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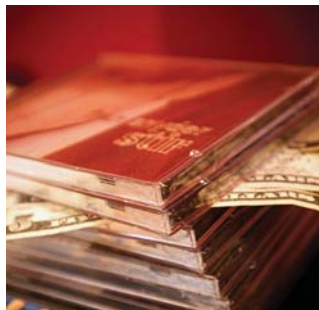
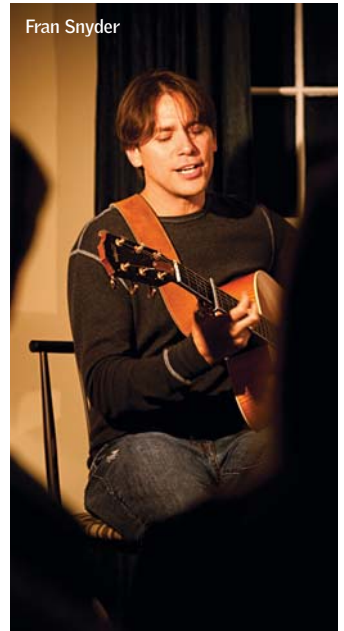
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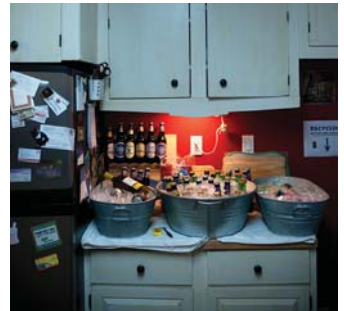
All photos are from the Concerts on Bonnie Branch house show in Ellicott City, Maryland.



Fran Snyder



David Glaser



# Live from Your Living Room

House concerts are becoming a popular way for independent artists to get up close and personal with their fans. By Sam Machkovech

**WHEN I ATTENDED MY FIRST HOUSE CONCERT**, it was merely a job perk. I was a music reporter, so bands in my city occasionally invited me to their homes to catch their rehearsals. A mess of musical equipment would occupy the living room (sometimes, the drum set would spill over into the kitchen), and upon

my arrival, someone would turn the lights down to set the mood for a private set list.

A few of those bands went on to receive national accolades; most didn't. Still, the shows meant a lot to me for reasons beyond the "I saw 'em back then" factor. Attending those shows made me feel like part of a secret, creative circle. The line between entertainer and fan was blurred.

But I soon learned that it doesn't take a snazzy gig to be able to see that kind of intimate performance. House concerts — where everyday fans host independent musical acts in their private abodes — have gained popularity in recent years. I've now watched concerts in backyards, dorm rooms, and suburban living rooms, sometimes seated next to men with kids in their laps and sometimes barefoot among bottles of wine and yoga mats. None have been exclusive, really; friends and neighbors come and go, often without invites. But these events certainly *feel* exclusive.

For music lovers of all kinds, the shows are far more intimate and often family-friendly alternatives to massive halls and dingy clubs. And performers who dip their toes in the house-concert circuit often have a tough time going back to more traditional venues.

"It's not an overstatement to say [house concerts] are all I do now," says singer-songwriter Fran Snyder with a chuckle. The 40-year-old from Lawrence, Kansas, played his first house concert eight years ago, and he has since remodeled his career around playing, hosting, and promoting such shows through his website [ConcertsInYourHome.com](http://ConcertsInYourHome.com), the world's largest online community for acoustic living-room concerts. After half a decade of playing for friends and fans in their homes, Snyder built the site in 2006 to fill the promotional gaps that sites like MySpace were overlooking, particularly in connecting inexperienced hosts to independent musicians.

But for much of his career, the aspiring singer-songwriter was clueless about the house-concert concept, focusing his earliest efforts on the stereotypical small-time musician path: spending weeks on the road in a beaten-down van, hitting every nightclub along the way, and playing the occasional big-time opening gig. During a 2001 tour, he found himself with a night off, which he

refers to as "a night you're losing money." On a lark, Snyder called an old friend who lived in the area and suggested throwing a one-off show in his basement. He thought a few friends and fans might pay to attend.

The basement could comfortably seat 25 or so. With little advance notice, 50 fans showed up, so Snyder played two capacity shows that night. "It was a fabulous time, and I was instantly hooked," he says.

**While club profits have to be used for staff salaries and overhead costs in addition to performer pay, house concerts have to be generous affairs by default.**

Snyder began booking the occasional house concert, and since then, his touring life has completely changed. No more hunting for hotels or food — Snyder's hosts typically have potluck dinners on hand, along with a free bed or couch for him to sleep on. Attendees are far more engaged than audiences in a noisy nightclub setting are. And he no longer worries about nights of losing money. As an example, Snyder points to a recent show he hosted at his home for a Chicago singer-songwriter friend, Edie Carey. "The night before, she made \$60 playing at a club," he says. "She played at my house and made \$600."

While club profits have to be used for staff salaries and overhead costs in addition to performer pay, house concerts have to be generous affairs by default. By law, they can't be run for the homeowner's profit, so guests' donations (which typically are a suggested \$10 to \$20) go straight to the artist. In addition, house concerts draw devoted crowds that are likely to buy CDs after the show — another key source of income for artists.

The take isn't just cash, of course. Andy Bothwell, who goes by the stage name of Astronautalis and is a musician from Jacksonville, Florida, has built much of his career through house concerts. His genre-

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Fran Snyder



The audience at the Concerts on Bonnie Branch house show



## Try This at Home

Have designs for turning your living room into a musical mecca? ConcertsInYourHome.com founder Fran Snyder offers a few tips for budding promoters.

### Where to Begin

While a site like Fran Snyder's is a good start, it's just as simple to look up a musician you love and send a friendly e-mail or two. Let the musician know that you're a fan, your friends are fans, and you'd love to host a show if he

or she comes through town. Guaranteeing a crowd and a bed to crash on is no small thing for the up-and-coming touring musician.

### Be a Good Host

Snyder calls house concerts altruistic, and in terms of local laws, they have to be lest a host run afoul of local licensing laws. Additionally, house-concert hosts typically offer the performer a place to sleep and a meal. Getting your guests to chip in some dishes à la potluck makes the latter easier and more fun.

### Start Small

Keep in mind that a full band isn't going to sound great in your living room. "Setting up a drum set is going to be rough acoustically and take up half the space," Snyder points out. Unless you've rigged a stage in a spacious backyard, you'll want to stick to solo artists and duos.

### Regularity Isn't Necessary

Though some die-hard music fans host frequent events, Snyder recognizes that not everyone wants to "rearrange their furniture every month." It's common to limit your philanthropy to a favorite artist or band, and musicians tend to prefer having a favorite fan in a given city to visit on an annual basis.

### Don't shout, "Freebird!"

"When some people hear *house concert*, they think *house party*," Snyder says. With living-room concerts, don't expect to shove a band in the corner while your friends mingle loudly; these musicians plan to perform their own songs and tell stories in between. "The beauty of house concerts is how well they focus the audience on the entertainer," he says.



blending style and penchant for telling long, humorous stories between songs are well suited for such intimate shows and settings, as is his lack of a full band (Bothwell raps and sings to prerecorded tracks, which he plays from his laptop). While Bothwell has grown in popularity and started playing at bigger clubs that have begun to recruit him, he still attempts to recreate the feeling of the more than 300 house concerts he's performed. "I try to manufacture the intimacy of the house show [wherever I go] by sitting on the edge of the stage, walking in the crowd, and talking directly to the audience," he says. "I want people to walk away from my show feeling like they were a part of something special."

House concerts provide a unique way for neighbors and families to connect — they're a twenty-first-century take on the block party. And musicians reap the benefits of them as well. Beyond money or free lodging, it's the experience, they say, that often means the most.

"My wife jokes about this," Snyder remarks. "She says, 'You get to visit friends for a living.'" **AW**

**SAM MACHKOVECH** is a music and technology writer based in Seattle, Washington, where he has attended, hosted, and even performed at a few house concerts. If those performances were any indication, he won't be quitting his day job anytime soon.

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