



AWAY FROM THE  
GLITZ AND BIG  
MONEY OF THE CLUB  
SCENE, INDEPENDENT  
CONCERT  
PROMOTERS CARE  
ABOUT ONE THING:  
MUSIC FOR THE  
PEOPLE.

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## DIY [n]: A concert planned, publicized, and hosted by independent music promoters in an alternative venue.

It's 4pm, three hours before a show at the Barbary in Fishtown, Philadelphia, and Joe Ferree arrives at the bar to help set up the PA system. Soon, the headlining hip-hop group Themselves and Super Galactic Expansive, a local band, will hit the stage in front of a fervent crowd. Ferree runs out to order food for the bands, and by 7 he takes his place to work the door. One by one, he checks off the attendees with advanced tickets and takes \$10 from everyone else. By 10 the show ends, the 60 audience members disappear, and the Barbary transforms back into a late-night bar. Ferree quickly packs his things and rides the subway home. Another day, another dollar.

Ferree, 24, throws parties for a living. He finds talented bands and throws bashes in nearby chapels, bars, and basements in Philadelphia instead of throwing them in big-name clubs, which could cost thousands of dollars in rent. After throwing these shows with R5 Productions, a do-it-yourself show promotions agency, for three years, he still gets a thrill from the music. He loves throwing shows for bands that he's worked with before or bands that will shine on stage. "I'm pretty stoked on what I am and what I do," he says.

DIY shows trace back to the beginning of punk. Starting in the mid 70s, bands preferred to throw concerts in basements rather than clubs as a way to "stick it to the man" and prove to fans that the music comes first. Now the ethic has made a comeback and crosses all genres. Promoters like R5 organize these gigs for the music, not the money. DIY shows are popping up throughout the nation — Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Austin, Los Angeles, and New York City included. All over, tiny spaces are being transformed into venues for sold-out concerts.

The scene's underground aura once made authorities suspicious. Without entertainment licenses and other health and safety permits, concerts were subjected to unwanted police intervention. "One time we set up a show in the middle of a parking lot and the police came to break it up," says Andy Nelson who books shows at R5. Nelson believes that three years ago big club owners in Philadelphia actively attacked the DIY scene. "The only way (the police) will check something out is if they have a tip or a phone call," he says. But now, Nelson says, cops are rarely an issue. Gradually, law

enforcement agencies are realizing these shows aren't dangerous, as some people once thought.

Recently the Chicago City Council rejected a proposal that would have charged independent concert promoters \$500 to \$2,000 for a license to put on a show, plus at least \$300,000 in general liability insurance. In the end, the council recognized that most DIY promoters were law abiding and low budget. "It's just a show," says Ulf Oesterle, an assistant professor in the Bandier Program for Music and the Entertainment Industries. "All you need is a band and PA system."

With the DIY ethic there's no need for fancy signs, complicated strobe light sequences, or an extended array of bar concoctions. "Many established venues are not tied to a bar and limited to an 18-plus or 21-plus crowd," says Oesterle, who is also the owner of Aux Records. "DIY is not dependent on alcohol sales. It's fun. You can have a band you love in your living room, basement, or backyard. It's less about the business and more about the atmosphere." With DIY, as long as you've got a banging sound system, a solid band line up, and an enthusiastic crowd, it'll be a good night. "We'll always see them as part of the business," Oesterle says. "It's how bands get their teeth."

Ferree started organizing shows when he was 16 years old. Growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, he grew tired of driving to big cities to see quality bands play. He taught himself to find the bands and the audience and put them together in one place. Now an assistant promoter, he finds it much easier to throw these shows regularly. R5, with a staff of around 15, books everyone from mainstream bands like The Ting Tings to more obscure bands like Canadian indie rockers Human Highway.

Finding an audience comes easily when you have an online newsletter reaching more than 30,000 people and graphic designer friends to make flyers. All that's left to do is set up the sound system, make sure the band eats, and work the door (a show is rarely more than \$15), and you've got yourself a concert. "Obviously, we keep different hours than those who work from 9 to 5," says Nelson. "I don't think it's a bad thing... it's the best thing ever. It's sort of political. It's sort of anti-establishment, but at the same time insanely creative and rewarding."

Not every independent promoter works with a company. Some are truly independent. They get together with friends



Show!Smonger, a teenage indie promoter, threw a wild bash last year at Stay The Fuck Out (SFTO), a NYC venue run completely by high school kids. With permission from their parents, the kids rocked out to the punk band the So So Glos.

and throw shows whenever they have time. Joe Ahearn, a junior art major at Pace University in Manhattan, fits that description. He has been throwing DIY shows for four years, but has organized shows with friends since high school. In addition to going to school, Ahearn organizes several music parties a week and runs a blog, *Sleep When Dead NYC*, listing all of his shows. He also helps manage *ShowPaper*, a free biweekly guide to the DIY scene in the Tri-state area and is a co-owner of Silent Barn, a frequent venue for DIY shows in Brooklyn, which also doubles as his home.

With all that is on his plate, Ahearn still considers his job a mutually beneficial relationship. “It only works if there’s people I’m interested in,” he says. “What (the bands) are giving me is entertainment and what I’m giving them is a unique space to play.”

Because Ahearn hosts shows at home, he thinks he’s better off than Manhattan’s mainstream club owners, who have to pay more for rent, electricity, and utilities. He and his five other roommates would pay the same bills if shows weren’t thrown there. And after a hardworking night, he can just go upstairs and crash in his bed.

Professor Oesterle thinks many people embrace DIY shows because there is a uniquely close relationship between a band and its fans in a smaller venue. “(DIY shows) become a conversation with the audience,” he says. Ahearn believes people throw more shows in their own spaces because they’re realizing that DIY shows aren’t crazy raves with free-flowing drugs and alcohol. It’s just about the music.

Stephanie Gross, who also works with *ShowPaper*, is trying to bring more legitimacy to the DIY scene by helping venues like Death By Audio file for not-for-profit status. Gross, 26, hopes that the scene will become longer lasting, more secure, and more legitimate.

With Death By Audio’s not-for-profit status, the space can apply for grants in the fall that will allow it to expand, get more performers, improve the bathrooms, PA system, lighting — and even get some air conditioning. “We’re just providing a social good and we’re providing something that’s really important. There’s a connotation that (shows) are dangerous, but they’re not... you don’t have to have a million-dollar insurance policy.”

Additionally, Gross works with her group Road Side Assistance throwing DIY shows. The organization does exactly what the name says — when bands pass through New York City, Gross and other staff assist them by setting up and promoting the show. “Even today people will recommend bands that I’ve never heard and they sound so unique. Whether they become the next big hit is irrelevant to me because they inspired me and brought something good to me.” She rambles off bands excitedly — Team Rose, The Mae Shi. “It’s a freakin’ blast. There’s not a show that I’ve worked at that I haven’t had fun.”

But for some, like Nelson and Ferree, the “fun” doesn’t pay the bills. Nelson does independent work as a graphic artist, plays in a band called Paint It Black, and moonlights occasionally as production manager at club Studio B in Brooklyn. Ferree has flexible part-time jobs working for Monster energy drink and FedEx Office. “Baseball tickets aren’t going to pay for themselves,” he says laughing. Ferree also likes to have money saved up just in case a show isn’t successful. “If I promise to pay a band a lot of money and no one comes, I have to pay for it somehow. I’ve gotten a lot better at it, so I don’t lose money very often, but it’s definitely a kind of risk and reward type of thing,” he says.

Even though DIY promoters never stop working, Ferree’s not planning on changing careers anytime soon. “I’m pretty much hooked on it. It doesn’t feel like work,” he says. “I don’t even know what it’ll take to make me stop.”