

# Live, from the living room...

*Musicians are reaching new audiences with intimate concerts in houses around the city*

BY ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE

**I**F YOU'VE NEVER SAT just a metre or two away as a talented musician like David Myles strums a vintage 1936 Gibson acoustic L-oo, you haven't really lived. And even if you've seen this rising East Coast performer play plenty of times before, you probably haven't heard this guitar, because he doesn't typically play it onstage.

But tonight, Myles has decided to give this cherished instrument its moment because tonight there is no stage. There are also no amplifiers and no lighting gear (unless you count the adjustable desk lamp clipped precariously to a nearby hutch) and pointed roughly at the area where he's stood all evening.

Tonight, Myles performs for an enthusiastic crowd of about 45, all music lovers, and all scattered among a jumble of folding chairs, sofas and cushions around the Bedford home of George Kephart and Monique LeBlanc. He's clearly enjoying himself. And judging by the applause, which is worthy of a crowd twice this one's size, his audience seems pretty happy too.

"Hands up: how many people are here at a house concert for the first time?" Myles asked at the beginning of his performance. About a dozen hands went up, and LeBlanc took a moment to explain that, as the concert's hosts, she and Kephart would be "passing the hat" at the halfway point in the evening. "It's just like church," she quipped. The expected donation was \$20 each, with all of the money raised going directly to Myles.

It was a pretty typical house concert, by Paula Fredericks's definition. Fredericks is a self-described lover of "indie" singer/songwriters. She runs a website ([acousticroof.ca](http://acousticroof.ca)) where people who would like to host shows in their homes and interested musicians from across the country can connect. She's voluntarily taken on the task of educating anyone who will listen about the virtues of house concerts, and has herself hosted plenty of performances at her open-concept home in Boutillier's Point, outside Halifax.

"I guess there are three things that define a house concert," she offers, as we sit down for coffee near the big dining room windows that overlook St. Margaret's Bay. "There's always some sort of a host, and it's always an event where people sit and listen to music. It's not a party, and it's definitely not a kitchen party—a kitchen party is where one or more people might have musical instruments, and there might be some jamming. At a concert, people come to sit and listen to someone entertain them in a quiet environment. Also, it's a noncommercial event and usually all the money goes to the artist."

Fredericks makes it clear that it's not necessary to use her website to host or play a house concert, but she points out that the site offers lots of advice for first-time hosts on how to manage a successful event. Hosting a performer can be as simple as contacting your favourite artists and asking them to play, then making sure you can guarantee an audience of friends and acquaintances



With small crowds sitting just steps from the performer, house concerts let fans mingle with the artists in a way that larger shows can't replicate.

large enough to make it worth their time and effort. Plenty of touring artists are happy to play house concerts on their off nights. Fans might be surprised to learn that the list of local artists on the site reads like a who's who of Halifax's most popular performers: Amelia Curran, Charlie A'Court, Christina Martin, Jenn Grant, Meaghan Smith, Chris "Old Man" Luedecke, Rose Cousins and David Myles.

Kephart and LeBlanc enjoy hosting so much that concerts have become an almost-monthly event in their living room—a venue they've dubbed "Patchwork" in honour of their blended family. But at that level, marketing can be a challenge. "You've got to get a pretty good email list together, and that's the thing that requires some work," Kephart. "To get 30 people out to a show, you probably need a hundred people on your list. But once you get going, the thing just sort of sells itself."

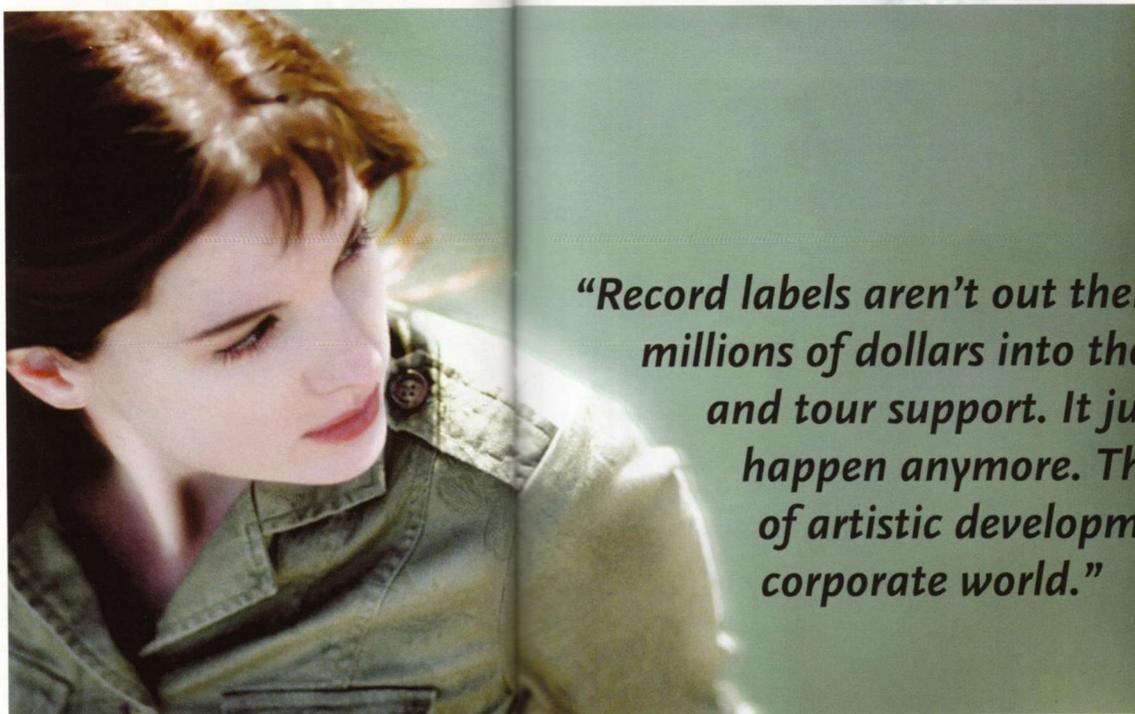
It's not a bad chunk of change for a performer's night's work, either. Typically, the "suggested donation" at house concert ranges from \$15 to \$30. If a host is able to cram as many folks as Kephart and LeBlanc can comfortably seat in their L-shaped living space, performers stand to make as much as, or more than, they can earn playing at a bar or nightclub.

And having a large space isn't an absolute requirement for hosting a concert. Christina Martin (who released her sophomore CD *Two Hearts* to enthusiastic reviews last year), makes house concerts a major part of her business plan. She vigorously promotes her willingness to do them at all her gigs. "Some people still just can't believe that an artist that they really like will come into their living room," she says. "They think, 'Oh my living room is not that big.' I just tell them, 'If you can squeeze 10 people into a room, I will come to your house and play.'"

Many more of Halifax's working musicians are discovering that they can earn a decent wage playing these informal shows. It's a practical market strategy, given the evolving economics of the music industry. Scott Long, executive director of Music Nova Scotia, says it's tough now for local musicians and emerging artists to find promoters who will take a chance on them. He thinks that house concerts represent the kind of grassroots marketing that artists have to be involved in today to take their careers to the next level.

"Record labels aren't out there signing big contracts with artists that they discover, and pouring millions of dollars into their marketing and tour support," he says. "It just doesn't happen anymore. There's no kind of artistic development from the corporate world, so you have to do all those things on your own. If you can build up your own grassroots audience through playing in people's

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—Scott Long

House concerts have helped music fans discover songstress Meaghan Smith.

homes, and make a few bucks at the same time, that’s great.”

Myles agrees that house concerts can be instrumental in building a career. “I think as a solo singer-songwriter, if you’re touring, they make tons of sense because of the CD-sale and fan-building potential,” he says. “[At a bar], people spend their money on drinks. Plus, if you’re not playing big folk clubs, which are really hard to start playing because there’s just not that many of them to begin with, then house concerts are a great way to connect to new audiences.”

“Connect” is an understatement. House concerts are intimate affairs, where the performer and the audience are likely to be separated by little more than a strip of hardwood floor. Just like tonight, there’s generally no stage, usually no professional lighting and often no amplification of any kind. But that’s the attraction.

“It’s a really neat way to hear music,” says George Kephart. “At a lot of the venues where you can go to hear music, there’s people talking, it’s in a noisy bar or it’s really late.” House concerts provide the quiet, attentive audiences that musicians, particularly singer-songwriters, crave.

“Often, if you’re playing more introspective music,” says Myles, “a bar is not going to do the job that you’re hoping it would do, which is make people interested in your music or move them in some way.

PHOTO: STEVE KENNARD



Folk singer Chris “Old Man” Luedecke is a familiar face on the house-concert circuit.

It’s wonderful to play for people who are truly interested in hearing your songs, and a house concert allows you to perform the songs as you’d perform them in your living room.” He pauses, then laughs: “Which, I tend to think, is when I sound best.”

All these factors make for an ideal fan experience. “I just describe it as pure joy,” says Monique LeBlanc. “I just love having someone playing in my living room.” Kephart chimes in with a chuckle, “The other thing is, a lot of people bring a bottle of wine and they always leave about a half a glass in the bottle. So cleaning up is a lot of fun!” ■