

Local Musicians Can Learn from Peers' Success Stories

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By Bill Ellis
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Only some two dozen folks turned up for the first Musicians Advisory Council meeting Tuesday at the Emerge Memphis building, a not-so-surprising showing given the level of disillusionment and fallout among certain members of the local music community toward the Memphis & Shelby County Music Commission.

Yet those who came heard of the city-county agency's commitment to working musicians, hence the re-launch of its advisory council, which existed as a small consultative group under past commission head Jerry Schilling.

Commission president and chief executive officer Rey Flemings pointed out that many of the concerns addressed that night were already part of the commission's broader strategic plan, and that the advisory council should exist, in part, to tackle more immediate community issues. Complaints ranged from the city's lack of industry infrastructure to the obstacles, financial and otherwise, which musicians face working in clubs.

The difference between forums is that the advisory council, theoretically at least, will be given the charge to help find solutions. If they can get past the need to vent, that is. Most of the first two-hour meeting was eaten up with grouching, a necessary first step but one that can sink the whole endeavor - open to all who wish to attend - before it gets started.

Certain ideas were brought to the table, from producing a Memphis music sampler CD to creating a television program to hiring a public relations firm. The challenge from council chair Richard Cushing will be in getting the collective, self-regulating group (one that could quickly outsize itself) to focus on one or two goals and run with them - assuming, of course, that the commission will indeed back its choices. And one wonders how much the council becomes a sly way to silence detractors by getting them "involved" so the commission can go about its business of generating business.

Perhaps with that last point in mind, the council has been given some band exchange and booking opportunities, notably providing talent for this year's Fourth of July celebrations in Tom Lee Park. Be careful with that one. What sounds good on paper just may become a devil's contract of self-interest.

It's also important for members of the council to step back at some point, remove their own dilemmas from the equation, and take an honest look at those who are doing well in the Memphis music scene. I doubt that Saliva, the North Mississippi Allstars and Three 6 Mafia are complaining too much. Why is that? And how can we learn from their success?

The Musicians Advisory Board plans to meet the third Tuesday of each month.

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