

# NorthJersey.com

## North Jersey's smaller music venues offer closer connections to artists

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BY ALFA GARCIA  
The Record  
STAFF WRITER

On a Saturday night at Our Lady of Mercy Church gym in Park Ridge, 100 listeners fall to a hush. Onstage, singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Pete Kennedy shreds "Rhapsody in Blue" on a ukulele.

The only sound in the room is the tinny resonance of the instrument's chords and soaring scales. In other venues, a bar or a club, it would be hard to hear the ins and outs of Gershwin on a uke. But in this setting, the monthly Acoustic Café, music is central to the appeal.

"We try to create a cozy, coffeehouse feel," says Barbara Roehrer, founder of the five-year-old series.

North Jersey's original music scene – often of the acoustic, folk, blues, country or indie

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rock flavor — is made up of intimate listening rooms like the Acoustic Café. Hosted by local, music-based non-profits, these concerts have become havens for emerging musicians and touring acts alike. They are held in makeshift venues — gyms, churches, community centers — and are a breath of fresh air for music fans who want an alternative to loud bars or large, pricey auditoriums.

"It's much closer and more personal," says Steve Leonard of Wayne, a volunteer at the Hurdy Gurdy Folk Music Club, which holds monthly shows at the 170-seat auditorium at Fair Lawn Community Center. "And the price you pay to see a concert is what you'd pay just to park at a big venue."

Groups depend on loyal membership, local demand and support from public radio stations like WFUV and WFDU. Ron Olesko, president of Hurdy Gurdy, says the setting is appealing for all: "The artist has a chance to interact with the audience, and I think the artist and the listener enjoy that."

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Hurdy Gurdy, now in its 30th season, took its cue from one of the oldest music series in the area, the Minstrel Acoustic Concert Series at the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship. Created in 1975 to showcase members of its parent organization, the Folk Project, The Minstrel now also presents national and international acts — often artists linked to a traditional folk sound.

"We still sort of do music as a social activity, which is something that's fallen by the wayside in the last 50 years or so in America," says Mike Agranoff, The Minstrel's program chairman. "Music is not only about performance, but it's an enjoyment and it's part of our culture."

At Outpost in the Burbs, a 23-year-old organization that rents space in two Montclair churches, executive director Steve Cutaia says this communal element of music is central to the group's existence.

"Music is a connective medium," he says. "That's something you just can't buy — having this large, extended community."

Music at the Mission, which hosts shows at the West Milford Presbyterian Church, was founded eight years ago by Sara Gallmann, a yoga teacher who wanted to bring music to her far-flung locale. "We're a bit off the

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beaten path ... so we have to travel to pretty much everything as far as entertainment or music. I thought it'd be great to bring musicians here," she says.

But nurturing live music comes with its challenges. To keep costs low, shows are volunteer-run, and low-rent space is used (all but one – Hurdy Gurdy – take place at church facilities). To bring in audiences, cover fees have to stay affordable.

Meanwhile, bookers must choose performers wisely.

"It's walking that fine line between somebody who's so big that we can't afford them and also someone with enough name recognition that people will come out to the shows," says Gallmann. As an alternative, Music at the Mission hosts a monthly open mike for local, less-established acts.

### Making ends meet

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At Hurdy Gurdy, finding acts with a big draw isn't a hard and fast rule, but tends to help make ends meet. "If we do want to put on someone that no one really knows, how much is it going to hurt us? We aren't really looking to make a profit, but we just want to break even," says Olesko. Smaller acts, he says, can sometimes get in as openers or share a bill.

For the most part, artists are the only profit-makers on performance night. "It's very similar to things like community theater," Agranoff says. "These things tend not to be viable as a commercial venture, but there are enough people interested and willing to put effort into them."

Membership is one source of revenue offered by many of the organizations, bringing advance dollars to offset costs and giving members perks, like reserved seats and discounts. Folk Project has more than 500 members, but Agranoff notes a troubling trend.

"As we have aged, so has our audience," he says. "That's going to be a big challenge, to make sure [our membership] doesn't die out with us."

Olesko says that Hurdy Gurdy, which thrived through the '90s with 500 members, now has



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100. He points to audience behavior as a factor, noting that concert memberships are no longer popular, while Hurdy Gurdy hasn't promoted the program heavily in recent years. Like The Minstrel, Hurdy Gurdy has stepped out of its folk bent at times to attract younger audiences. "We're looking for that artist that's going to attract about 200 people or so — a lot of the newer names, newer songwriters, plus some of the older people delving into [folk] traditions."

Outpost in the Burbs, which has a slightly more rock-driven angle, does not have an extensive membership program, but can draw 180 to 500 show-goers, depending on the featured act and venue used. "It really depends who's booked," says Cutaia.

### House concerts

Others share music on a smaller scale. Chris Kunstadter organizes the reservation-only Notes From Home house concert series at his

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Montclair home. Despite a 30-person capacity, Kunstadter has been able to bring in such artists as Pat Wictor, Amy Speace and Sloan Wainwright to play unplugged sets in his living room. The artists are paid solely by audience donation. Shows involve a pot-luck dinner and a chance to speak one-on-one with musicians.

"It's not meant to be a commercial venture, and I don't make any money from it," says Kunstadter, who also volunteers at Outpost in the Burbs. "I thought this was a great way to introduce people to good music."

Despite hardships, North Jersey's listening room venues are helped along by a sense of support among organizations, many of whom cross-promote shows or volunteer for each other.

"We're all doing this because we want to see this music continue," Olesko says.

"We want new generations to discover it."

E-mail: [garciaa@northjersey.com](mailto:garciaa@northjersey.com) Bog: [northjersey.com/shoptalk](http://northjersey.com/shoptalk)

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