

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Youth Movement Records artists DynaMic and Berd. Photo by Jason.

The All-Ages Music Movement: How It Impacts Culture, Civic Engagement, and Leadership

By Shannon Stewart

In every town, all across the United States, young people are using music and art to make interesting, creative, and positive things happen in their communities. They are punks, rappers, educators, singer-songwriters, artists, and community organizers who carve out safe creative spaces for people to come together. This paper by Shannon Stewart characterizes youth-based music organizations that are fostering civic engagement through music. Stewart provides a current view of these groups as preface to the 2007 All-Ages Movement Project Project Report.

The [All-ages Movement Project \(AMP\)](#), a network of organizations that connect young people through independent music and art, is focused on personal and community transformation facilitated by youth-driven cultural organizations engaged in popular music and art. These community-based organizations connect youth through cultural creation and production. Their cultural influence is examined in three areas of interest: cultural products, civic impact, and alternative leadership development opportunities.

These organizations contribute to cultural and social change through producing independent culture, nurturing an ethic of civic engagement, and incubating strong youth leaders.

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PREFACE

“The Vera Project is not just a music venue. We are not a rec center and we are certainly not babysitters. We are a diverse community that is working at the grassroots to create consensus and credible social change [through music]. We are battling everything in our culture that seeks to make us boring, apathetic, and stupid. We are a community inspired and defined by our affinities and connections to each other, not by how marginalized we are from the rest of society.”

These words by long-time volunteer Chris Hong at the [Vera Project](#), an all-ages music and arts venue in Seattle, sum up some of the philosophical underpinnings of all-ages music organizations across the country. By engaging participants at all levels of music production and community organizing, Vera strives to fulfill its mission to foster a participatory creative culture through popular music concerts, arts programs, experiential learning, and volunteer opportunities for all ages.

In 2006, five years after co-founding the Vera Project in Seattle, I was invited to be part of a consortium of youth-led art and activism organizations on the West Coast. This group aimed to document the impact of new models like the Vera Project and provide resources to communities interested in starting and sustaining similar programs across the country. With support from four cornerstone organizations¹ and funding from the [Rappaport Family Foundation](#), I was appointed to track down and study these organizations (assumed to be just a handful) and soon found myself tracing a music-venue history that has been passed on like folklore, mainly by musicians that have circled the country, committed to playing in venues with no age restrictions.

By the end of 2006, having seen, surveyed, and interviewed more than 100 organizations, the findings were clear: in every town, all across the United States, young people were (and are) using music and art to make interesting, creative, and positive things happen in their communities. They are punks, rappers, educators, singer-songwriters, artists, and community organizers who carve out safe creative spaces for people to come together, even with very little support and often against many odds.

These findings propelled the formalization of the All-ages Movement Project (AMP) as a member-driven network of organizations that connect young people through independent music and art.

The following report, originally published in 2007, is the outcome of AMP's initial research related to the following questions:

- 1) How many organizations existing today combine youth empowerment, popular music and art, and civic engagement in their work, and where are they located?
- 2) How do they compare with one another in their histories, structures, and demographics?
- 3) Looking at a variety of metrics in three areas of interest (cultural products, civic impact, and alternative leadership development), how are these organizations contributing to cultural and social change?

What is the potential value of building relationships among these organizations via a national network?

In 2010 AMP hosts the most comprehensive online directory of youth-music organizations in the United States and provides essential support to young leaders across the country.

Having served the all-ages movement for nearly four years since the study, AMP has learned much more than is covered in the following pages. Since then, the makeup of organizations in the study has changed considerably—many organizations are gone and new ones have sprung up in their place and are reaching out to AMP for support. The increased demand to support new initiatives can be explained, in part, by the fact that rock and hip-hop programming has become more mainstream as Generation X has aged (for example, programs similar to the one portrayed in the Jack Black movie *School of Rock* are increasing in number). Also, the millennial generation's "can do" attitude, along with the increase in resources that support youth initiatives, are helping the newer projects get traction. On the flip side, the old fear demons continue to lurk about youth, music, sex, drugs, and rock and roll and contribute to the chronic issues of sustained survival (keeping a stable space, finding funding outside of progressive urban areas, and city all-ages dance ordinances that negatively impact music shows). These obstacles have significantly worn away at the base of youth-music organizations, threatening even those that have been around for decades.

Lack of longevity is the most challenging issue that faces the organizations comprising AMP. By nature these organizations come and go, with an estimated 20 percent turnover

every couple of years. It is generally agreed that some of the coming and going is natural for youth-led organizations, and even good for nurturing innovation and artistic experimentation. On the other hand, many barriers that affect the ability of the organizations to last have to do with inequitable distribution of resources as well as targeted discrimination toward these organizations from neighbors and local legislators.

The challenges that keep organizations from being able to establish themselves exacerbate the longevity problem by impacting the ability to be competitive for funding and the ability to pass on the learning of past generations of all-ages music leaders to future ones. AMP has worked to overcome these barriers through education, networking, and resource sharing because we have seen that these organizations contribute to cultural and social change through producing independent culture, nurturing an ethic of civic engagement, and incubating strong youth leaders.

To add fuel to this all-ages music fire, AMP is releasing *In Every Town: An All-Ages Music Manual*, a book that is part history and part how-to, based on years of collaborative research and nine case studies of organizations in different parts of the country. *In Every Town* (available at www.allages.net) addresses the immediate and chronic issues that impact young people's ability to come together in healthy and engaging cultural space and encourages them to take bold steps forward in art and activism.

BACKGROUND

The All-ages Movement Project (AMP) is focused on personal and community transformation facilitated by youth-driven cultural organizations engaged in popular music and art. These community-based organizations connect youth through cultural creation and production. They are programs and spaces where young people creatively express themselves; independently produce shows, records, and publications; learn democratic practices; make values-based decisions; gain access to resources usually outside their reach; build networks with social capital; and grow into innovative leaders.

The term “all-ages” is used within the live-music industry to differentiate between a show or event that is inclusive of youth and one that is limited to people ages 21 and over. Because live-music participation is generally restricted by the minimum drinking age and much of music production is restricted by access and economics, many communities have come up with alternative ways for young people to be a part of music. Though the term is *all ages*, these organizations generally serve young people ages 13–25. This report refers



Lightning Bolt at an undisclosed venue in Brooklyn.
Photo by Jason Bergman.

to all-ages music organizations and youth-music organizations interchangeably.

All-ages music organizations typically exist under the radar of established arts funders and depend wholly on volunteer staff and benefit concerts to sustain themselves. Despite this, most are approached regularly by major arts institutions, political groups, and corporations to partner based on their unique ability to capture the interest of young people through using culturally relevant mediums and participatory

structures.

As part of a process to investigate this growing area of activity, AMP developed a survey to take a snapshot of the national landscape of all-ages music organizations and examine their cultural influence by looking at three areas of interest: cultural products, civic impact, and alternative leadership development opportunities.

Cultural products are the tangible and measurable creations of participatory culture. They support an organization's programmatic work through earned income and extend the reach of an organization's mission through cultural consumption. Cultural products of interest in this survey are primarily records and live music concerts, though many ancillary products come into play (clothing, posters, publications, etc.).

Civic impact measures the significance of the role youth and music organizations play in political processes, specifically, their intersections with community organizing efforts—how they generate political capital, are political assets, and allies; how they act as an introductory step to civic engagement and political action for young people; and how they provide the critical space for peer-to-peer dialogue and influence.

Alternative leadership development refers to empowering opportunities that appeal to a broader spectrum of youth than opportunities traditionally offered to young people. This study is specifically interested in how youth-directed participatory models encourage leadership through open-governance practices and erasing the line between the people serving and being served.

AMP's Study Looked at These Research Questions:

- 1) How many organizations existing today combine youth empowerment, popular music and art, and civic engagement in their work, and where are they located?
- 2) How do they compare with one another in their histories, structures, and demographics?
- 3) Looking at a variety of metrics in the three areas of interest (cultural products, civic impact, and alternative leadership development), how are these organizations contributing to cultural and social change?

What is the potential value of building relationships among these organizations via a national network?

DEFINITION OF SCOPE OF PROJECT

Organizations focused on providing youth access to and opportunities in music production are an eclectic bunch. In order to draw a boundary around them, AMP laid out criteria and sought to capture organizations that embody a combination of the following elements:

Youth Empowerment

Youth empowerment allows young people to enrich their lives by gaining greater control, by having more choices, better options, and the power to be active and responsible citizens. AMP looked at organizations serving 13- to 25-year-olds, with a focus on teens. Many organizations have no formal “youth empowerment” agenda but offer truly empowering opportunities to young people. Whether or not the organizations uses this language is generally linked to their proximity to formal nonprofit youth organizations and funders.

Popular Music and Art Focus

Though it's hard to draw the line, AMP is focused on independent and underground music and art rather than classical or traditional music and art forms. Urban, hip-hop, rap, reggae/reggaeton, punk, hardcore, indie rock, pop, electronic, avant-garde, noise, and folk are among the genres currently considered popular with young people.

Participatory Structure

Many nonprofits have participatory structures. AMP's study was focused on the depth of constituent participation in youth-music organizations. In particular the study looked at

structures that erase the lines between the people serving and the people being served, lines such as performer–audience, producer–consumer, social worker–socially disenfranchised.

Producing Cultural Products Related to Music

This criterion is related to the first but goes further by looking more specifically at the products organizations are making for cultural consumption. These products are generally for sale (or could be sold) to an unrestricted public audience.

Some organizations focus on a wide variety of things, not primarily music, but still produce weekly all-ages shows. AMP assumes these organizations are contributing significantly to the field of music-based cultural products.

Additionally, a handful of organizations engaged in creating other music-related products were included in this study. Because hip-hop as a genre has four elements—graffiti, break dancing, emceeing, and DJing—and other popular music genres have similar overlapping elements—zines, silkscreening, etc.—it made sense to include them in the scope of AMP’s scan.

METHODOLOGY

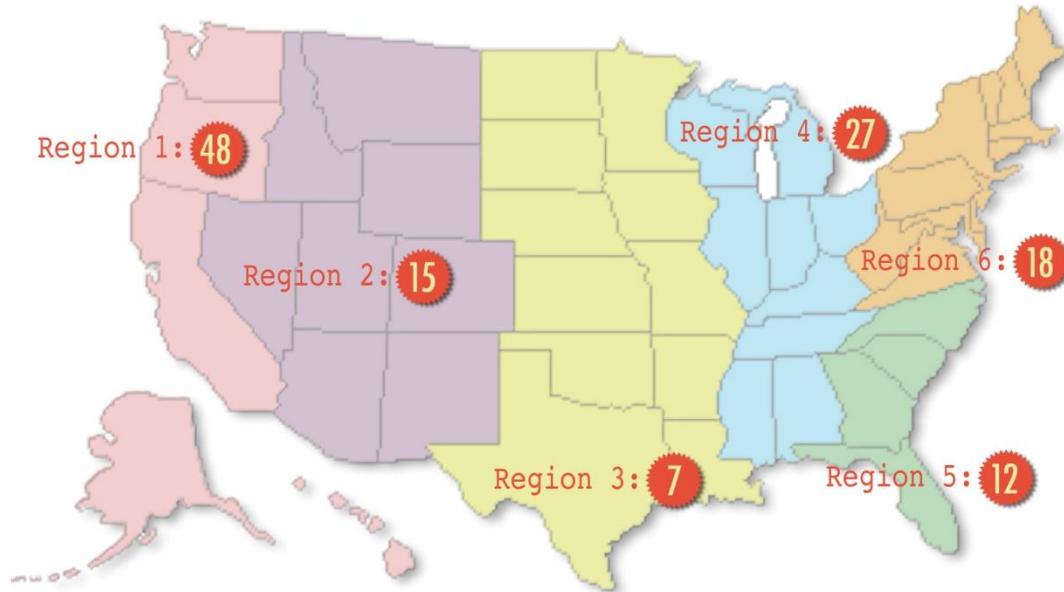
AMP’s method for collecting data was comprised of three phases of analysis: creating an inventory of existing organizations, collecting information from existing organizations via surveys, and doing in-depth interviews with organizations that demonstrated impact in the three areas and were in different regions of the country.

FINDINGS

- 1. How many organizations existing today combine youth empowerment, popular music and art, and civic engagement in their work, and where are they located?*

The most extraordinary finding of AMP thus far is that there are not a handful of successful youth music programs and spaces, but literally hundreds, and the names keep rolling in. As of July 29, 2006, 330 organizations have been found that touch on a combination of characteristics within AMP’s scope, while 127 meet three of the four criteria. Regionally, these programs are located in and around the country’s urban and cultural centers; in particular coastal California and the Great Lakes region.

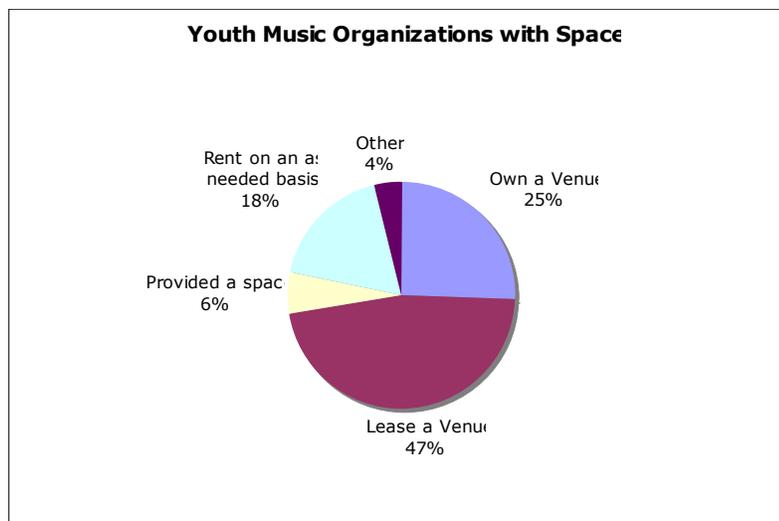
Number of Organizations per Region



2. How do these organizations compare with one another in their histories, structures, and demographics?

Clubhouses

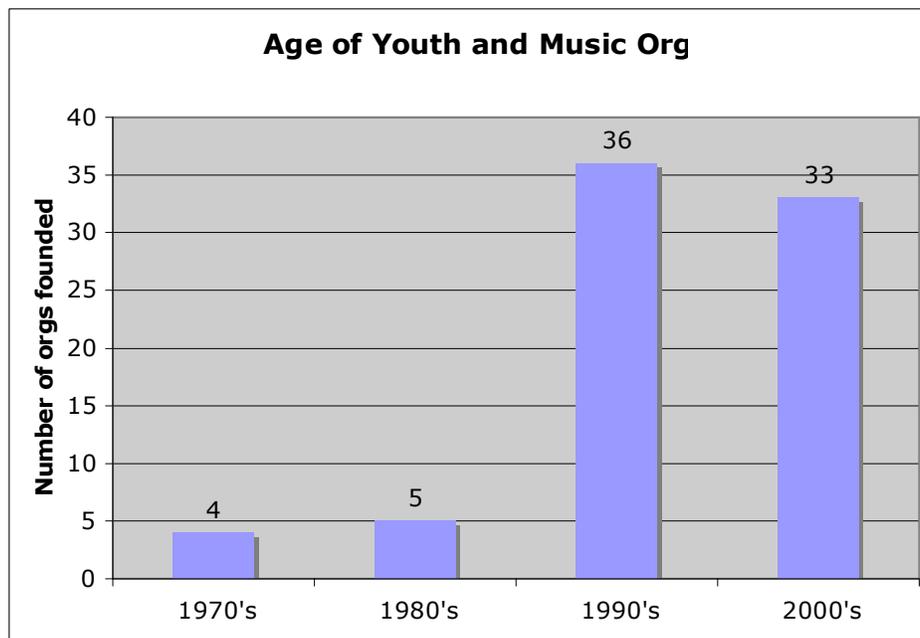
Almost 75 percent of these programs have and rely on having a facility to do their work. That said, though a sizeable number of these organizations own their facility (25 percent), the rest get their program spaces through relationships. Lease agreements often include rental rates that are far below market rate or are a formality for cities or other property owners that more or less give space to these programs. The majority of performance spaces in these facilities have the capacity to hold 100–300 people.



In the 1990s, churches were often the ones lending out their spaces to these youth organizations to put on shows and have meetings. Recently, however, a shift is happening toward faith-based organizations owning secular performance-arts spaces and providing faith-based programs alongside cultural (or subcultural) programs that appeal more broadly to youth.

Young Organizations Serving Young People

Aside from lasting institutions such as [ABC No Rio](#) (New York, N.Y.), [AS220](#) (Providence, R.I.), [924 Gilman](#) (Berkeley, Calif.), and the Che Café (La Jolla, Calif.), youth-centered music organizations are young. Judging by the trends demonstrated in the 78 organizations that answered this question, the 1990s and 2000s have seen an enormous growth across the country in organizations being set up to engage young people through music.¹



The relative newness of the tactic of intentionally using popular music and culture to engage youth partially explains why there is little literature that specifically documents and evaluates these organizations' roles in areas such as youth development, the arts, education, public health, civic engagement, or the music industry.

As far as how the youthfulness of the organizations affected AMP's information-gathering process, it contributed to the challenge of aggregating quantitative metrics through budgets, annual reports, and program evaluations. These formal nonprofit practices are either not prioritized or resources don't exist to support them.



The Underground "Culture of Opposition"

Beyond the lack of shared language in the different incarnations of music and youth organizations, the independent and underground nature of the work itself also made it sometimes difficult to gather information, whether it was skepticism of an unknown research entity, the lack of the time and structure (e.g., a staff person to answer the phone), or the need to keep more progressive work under the radar. For instance, one suburban teen center that employs progressive youth strategies and programs with good results chose not to officially disclose some of their work for fear of negatively impacting the way they are viewed by funders and/or their parent organization.

Legal Status

Organizations engaging youth through music ride the lines between art and industry, business and charity, participation and protest. In legal terms, this means they have a variety of statuses as far as the IRS is concerned.

Of the 48 organizations that answered the question of their status, 14 are either fiscally sponsored, part of a larger organization, or a government entity (e.g., a city teen center). Thirty-four are independent, the majority of which are nonprofits with 501(c)(3) status. Six of the remaining 34 function as collectives or co-ops, three others are set up as for-profit entities, and five operate off the radar. A music and activism collective on the East Coast, for example, has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for political and social causes in the last 20 years without ever filing a paper with the IRS.

Racial Demographics

Of the 50 organizations surveyed, 23 have primarily Caucasian participants, 20 have primarily nonwhite participants (seven African-American, four Latino, nine multiracial), and seven weren't able to declare their primary audience.

Musical Genre

In terms of musical genres represented in the different programs, it's evenly split. One-quarter focus on hip-hop/rap/urban, one-quarter focus on indie rock/punk/hardcore, and the other half mixes genres in their programming.

Budgets

Not surprisingly, almost half of those who answered the survey reported 2005 operating budgets of less than \$50,000. Looking at other vital information such as how many events a year these organizations host indicates that they may not have interpreted the question as it was intended. For instance, most spaces immediately distribute almost all of the money they take in at the door and don't report it or consider it income. If they did, it is likely their budget numbers would be in the hundreds of thousands. The answer to the question about organizational budget demonstrates more about how financially informal these organizations are, the possible lack of technical skills, and/or the desire to remain financially invisible. Interestingly, age of organization and budget size did not have a strong correlation.

3. *Looking at a variety of metrics in three areas of interest (cultural products, civic impact, and alternative leadership development), how are these organizations contributing to cultural and social change?*

Cultural Products

Within these programs, organizations are producing anywhere from one concert a month to five a week. Many are also producing records and releases anywhere from one to five a year. *The most consistent guideline cited among organizations for selecting artists was an overt statement against content that is racist, sexist, or homophobic in nature,* demonstrating an intentional move toward using public platforms to model socially progressive values. Other criteria for selecting artists included recruiting and booking youth musicians who are active in the organization, to working with national booking agents to book touring artists and pair them with local emerging artists.

To better understand the role and reach of cultural products, it's best to look at an example. [Youth Movement Records \(YMR\)](#) is a youth-run record company in Oakland. The positive impact of YMR is both social and cultural in that 1) it functions as a nonprofit using music as a vehicle for youth development and community building; and 2) the powerful content YMR artists produce has a positive impact on the larger Oakland hip-hop scene, socially and artistically. This dual benefit is often the case with community-minded cultural producers.

Every year, YMR produces a compilation that features the current-artists roster. The process of developing as artists—writing songs, recording, designing, marketing, and distributing the CD—is all done through collective participation. YMR's 2006 CD, *Change the Nation*, has sold hundreds of copies and landed the YMR crew tours, high-profile

program partnerships with organizations such as PBS, and opening spots at massive festivals. Through cultural production, YMR is reaching audiences everywhere—from locals at shows; to juvenile-justice inmates at Camp Sweeny, where YMR artists have led programs; to crowds of more than 10,000 at an Amnesty International Festival, where they opened for Michael Franti/Spearhead.

Civic Impact

The AMP looked at a variety of aspects of civic engagement and community organizing to see how these organizations are participating politically. Of the 51 who answered the question, 13 said they had no civic-engagement component (though one of those acknowledged they partner with civic-engagement organizations), and 38 said there was a civic-engagement component to their work.

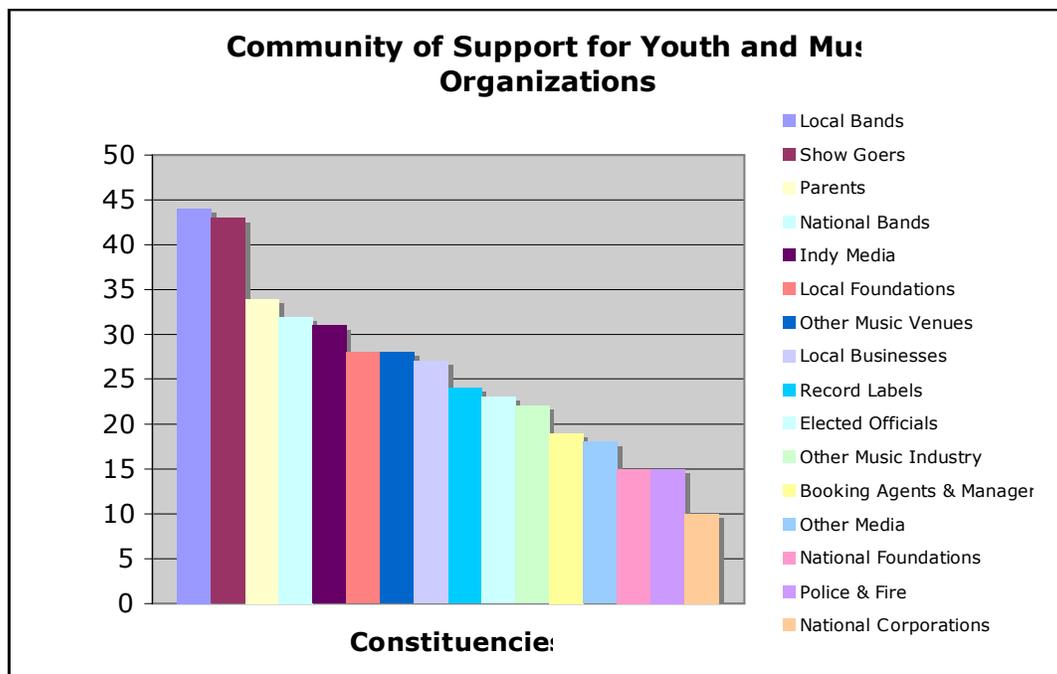
Of those 38:

- 87 percent consider peer-to-peer networking to be an integral part of their programs
- 74 percent provide space for civic engagement and politically oriented gatherings
- 58 percent offer popular education opportunities around social and political themes
- 53 percent promote civic engagement through their internal democratic (nonhierarchical) structure

In terms of their participation and place in the local political environment:

- 66 percent said they have working relationships with elected officials in their area
- 50 percent said that elected officials leverage their relationships with them to demonstrate their support of youth issues
- 45 percent host election-related activities that actively try to engage youth in voting
- 24 percent offer voter registration all the time

When asked about their local and national support systems, youth-music organizations selected from a list of constituencies they felt were strongly represented among their supporters. The constituencies directly serviced by these organizations (local bands and show attendees) were logically selected as the biggest supporters. Parents, national bands, and independent media represented the second tier. Potential for growth exists in relationships with police and fire departments, national foundations, and national corporations.



Alternative Leadership Development

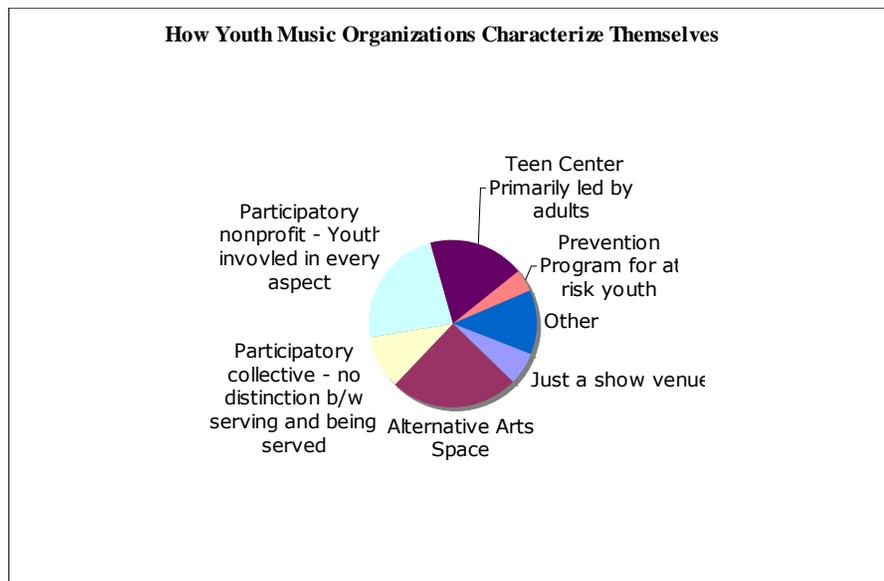
In the realm of leadership development, it's useful to revisit the organizational differences in this field. Essentially the organizations can be categorized as two types. One form has adult professionals trained in some form of youth social-service work or nonprofit administrators working toward more meaningful youth-involvement opportunities; many teen centers and traditional nonprofits fall into this category. The second type is the youth-run organization, made up almost exclusively of young people getting the most hands-on opportunities to lead and make decisions. These organizations often have no paid staff and minimal budgets such as the Che Café in San Diego, Monkey Mania in Denver, and dozens of other alternative art and collective spaces. A handful of organizations are a successful blend of both, such as [Elementz](#) in Cincinnati and the [Neutral Zone](#) in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Of the 50 respondents who answered questions about leadership development:

- 35 said youth participants are responsible for planning and implementing programs
- 25 offer formal leadership training
- 21 knew of other cultural organizations and businesses that started as a result of participation in their organization
- 21 are staffed and led by people under 25
- 20 regularly get called upon to refer their youth participants to other leadership or employment opportunities

- 20 have youth positions on the board of directors

When asked how to categorize their work, organizations demonstrated their differing motivation, ranging from focusing on participatory culture and the arts, to youth recreation and crime prevention.



Two Interesting New Models

Rocketown, Nashville, Tennessee

[Rocketown](#) is a relatively young youth center (officially reopened in 2003) that is enormous in scope. The organization's website boasts that they serve **1350 young folks a week** in their 40,000 sq. ft. facility through their music programs, skate park, and coffee shop. Their events calendar lists a smattering of mainstream indie rock groups, local teen punk bands, and faith-based speaking engagements. An evangelical church gathers every week in the Rocketown auditorium, and staff members can discuss faith with program participants when questioned.

In 2002, after leading a prayer session at Columbine High School, Christian music star, Michael W. Smith was inspired to set up a new kind of youth center in Nashville that could be replicated anywhere, especially communities like Columbine. He enlisted George H. W. Bush to be the spokesperson for Rocketown's Capital Campaign and managed to raise \$2.3 million in six weeks. Rocketown hosts an annual seminar, "How to Start a Rocketown In Your Town," that attracts youth leaders from all across the country.

YouthVille, Detroit, Michigan

[YouthVille](#) opened its doors in October 2005 and rivals Rocketown with 70,000 sq. ft. of programming space ready to serve thousands of young people every day. YouthVille is a project of the Detroit Youth Foundation and has received funds from several national foundations. It houses long-standing family service organizations such as the YMCA, United Way, Sylvan Learning Center, and others. The awe-inspiring facility is highly structured, monitored, and impressively outfitted with equipment for musical training, radio production, and recording. YouthVille also provides programming space to many smaller community organizations. There are up to 25 different classes at YouthVille on any given day, but at the point of this study, programs focused on producing shows and records are nonexistent. YouthVille similarly has visions of becoming a national model for urban youth-development centers; however, the ability to replicate an organization like YouthVille is dependent on sustained large investments from multiple funders.

4. *What is the potential value of building relationships among youth music organizations via a national network?*

The impetus behind AMP was to understand whether there was a critical mass of activity in the field of youth-music organizing nationally and to see how that activity might or might not benefit from networking, coalition building, and pooling resources.

Thirty-eight organizations were asked whether they thought the idea of a national network of youth-music organizations was a good idea. Of them, 35 agreed it was a good idea, two said they were "not sure," and one said "no." Incidentally, the organization that expressed

disinterest in the network idea is one of a handful of organizations that have already reached out to AMP for resources. Phone calls and e-mails of this sort range in topic from dealing with a particular situation at an existing organization to wanting more information about how to get a new organization going.

According to AMP's research thus far, challenges facing these organizations entail some standard business/nonprofit development questions, but many are unique to youth-music venues and programs:

- How do you maintain a participatory culture as the pressure of growth makes streamlining processes more necessary?
- How do you communicate the importance of youth participation in decision making to funders and partners?
- How do you deal with safety issues without making a venue feel like a correctional facility?
- How can you be competitive as a venue in the music industry?
- How do you maintain an active and accountable core of volunteers?
- What are the pros and cons of working with corporations?
- How do you change existing power dynamics to be more youth driven?
- How do you set up a sustainable infrastructure and still meet the demand from artists that need venues to rehearse, record, perform, etc.?
- How do you take time to help other communities start their own programs when you have to focus on your own?

Based on studying more than a hundred organizations, it is clear to AMP and the organizations themselves that many of these issues could be addressed by developing best practices, sharing resources, and raising the visibility of the work.

Because the sheer number of organizations engaged in this work is much larger than expected, a more thorough needs assessment should be done to understand the potential value and services a national network could offer. Preliminary conversations alone indicate a vacancy in the intermediary resources available that are appropriate and relevant to youth-music organizations. In-depth interviews tell us that organizations envision a national network being helpful in ending the sense of isolation many young leaders feel, in sharing resources to build sturdier organizations, and collectively in making a stronger case for support.

CONCLUSION

There is an undercurrent of progressive-movement building going on throughout the country in music venues and youth programs focused on popular culture. Because these programs so effectively engage young people, communities across the country are eager to replicate and grow these models. At the same time larger institutions are trying to figure out ways to use grassroots cultural tactics to work toward different agendas—be it selling more products, decreasing youth crime in under-resourced urban areas, using secular indie culture as a faith-based outreach and retention tool, or politicizing young artists and their fans in an effort to make civic engagement hip. Networking the existing organizations through a national organization will bring visibility to the physical independent cultural infrastructure in the United States, increase access to resources for these organizations, and allow other fields to learn from the pioneers in this movement.

Endnotes

¹ The Vera Project (Seattle), Youth Movement Records (Oakland), Youth Speaks (San Francisco), and (now defunct) Music For America (a national organization based in San Francisco).

Shannon Stewart, 33, co-founded two youth and music nonprofits (the Vera Project and the All-ages Movement Project), has written much on the subject of youth-music opportunities in the United States, and has taught and performed with several dance companies in Seattle and San Francisco. She holds a double degree in Community and Environmental Planning and Business Administration from the University of Washington, as well as a minor in dance. She has served on the advisory boards of Bumbershoot, Velocity Dance Center, Seattle Central Community College Arts Management Program, and Seattle Young People's Project. She has also served as an advisor to numerous start-up organizations. Whether working with words, music, movement, organizations, buildings, or policies, Stewart's interest is piqued by the intersection of space, creativity, and social justice.

For more information, visit: www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy