

## Local Beat

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Nearly 60 industry professionals -- musicians, producers, managers, and label owners -- showed up at the **University of Memphis' FedEx Institute of Technology** for the **Memphis & Shelby County Music Commission's** latest "town hall meeting" last Thursday night. Commission president **Rey Flemings** kicked off the meeting, which began some 30 minutes behind schedule, with a PowerPoint presentation detailing the group's latest efforts on behalf of the local music community. According to Flemings, the commission's immediate focus is on "marketing and branding Memphis music" and "making Memphis the independent music capital of the world."

"We want to reinforce a 'we can' attitude," Flemings said, citing the possible relocation of the **MTV Video Music Awards** to Memphis as one "signature event" that could bring national attention to the local industry. "People will look at this community and realize that Memphis is on the scene again," he said, while a screen behind him displayed a headline that proclaimed the necessity of "leveraging legacy for the benefit of our contemporary audiences."

"Memphis is a rare intersection of place and history and significance," Flemings said. Interestingly, he downplayed the "50th Anniversary of Rock 'N' Roll/50th Anniversary of Soul," which was recently a focal point for the commission. Instead, Flemings and **Wayne Leeloy**, his associate director, highlighted other ideas, such as a syndicated Memphis music television program and a new live music venue, to capitalize on the booming tourism industry, which brings in more than \$2.3 billion annually.

"We envision day-in, day-out reminders of the wonderful musicians Memphis produces," Flemings said.

The meeting's most sobering moment came when Flemings compared the figures between Memphis and Nashville, which is the nation's third-largest recording center, with 6,000 full-time music industry employees and a \$3.5 billion annual economic impact. According to the music commission's recent **Economic Analysis Study**, some 4,500 Memphians make their living off of music. A \$10 million music venture fund, creative bank-lending practices, and an incubator program for fledgling music businesses are in the works to help breathe life into the local industry.

"Forty-five hundred people? You have to be counting the bartenders or something," disbelieving musician/producer **Niko Lyras** said. "I see the same problem of general definitions without specific targets," he added, criticizing the Music Commission's strategic plan. "I've been in the business for 23 years, and except for the venture capital, I don't see anything that will help me do what I'm doing better."

Like many local musicians, Lyras was particularly disdainful of the commission's hard sell on the MTV Video Music Awards. "It's one thing to hype the economic impact from an event here, but it's not as strong as growth from existing musicians, labels, and studios with a multiplier effect," he noted.

"I believe you're not correct about local benefits," Flemings retorted. "[MTV will use] studios for voiceover work and local facilities for MTV News," he said, anticipating that 600 locals will get work during the VMAs.

Others voiced their own concerns: **Unclaimed Recordings** engineer **Brendan Danley** wondered how to boost attendance at local shows, while singer-songwriter **Doug Saleeby** hoped that the proposed music venue might sponsor *Live from the Bluebird Caf *-type events. Saxophonist **Jim Spake** spoke out against the cover-tune mentality on **Beale Street** and local venues where musicians have to compete with TV

sets for audience attention.

"Could you maybe convince the city fathers to give tax incentives for an alternative entertainment district?" Spake asked. "Memphis is a very sprawling city." **Angelo Earl**, owner of **The Complex**, a club located in the Edge arts district, encouraged Spake to give his establishment a try. "We only do original music. There needs to be more of that, especially publishing-wise," Earl said, piquing interest for dozens of musicians who'd never visited the Complex before.

U of M music industry professor **John Schuch** -- who's worked at **MCA**, **Sony**, and **Warner Bros.**, as well as indie stalwart **Sub Pop** -- urged caution in regard to the Music Commission's attempt to make Memphis an independent music capital. "The [independent] work ethic is 'do it yourself.' It's about decentralization. Independent music is both everywhere and no place at the same time. How can you identify something so amorphous with one place?" Schuch wondered.

Things got tense when singer **Susan Marshall** queried Flemings about the Music Commission's involvement with **Icehouse Records** and the **Memphis Chamber of Commerce**, which recently paired to present **The Memphis Jazz Box**, a three-disc set of local recordings. The Music Commission's logo appears on the back of the box. According to Marshall (who does not appear on the compilation), local musicians who participated in the promotional project were frustrated with communications with U of M jazz professor **Jack Cooper**, who compiled it.

"To find out [that] something you gave to better the city of Memphis is being sold for \$25 is a slap in the face to musicians who in good faith lent their talent to the CD," Marshall said, contending that the box -- which was being sold via the chamber's Web site -- "is illegal, and I don't think you'd want to be a part of it." She also noted that no local musicians ever signed releases or licensing forms for their inclusion on the box.

"We expect an organization like [the Music Commission] to be a little more aware," said **Sherwood Pate**, husband of singer **Teresa Pate**, who *is* included on *The Memphis Jazz Box*. "We expect a due diligence. Make sure basic legal tenets are followed."

Flemings' response was brief: "We assumed it was okay. I'll accept the blame," he said.

After the meeting, Spake, whose work also appears on the box, shook his head and laughed. "This is supposed to promote local artists, but you could die from exposure, baby! It ain't right!" By Friday, the Chamber of Commerce had deleted information about *The Memphis Jazz Box* from its Web site until licensing problems could be cleared up. -- AL

**Music News and Notes:** The good folks who manage the rotating concert series **Tha Movement** have taken a new step in their efforts to promote art and culture in Memphis with the establishment of a new nonprofit organization called **Momentum Inc.** According to the latest missive from Tha Movement, Momentum will seek to make its mark through initiatives such as **EXPOSURE**, a program designed to expose youth to arts and culture, **Project ART**, which is a mentoring program that pairs local musicians and artists with Memphis teens, and the **Artist Development Account**, which will educate artists on business matters. Tha Movement's latest event, **What's Going On --A Tribute to Marvin Gaye**, will be a benefit for Momentum. The concert, which takes place Saturday, April 3rd, at **Gibson Lounge**, will feature local artists such as **Kelley Hurt**, **Candice Ivory**, and **Stephanie Bolton** performing Gaye songs. The **Elvis Costello** concerts at the **Hi-Tone Caf ** that have been rumored for weeks appear to be official now, with the April 16th and 17th shows listed on the club's Web site (HiToneMemphis.com) and tickets scheduled to go on sale Wednesday, March 31st. Hi-Tone owner **Dave Green** sounded a cautious note Friday when asked about the highly anticipated club gigs, but it seemed like set times and lengths were the only variables left. Costello is in the area recording and these intimate concerts are likely the highest-profile shows the Hi-Tone has ever had. Speaking of left-field legends in local studios, **Big Star** continues

to work on their "comeback" record at **Ardent Studio**, which drummer and Ardent studio manager **Jody Stephens** says will likely be released on **Rykodisc** later this fall, possibly to coincide with a band bio that is also in the works. Apparently, the decision to record new material again has been on the agenda for a while. "We were onstage in London two years ago and **Alex [Chilton]** announced, 'Big Star is doing a new album. **Jon [Auer]**, **Ken [Stringfellow]**, and Jody don't know that,'" Stephens said In other news related to some of Memphis' recent **SXSW** attendees, **Lucero** left Austin to head on a two-week West Coast tour opening for **The Breeders**, while **The Reigning Sound** are prepping for the release of their third album, **Too Much Guitar**, which should be out April 27th on **In the Red** Another of the year's most anticipated local releases, the debut from hip-hop-hybrid group **Free Sol**, is set for an April 20th release on **Young Avenue Sound's Memphis Records**. The group currently has a record-release party set for May 7th, at downtown's **Cadre Building**. --CH

Date created: 04/ 2/2004

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