

# Bringing It On Home: House Concerts

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There's nothing like taking matters into your own hands. Or in some cases, into your own house. In 2001, when indie music fans Babs Perkins and Libby Staples moved from New York City to Greensboro, North Carolina, the lack of indie-friendly music venues was a bit of a culture shock. Their new neighbors seemed to have accepted the situation and adopted the resigned local mantra that there was nothing to do in "Greens-boring."



Perkins and Staples decided to change that. They began contacting some of the artists they had loved watching at NYC... They compiled a list of local music fans who might be interested in hearing something new. After a few short months, the series of Sunday Night Sessions was born.

"We provide dessert and coffee and charge a small donation to pay the artist," Perkins explains. "The guests get to hear new music in an intimate, cozy environment. The artist can really interact with the audience. It's magical." She and Staples have hosted almost twenty such magical evenings since then and have no plans to stop.



Perkins and Staples are involved in a growing indie music trend. House concerts, gigs in which independent artists perform in a fan's living room for a gathering of family and friends, are becoming increasingly popular for both the fans and the artists. For the fans, it's a chance to see their favorite singer/songwriters without driving for hours to catch their nearest tour stop. For the artists, it's a chance to perform in a listening-room atmosphere, where guests come to focus on hearing new music and buying CDs. House concerts also give musicians the chance to build a fan base in cities where no one knows them.

Matthew Asbell, of the NYC artist management group Asbell-Baker, has been watching the popularity of house concerts grow and finding many advantages for his artists in these gigs. In fact, Asbell is so enthused about the house concert concept that he has devoted much of his time to encouraging fans to host them. He has provided feedback and resources for almost one hundred house concerts in the past four years.

"From a business aspect, house concerts offer financial and promotional advantages," he says. "Financially, the artists don't have to split the door with club management, and they save money in travel expenses because the host often feeds them and lets them stay at their house that night. Promotionally, it's a personal and hospitable environment in which the host can introduce their favorite artists to family and friends. The performers build an audience in places they may not have toured previously and can make professional contacts among the guests who attend."

The performers can also land additional bookings when attendees get inspired to become hosts. North Carolina musician and guitar teacher Bett Padgett is one such person.

"A friend of mine hosted one, and right away, I wanted to try it," she remembers. "Through my own professional contacts, I know many great artists who I felt deserved more recognition, so I made an open invitation, and they started coming."

Padgett has taken the concept to a much higher level through what she now calls the Little Lake Hill House Concert Series. She hosts the concerts in her spacious, newly-renovated home on three acres of land in Raleigh. Such grand accommodations allow her to host between 120 to 130 guests at her shows.



"I have about twelve hundred people on my mailing list now," she says. "Since we have so much outdoor space, I'd like to start setting up grills around the house and having cookouts. Guests can bring food and use the grills, and we'll have room for even bigger audiences."

She will also have room for more artists in one night, and possibly even entire bands. While indoor house concerts can usually accommodate only one or two singer/songwriters, the only boundaries outdoors are the size of the lawn and the

limits of the neighborhood noise ordinance.

Wisconsin indie fans Gary and Susan Million have bigger hopes for their own "Millions for Music" series as well. "We recoup our expenses and pay the artist by setting up a donation box," Susan says, "and we'd like to take that a step further by using the house concerts to help those less fortunate. There's a charity here in Milwaukee for mothers and their children who are in need, and we're going to start asking our guests to bring baby items or other donations."

For music fans who are interested in hosting such concerts, lack of artist enthusiasm is not a problem. Many singer/songwriters advertise on their web sites that they are available to play these gigs and offer advice on planning them. Jennifer and Scott Smith of the Baltimore indie band Naked Blue became true believers after playing their first one. In fact, Jennifer says, their best and worst house concert moments were on the same night: "The worst part was right before the concert, when we were kind of nervous and unsure about being under the folk-fan microscope. The best part was ten minutes after the show started, when we realized that we were really having fun!"

A music fan with questions on where to begin need only ask the artists, their managers, or other hosts. "Getting people to attend is the biggest challenge," says Million. "We've got over 100 people on our mailing list, and we average about 15 to 20 guests per show." Padgett agrees with that estimate, saying "You can expect about ten percent of the people on your invitation list to attend."

Raleigh singer/songwriter Taylor Roberts stresses attention to detail. "I've played a few house concerts, and it's great when the host is really organized. Whether it's arranging furniture, providing a solid PA, taking money, providing refreshments, or putting a muzzle on the dog, all aspects work together to make a house concert a killer experience!"



*Another important tip: advertise.* Perkins & Staples have their own web site at [www.geocities.com/sundaynightsessions](http://www.geocities.com/sundaynightsessions) in addition to their mailing list. Padgett puts sound clips on her website at [www.bettpadgett.com](http://www.bettpadgett.com). Other practical issues involve notifying neighbors and making sure your guests have plenty of parking. But another important thing, all hosts agree, is not to stress too much.

"People who come to house concerts are generally laid-back," says Perkins. "They're not going to get upset if there are small technical glitches. Don't sweat it. Once the artist begins playing, the audience tends to get caught up in the performance. They either won't notice any problems or won't care."

"We've had truly magical moments at our concerts that wouldn't happen in other venues. We hosted a New York singer/songwriter named Sam Shaber once. It was Mother's Day, and her mom came to the show. All evening, Sam played songs and told stories about her family. She even tried out a few half-finished songs, just to get our feedback. That kind of thing can only happen at a house concert because the artist doesn't have to worry about putting on a perfect show to impress a club's booking agent."

Roberts has his own fond memories involving the kinds of guests he never would have encountered in a professional venue. "One time, in the middle of one of our passionate, I-love-you-so-much-baby love songs, the most adorable little two-year-old girl reaches into a cooler, pulls out a couple beers, and makes her way to the stage to hand them to the band. We didn't even make it through the rest of the song."

If the whole concept of hosting a concert still seems overwhelming, try delegation. The Millions have found their guests more than willing to share the responsibility of putting on a show. Their house concert regulars have volunteered to collect money at the door and periodically walk through the house to make sure everything is in order and guests are comfortable.

"Having that kind of help is great," Million says. "I have more time to sit back, enjoy myself and see something wonderful: a roomful of people enjoying themselves and giving new music a chance."

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