

Amanda Hornby and Anna Bjartmarsdóttir Sveinbjörnsson

## Beyond grunge

Engage in Seattle's *real* music scene

The 14th ACRL National Conference provides librarians with the opportunity to engage in Seattle's vibrant culture. Grunge rock made Seattle's music scene famous, but Seattle's current local music scene is as diverse as it is innovative. Seattle's jazz and rock music past (and present) is characterized by independent thought, unique musical collaborations, and a sense of place. We hope that this article will help you understand the rich history behind Seattle's popular music scene and provide you with a guide to going out and enjoying it. Whether it's indie rock, jazz, classical or hip hop, Seattle's music scene has a dizzying array of live music venues and genres to choose from. We invite you to engage in one of Seattle's most thriving enterprises: the live music scene.



hood in the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, Seattle was also home to a politically radical folk music scene, and folk singer Woody Guthrie regularly stayed in town.

Seattle's Jackson Street jazz scene flourished from the late 1930s to the 1950s, and dozens of jazz clubs prospered along Jackson Street, thanks to the talent



Jazz musicians playing at local club, Seattle, 1961. Copyright: Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History and Industry

of musicians like Ray Charles and jazz singer Ernestine Anderson. Seattle experienced considerable growth during the 1930s and 1950s, and soldiers and workers, looking for a good time, helped make Seattle a boomtown for bootleggers and live music. Seattle's Chinatown also played host to a dynamic after-hours jazz scene, particularly the celebrated Black and Tan Club. Seattle's music scene began to receive more national attention in the 1950s

when local band the Fleetwoods produced the first national pop hit from the Northwest

### Seattle's early music scene: Vaudeville, jazz, and the "Northwest sound"

As a remote Northwestern town, Seattle's live musical entertainment in the early 1900s was largely imported from across the United States. Seattle soon became the center of rowdy vaudeville touring circuits and several theater chains, including the Moore Theatre. An active jazz community began to develop around Seattle's Jackson Street neighbor-

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The Kingsmen loading instruments into trailer, Seattle, 1964. Copyright: Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History and Industry

and Seattleite Ron Holden's soul ballad "Love You So" reached the national top-ten Billboard list.<sup>2</sup>

During this time period, a "Northwest sound," heavily influenced by Seattle's jazz scene, began to emerge with the garage rock music of local bands the Wailers, the Kingsmen, the Sonics, and Paul Revere and the Raiders. Seattle jazz historian Paul De Barros remarks that "in the late 1950s and early 1960s,

white kids in the Northwest seized upon black R&B with a manic, almost awkward ferociousness, epitomized by the Kingsmen's anthem, 'Louie Louie.'"<sup>3</sup> This influential scene also helped to inspire Seattle native Jimi Hendrix's innovative electric rock guitar sound, music producer Quincy Jones, and many others.

As a major university town, Seattle experienced its share of the hippie activist movement, including folk music, underground newspapers, an active Black Panthers chapter, and the outdoor music festivals of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In addition to groovy disco acts such as Ze Whiz Kidz, the most well-known Seattle rock group to emerge in the 1970s was the band Heart, fronted by sisters Ann and Nancy Wilson.

### 1980s Seattle: Garage rock and hip hop

In the 1980s, heavy metal music grew out of Seattle's garage rock scene, and Seattle heavy metal band Queensrÿche gained national attention. In the '80s, Seattle's First Avenue became home to many punk rock and hardcore music hangouts; major bands from this scene included The Fastbacks, Green River, Solger, TAD, The Gits, and more. The punk

## Live music

What bands are playing while you're in Seattle at the ACRL National Conference? Consult these online resources for up-to-date information and live music concert listings. Seattle's exciting live music scene awaits, no matter what your musical tastes.

### Live music—all types

These sources include live hip hop, jazz, classical music and opera, indie rock, and world music.

- **Seattle Post-Intelligencer Live Music Calendar**, [seattlepi.nwsourc.com/wh/livemusic.asp](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/wh/livemusic.asp)
- **Seattle Weekly Music Calendar**, [www.seattleweekly.com/music/](http://www.seattleweekly.com/music/)

### Live indie rock and pop music

- **KEXP Concert Calendar**, [kexp.org/events/clubcalendar.asp](http://kexp.org/events/clubcalendar.asp)
- **The Stranger Music Listings**, new. [thestranger.com/music](http://thestranger.com/music)

### Live jazz music

- **Ear Shot Jazz Calendar**, [www.earshot.org/Calendar/calendar.asp](http://www.earshot.org/Calendar/calendar.asp)
- **KPLU Music Calendar**, events. [publicbroadcasting.net/kplu/events.eventsmain](http://publicbroadcasting.net/kplu/events.eventsmain)

Be sure to visit the ACRL Conference Wiki for more live music information, ACRL conference details, and Seattle's best music and restaurant picks at [wikis.ala.org/acrl/index.php/ACRL\\_14th\\_National\\_Conference\\_Wiki](http://wikis.ala.org/acrl/index.php/ACRL_14th_National_Conference_Wiki).

and hardcore music scene embraced a do-it-yourself, anti-corporate attitude influenced by local music zines and independent newspapers, like the *Rocket* and *Desperate Times*, and local independent radio stations.<sup>5</sup>

The rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot emerged in the 1980s out of Seattle's small but vibrant hip hop scene. Sir Mix-A-Lot cofounded a hip hop record label in 1983 with DJ Nasty Nes, who also hosted Seattle's first hip-hop radio show; Sir Mix-A-Lot promoted the Seattle hip hop sound, and produced his own tracks.<sup>6</sup> Sir Mix-A-Lot gained national notice with his single "Posse on Broadway," which referred to Broadway Street in Seattle. Sir Mix-A-Lot later collaborated with Seattle rock groups Mudhoney and Presidents of the United States of America.

### "Grunge" music: The new Seattle sound

Seattle had a thriving underground garage rock scene in the 1980s and 1990s, and *grunge* emerged as a term for the music in 1991-1992; the grunge rock movement in Seattle (and beyond) represented authentic rock in opposition to "rent-a-culture," yuppies, packaged bands promoted by major music record producers, and overblown arena rock excess.<sup>7,8</sup>

The record label Sub Pop is widely credited with introducing Seattle grunge music to national and international audiences. In the late 1980s, Sub Pop record label founders Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt (the author of a music zine called *Subterranean Pop*) released recordings of new Northwest bands like Nirvana, Mudhoney, Girl Trouble, and Soundgarden. The resulting widespread interest in the grunge sound, which also included Pearl Jam and Alice in Chains, soon made Seattle's music scene famous. The most well-known of the grunge bands was Nirvana, recognized for its charismatic lead singer Kurt Cobain and

the band's distorted, feedback-heavy sound. Sub Pop and other promoters of the "Seattle sound" publicized a very particular image of grunge music: "long hair, flailing heads, slam dancing and stage diving, beer, cynicism, male bonding, feedback, ear damage, smoke...no politics, no R&B, no women in sight." This depiction was an "inaccurate portrayal of all

Seattle bands," but the music press and the media at large eagerly accepted the image.<sup>9</sup>

Following the success of bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam, the media and fashion world flocked to Seattle to cash in on the music and style, and the flannel shirt (worn by grunge bands for its cheapness and durability) became

symbolic of the high-fashion grunge look. Pearl Jam frontman Eddie Vedder unwillingly typified the grunge Seattle sound and look in the mainstream media by being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine under the headline "All the Rage."

### Seattle's other music scenes

Even as the grunge scene took a more aggressive, masculine tone, many female musicians were making waves in Seattle and beyond. Many of the female bands were outspoken feminists and radicals, especially the bands and zines associated with the "Riot Grrrl" scene centered in nearby Olympia, Washington.<sup>10</sup> The band Bikini Kill was among the most well-known of the "riot grrrl" music scene. Courtney Love's Olympia-based band, Hole, was re-formed upon her move to Seattle in the early 1990s and straddled the labels of "grunge" and "riot grrrl."

Enthusiasm for grunge music began to wane in the later mid-1990s, and many Seattle music fans hoped for the death of grunge so that a greater diversity of Seattle music could be heard, including bands like Sky Cries Mary,



The Showbox marquee in Seattle. Copyright: Photo courtesy of Joe Quercia

## Live music venues

### Jazz

#### *Downtown Seattle*

**Musiquarium Lounge** (at the Triple Door), 216 Union St., Seattle, WA 98101, (206) 838-4333, [www.thetripledoor.net](http://www.thetripledoor.net)

**Dimitriou's Jazz Alley**, 2033 6th Ave. # 255, Seattle, WA 98121, (206) 441-9729 [www.jazzalley.com](http://www.jazzalley.com)

**Tula's**, 2214 2nd Ave., Seattle, WA 98121, (206) 443-4221. [www.tulas.com](http://www.tulas.com)

### Indie rock, alt-country, hip hop, and more

#### *Ballard neighborhood*

**Sunset Tavern**, 5433 Ballard Ave., Seattle WA, 98107, (206) 784-4880, [www.sunsettavern.com](http://www.sunsettavern.com)

**The Tractor Tavern**, 5213 Ballard Ave., Seattle WA, 98107, (206) 789-3599, [www.tractortavern.com](http://www.tractortavern.com)

#### *Downtown Seattle/Capitol Hill neighborhood*

**The Showbox**, 1426 7th Ave., Seattle WA, 98101, (206) 628-2297, [www.showboxonline.com](http://www.showboxonline.com)

**Neumos**, 925 E. Pike St., Seattle, WA 98122, (206) 709-9467, [www.neumos.com](http://www.neumos.com)

**Chop Suey**, 1325 E. Madison, Seattle WA, 98122, (206) 324-8000, [www.chop-suey.com](http://www.chop-suey.com)

**Comet Tavern**, 9822 E. Pike St., Seattle WA, 98122, (206) 323-9853, [www.myspace.com/thecomettavern](http://www.myspace.com/thecomettavern)

**Highdive**, 513 N 36th, Seattle, WA 98103, (206) 632-0212, [www.highdiveseattle.com](http://www.highdiveseattle.com)

**The Triple Door**: 216 Union St., Seattle, WA 98101, (206) 838-4333 [www.thetripledoor.net](http://www.thetripledoor.net)

#### *Fremont neighborhood*

**Nectar Lounge**: 412 N 36th St., Seattle, WA 98103, (206) 632-2020, [www.nectar-lounge.com](http://www.nectar-lounge.com)

#### *Georgetown neighborhood*

**Jules Maes Saloon**, 5919 Airport Way S. Seattle, WA 98108, (206) 957-7766, [www.myspace.com/julesmaessaloon](http://www.myspace.com/julesmaessaloon)

Hammerbox, and Seattle punk rock and hip hop groups. Sir Mix-A-Lot even used "No Grunge" as the subtitle for a compilation of Seattle rappers his record label released.<sup>11</sup> The death by suicide of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain in 1994, in part, signaled the end of the grunge phenomenon, but did not dim Seattle's reputation as a music town.

### The end of grunge, the start of something independent

In the aftermath of the worldwide grunge music fever, an innovative independent music scene began to flourish in Seattle and the Northwest. The Seattle music scene was regenerated in the late 1990s and 2000s with an active alternative-country scene, featuring bands like the Dusty 45s and Neko Case,

international rock bands like Kulture Shock, avant-garde jazz artists like Bill Frisell, and a celebrated independent (or "indie") rock scene typified by bands like Death Cab for Cutie, Sleater-Kinney, Built to Spill, Modest Mouse, and many more.

Seattle's hip hop scene has recently gained national attention with local acts like Blue Scholars, Common Market, Abyssinian Creole, the Saturday Knights, and more. The Northwest hip hop scene is known for an independent hip hop sound, with music lyrics often focused on civil rights in the Northwest and other social equality issues. One of the most well-known Seattle hip hop groups is Blue Scholars, whose name is a play on "blue collar." Their music and lyrics focus on social justice issues and youth empowerment. Blue

Scholars have even performed live several times at the Seattle Public Library.

### Seattle's music industry

Today, the Seattle music industry is thriving; in addition to countless local bands, there are an abundance of recording studios, recording labels, and music venues. One recording studio that seems firmly rooted in the grunge era is Studio X, formerly known as Bad Animals, founded by Steve and Debbie Lawson in 1979. This studio recorded some well-known musicians such as Alice in Chains, B.B. King, Johnny Cash, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and R.E.M. Another studio with a lengthy but more indie rock clientele list is Jupiter Studios, founded in 1996 by Michael Feveyear and Xian Folghum. The roster includes bands such as Modest Mouse, Mark Lanegan, and Cornershop.

In addition to recording studios, Seattle has many record labels. Sub Pop, Epoch Records, Barsuk, Up Records, Mass Line Media, and Light in the Attic are just a few of the current local labels promoting indie rock and hip hop from Seattle and beyond. The record label Mass Line Media is a co-op record label run by hip hop acts Common Market, Blue Scholars, and Gabriel Teodros. Of all of the local record labels, Sub Pop is still a tastemaker for music-savvy Seattleites. Reporting on Sub

Pop's 20th anniversary in 2008, *The Seattle Times* remarked that "Going out of business since 1988" is one of the label's slogans, but today Sub Pop's sales have never been better, evidenced by national bestsellers like Seattle band The Postal Service.<sup>12</sup> In 2007, Sub Pop also launched the record label Hardly Art, promoting new Seattle bands such as Arthur & Yu and the Dutchess and the Duke.

### Seattle's live music venues

Seattle has a varied live music scene. While in Seattle, you may find that, whatever part of town you're in, there are sure to be a few clubs, bars, or cafes with a live music line-up. Visit favorite local venues Neumos or Chop Suey in the hipster-friendly Capitol Hill neighborhood, near downtown. Both have a packed calendar of music shows to choose from, with both local and touring indie rock and hip hop bands. For those in search of a mellow, comfortable environment with relaxing live jazz music, head over to the Musiquarium Lounge at the Triple Door, in downtown Seattle. They feature mostly local jazz musicians, and there is usually no cover charge. Nearby is Dimitriou's Jazz Alley, the premier venue for live jazz. Downtown Seattle is also home to major live music venues The Showbox and the Moore Theatre. The Showbox features both big name and indie local bands and recently opened

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The Showbox Sodo, south of downtown. The Moore Theatre is a historical landmark that features big live music acts, comedians, and more.

Visit the Ballard neighborhood, known for its hip boutiques and farmer's market, for several live music choices. A favorite neighborhood live music venue is the Sunset Tavern. With a full lineup of live bands most weeks, the Sunset has a warm and intimate atmosphere where you can really feel close to the music. The Tractor Tavern is a roomier venue, just down the street from the Sunset on Ballard Avenue. They tend to focus on alternative country, folk, or low-key indie music. For a more raucous rock experience, head to the Jules Maes Saloon, situated in the heart of the industrial Georgetown neighborhood. The bar's rustic ambience perfectly harmonizes with the eclectic crowd. We have compiled a selective list of recommended live music venues to check out while you are in Seattle; consult the ACRL 14th National Conference Wiki for many more recommendations. Check

in with us next month for an article on Seattle's many cultural offerings.

## Notes

1. Paul De Barros, *Jackson Street After Hours: The Roots of Jazz in Seattle* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1993).
2. Clark Humphrey, *Loser: The Real Seattle Music Story* (Seattle, WA: MiscMedia, 1999).
3. De Barros, 1993, 204.
4. Humphrey, 1999.
5. Ibid, 1999.
6. "Sir Mix-A-Lot," *VH1.com*, [www.vh1.com/artists/az/sir\\_mix\\_a\\_lot/bio.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/sir_mix_a_lot/bio.jhtml).
7. "Music: Grunge Rock," *American Decades*, ed. Judith S. Baughman, et al. Vol. 10: 1990-1999 (Detroit: Gale, 2001).
8. Humphrey, 1999, 133.
9. Ibid, 140.
10. Ibid, 180.
11. Ibid, 186.
12. Tom Scanlon, "Sub Pop's Got Some Kind of Record," *The Seattle Times*, January 27, 2008. *zz*

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The image displays three architectural renderings of libraries. The top rendering shows the Daemen College Library, a modern building with large glass windows and a brick facade. The bottom-left rendering shows the LaGrange College Library, a long, low-profile building with a series of windows. The bottom-right rendering shows the interior of the Clark University Library, featuring a modern design with large windows, a high ceiling, and people sitting at tables.

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