

How Libraries Can Foster a Vibrant Local Music Community

Joshua Smith

Public libraries can help bridge the digital divide in the music streaming world by offering a more localized, curated collection of music to the listening public. This allows for a synergistic relationship between musicians and the library. The library gives the artists increased credibility and recognition while increasing their presence in the city and the artists add value to the library's offerings by giving patrons a new way to interact with and benefit from the library. The music is licensed for five years; after that period has expired, the artist can request its removal. Hosting a streaming music collection also allows for more varied programming to be offered by the library including live performances, partnerships with music venues and even the possibility of publishing physical recordings of the music hosted by the library.

The world of media is amid a tidal shift. Year after year the market share of digital media is further supplanting the market share of traditional physical media. The number of options in the streaming world has not risen significantly but the number of artists and tracks available on them has, as has the money that flows from the outlets to the artists. How has this shift affected lesser-known independent artists compared to the big players in the music world?

In early 2024, [there are over 100 million songs on Spotify](#). That is an amazing number of choices. But how many artists are getting lost in the crowd? Music Business Worldwide reported that only 21.6% of artists hosted on Spotify get an excess of 50 listeners a month. That would suggest that nearly 80% of artists are not getting the exposure they need to help them succeed in the business. This is particularly important considering that the Recording Industry Association of America stated in their [2022 report](#) that 84% of the record industry's revenue came from streaming services totaling \$13.2 billion for the year.

In 2021, we at the New Orleans Public Library set out to close that gap by supporting artists with our Crescent City Sounds streaming service.

Each city's individual music scene acts like a microcosm of the larger music landscape. Most people think of music in New Orleans with a narrow definition. Brass band and traditional jazz are what usually first comes to mind. While we have plenty of artists that fit into that category, it is not representative of the diversity of music in the city. Artists considered to be "classic New Orleans" have been honored with Grammys and embark on international tours. We also have many artists who primarily ply their trade in local music venues on any night of the week. We want to ensure that they are getting the recognition that they deserve. If the big streaming services tend to benefit

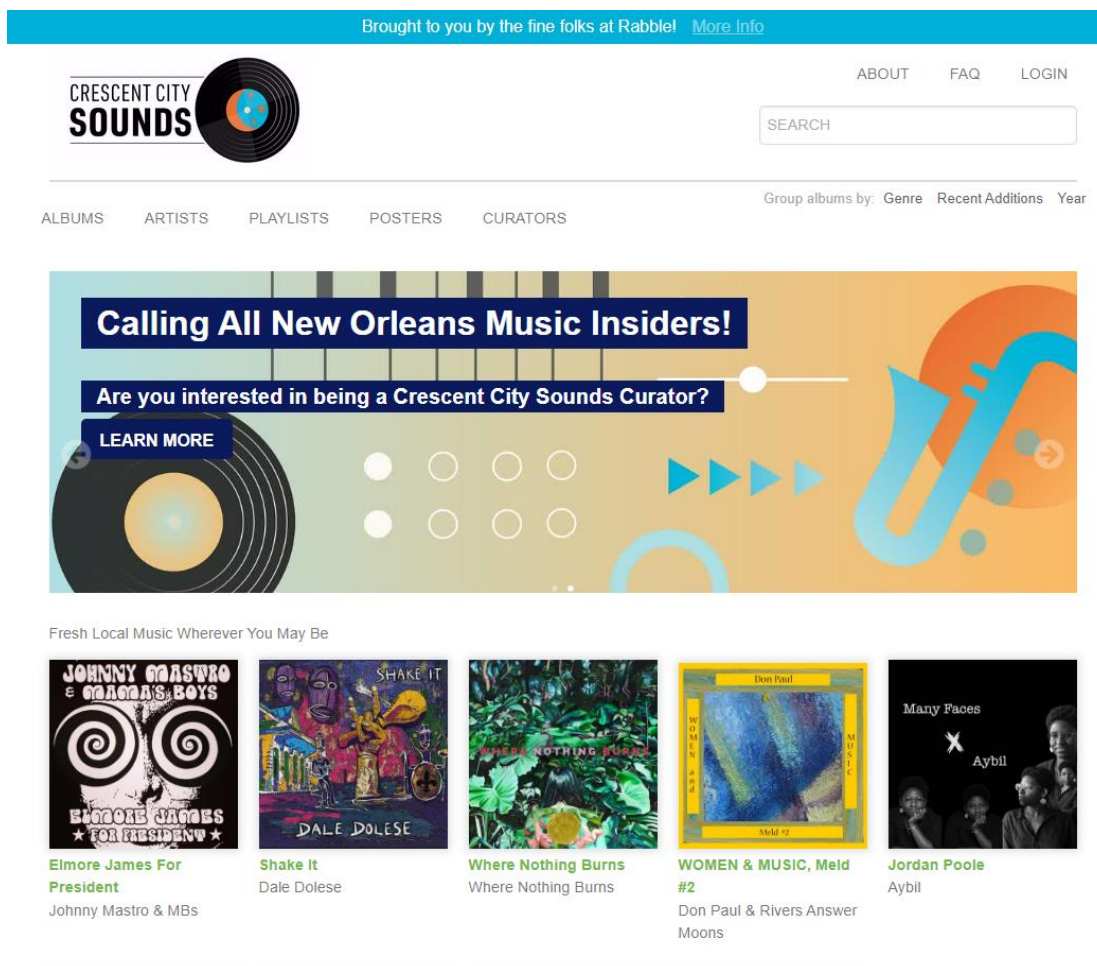
About the Author

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known acts, then the independent streaming services should benefit up-and-coming artists. “There are so many local bands here in town, I hear about a new act pretty much every week. We have an embarrassment of riches in this city, but it’s hard to know where to start when it comes to discovering them. [Crescent City Sounds] is a great space for giving local acts a place to be discovered among the plethora of national/international acts that are lifted by the algorithms of other streaming platforms,” Justin Powers of Marina Orchestra said. “Here we have a homegrown place for homegrown music.”

Figure 1 Landing Page




The benefits come from increased exposure and credibility. The site allows for the band to include a short biography as well as links to the band’s websites, social media, or to payment apps so listeners can tip the artists, as you can see in Figure 2. They receive increased exposure due to the library marketing the website as well as being invited to in-house performances and events. We also play music from the collection at events where we cannot host live music, furthering our goal of getting the music out to the public. Credibility comes from being selected by luminaries in the music community.

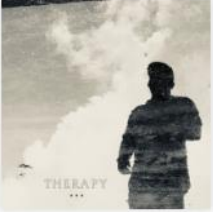
Taking Crescent City Sounds live in 2022 allowed us to start supporting artists and help increase their market share of the local music landscape.

Figure 2 Artist Bio Page

ALBUMS **ARTISTS** PLAYLISTS POSTERS CURATORS




Nesby Phips
Image by: Justen Williams



Therapy
Nesby Phips

Nesby Phips was born Courtney Nero on December 15, 1980 in New Orleans. He grew up living in both the New Orleans neighborhood of Hollygrove and the city's James Alley area of the 3rd Ward, across the street from the Orleans Parish Prison.[2] Phips's family is a musical one—he is the grand-nephew of Mahalia Jackson[3] and has multiple other musicians and visual artists in his family. Phips attended McMain High School in New Orleans along with classmates Lil Wayne, Curren\$y, and Mack Maine, all of whom he would later record and produce.

ARTIST WEBSITE



SUPPORT THIS ARTIST VIA:

PayPal Venmo Cash.App

[Crescent City Sounds](#) is built using the MUSICat service by [Rabble](#), a library centered software vendor. Rabble describes MUSICat as “an open-source platform that empowers public libraries to support their local music communities.” It serves [US and Canadian libraries](#) by providing and maintaining the software infrastructure that the music collections are hosted on. Pricing for the service is based on the population of the community served by the library and is provided in a chart from Rabble. The site is built by Rabble and support is given during the configuration process; we had weekly check-in meetings leading up to the first submission round. The website resides on Rabble’s servers, so the library simply needs an internet connection and no specialized equipment. These streaming music collections are composed of local artists and are curated by local luminaries in the music scene for consumption by patrons in the community and for non-locals looking for authenticity in a city’s music scene. The artists are paid an honorarium for licensing their work. The honorarium amount is decided by the individual library systems with the suggestion of \$250 per album for a 5-year non-exclusive license. The artist retains copyright of their work, they simply license it to us for library users to stream. The MUSICat service allows

libraries to also license the music for download, but Crescent City Sounds did not opt to allow downloads. Dale Dolese, an artist on Crescent City Sounds, had this to say about the honorarium; “You have to get so many hits to make money on other streaming services, it’s pretty ridiculous. I think the fact that [the Library] pays artists is really awesome, because it’s so hard to make money off having your music streamed, but that’s the primary way people listen to music today.”

Once a year, during a 6-week period, the library holds a submission round. Rabble allows each individual library to set their own selection process. During a submission round, artists can submit a track representative of their album for selection. Artists submit a track and fill out some biographical information on a webform that is live on the site while the submission round is open. The curators use a single track from each artist to make their selections; we select our music based on quality of recording, quality of content, and the needs of our collection. Our goal to ensure we have representation of genres and artists. At Crescent City Sounds, we base the process on diversity and equity, striving to fill in gaps from year to year, whether that be the musical genre itself or the demographics of the artists. Tracks are rated based on a 5-star system with the picks being made from the highest rated tracks using the needs of the collection and diversity of the submissions as our guide. We define an album for these purposes as a collection of songs that are at least 4 tracks or 20 minutes in length. At Crescent City Sounds we try to help this process along by ensuring that the curators on each round have different backgrounds than each other and their peers from previous rounds as best we can.

In 2022 Crescent City Sounds went live with an opening collection of 30 artists to a surprising amount of fanfare. Suddenly the first cohort of artists on the service were not only receiving local media attention but were part of the discussion in national and international media, being featured by NPR’s *Morning Edition*, *Vice News*, and *The Guardian*. We were pleased that our gambit to extend the local reach of our musicians increased their national and international exposure. While individual libraries may choose to offer the service only to library card holders, the majority do not; this allows for greater exposure for both the artists and the libraries hosting the music. After our media attention, I received correspondence from international listeners enjoying our collection.

In our second year, we added an additional 49 artists to the service bringing the total number of albums to 79 with 75 more planned to be added in 2024. The real story is in the number of submissions that we received. In our second year we received 127 submissions, up from 68 in the first year. Clearly the word was getting out; to the music community as well as the listening public. Year to year the number of tracks streamed on the service grew from 6,690 in 2022 to 19,010 in 2023 while the number of offered tracks increased by approximately 150%.

Figure 3 Player Interface

The screenshot shows the Crescent City Sounds website interface. At the top left is the logo for Crescent City Sounds, which includes a vinyl record icon. To the right of the logo are links for 'ABOUT', 'FAQ', and 'LOGIN'. Below these is a search bar with the word 'SEARCH' inside. A navigation menu below the search bar includes 'ALBUMS' (highlighted in green), 'ARTISTS', 'PLAYLISTS', 'POSTERS', and 'CURATORS'. The main content area features the album cover for 'March Of The Toddlers' by Leroy Jones, showing two children walking on a brick path. Below the cover art is the text 'Cover art by: Katja Toivola'. To the right of the cover art, the album title 'March Of The Toddlers' is displayed in green, followed by the artist name 'Leroy Jones', the label 'Independent', and the genre 'Children's Music - Jazz - Traditional Jazz • 2022'. Below this information is a blue button that says 'ADD ALBUM TO YOUR FAVORITES'. Underneath the button is a green header for the 'TRACK LIST'. The track list contains 10 items, each with a star icon, a track number, the track name, the duration, and a play button icon. The tracks are: 1. March Of The Toddlers (1:37), 2. Fun And Games (5:18), 3. Pipu (4:10), 4. I Wish I Could Fly (5:25), 5. Starlight (3:58), 6. Toys (4:02), 7. Take Ten (5:34), 8. Frolic (4:45), 9. The Alphabet (3:38), and 10. Nighty Night (1:37). At the bottom of the track list is a small grey box with the text: 'Crescent City Sounds music is for personal use only and users agree not to sell or otherwise distribute any streamed or downloaded materials.'

The Crescent City Sounds team consists of several individuals and groups in the library. A project manager opens and closes the round, manages the curation team, contacts the selected artists to guide them through the completion process, and uploads and publishes the music. The marketing department and the programming department as well as the digital resources librarian and some staff curators also provide assistance. Our team is similar in size to the other libraries I have spoken with although some libraries have a single person running it all.

Since embarking on this journey, we have also started hosting live music events at the library with more planned. This is an added value for the library, the musicians, and the community. It allows the library and the musicians to connect to the community in new ways while expanding the venues available to musicians and paying them for their performances.

When I speak with the musicians that we host, they consistently offer their appreciation for the recognition that the service offers them. They are of course grateful for the honorarium and most tell us that Crescent City Sounds paid more than the big-name streaming services. But what matters most to them is the recognition of an organization that they respect and being chosen by

people that matter in the music scene. Sozi, an artist on Crescent City Sounds and curator for this year's submission round, illustrated this point to us; "I can't stress enough how much libraries have influenced my relationship with music, and I just feel so grateful to be given this opportunity," he said. "I love libraries. I'm a rapper because of the Library, I believe that to my core. I can go rock a stage because my foundation was at a library. And now, to be a part of this platform? I think it's beautiful. It speaks to me as a person, not just as an artist." In my opinion, the most valuable thing that libraries can offer our artists are recognition and exposure. These are things musicians are often expected to receive in lieu of payment, but libraries can offer that plus an honest check for their work even if that check isn't going to make anyone rich. While I cannot say for sure that being hosted on the service means more gigs, I can say that I see a lot of our hosted musicians listed around town, sometimes even on the same stage.

Libraries entering streaming music provide real benefits to the library, patron, and music community. From paychecks to gigs and programming to at-home offerings, everyone reaps the rewards of an all-local, curated, and free music streaming service. Starting a project like this begins by reaching out to [Rabble](#) and requesting their start-up guide that includes pricing, ways to pitch the collection to library administration, and an overview of all of the processes. As we all venture into a new world of changing markets, we can take steps to help guide each other to a better future.