night, he might have a chef come in to make a meal before the concert, but mostly, it's all about the performance.

"The little house is great because everyone is there to hear music, and we usually have some absolute gems come through here," Peek says.

Perhaps it's because people are looking for deeper connections. Despite the world seemingly smaller with the advent of social networking platforms, many feel disconnected and lonely. Or maybe intimate shows are gaining popularity due to the fact that concessions and merchandise, not on the actual music, are the primary profit-drivers in today's live music business model. No matter the cause, pioneers like Peek and Arnett are returning live music to its roots. Artists experiment with instruments in a way they might not in front of a crowd of 500 people, and attendees bond with each other much in the same way friends unite over great food and conversation.

Music, much like food, is often a great equalizer. It binds many different people together in a way that otherwise wouldn't be a connection – all because of a commonality of taste. There's no competition for attention. Here, it's just about one moment of sound. Keep your eyes peeled and ears open, a live performance might be happening closer than you think. You just might be blown away by wonderful art and a magical performance that may never be replicated in the same way again.

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