

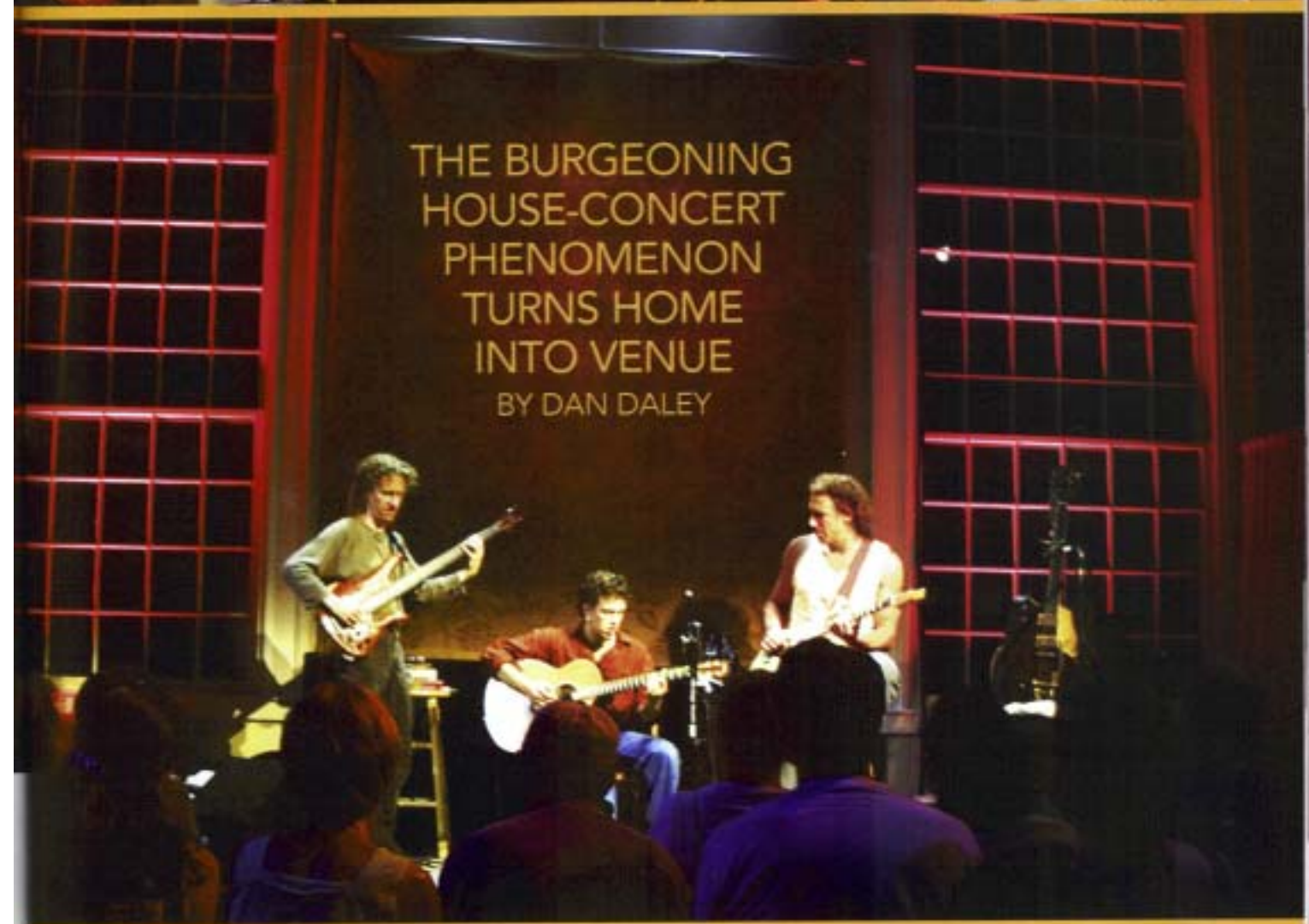


BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE

THAT'S (HOME) ENTERTAINMENT! Singer-songwriter Justin King strums an acoustic guitar in John and Debi Friedlander's 168-year-old church-turned-house in Haddam, Conn. Jamming with King are Michael Manning and Jeff Pevar (MIDDLE OF FACING PAGE). Also shown are (FROM LEFT, TOP OF FACING PAGE) David "Goody" Goodrich at the Church House; Lori McKenna, Jim Henry, and Tracy Grammer at the Fox Run House in Sudbury, Mass.; and the audience at the Church House.



THE BURGEONING
HOUSE-CONCERT
PHENOMENON
TURNS HOME
INTO VENUE
BY DAN DALEY



ON SATURDAY NIGHT AT 8 O'CLOCK, Julie and Russ Paris lower the lights and flip on some sophisticated electronics in the living room of their 3,000-square-foot contemporary home in the Los Angeles suburb of Oak Park. There is no screen, but this is still home theater—of sorts. Kleig-type spotlights wash one wall of the 500-square-foot living/dining area, under which a performer stands with a guitar, poised before 65 guests seated on folding chairs and a few more perched on the stairs. Welcome to the house concert.

The Parises run a graphics-design company. They have no expertise in either the economics of the music industry or its technology. But they have an abiding

love of music, all the more so if it's live. They're one of an estimated thousands of households throughout the country that have made house concerts a regular part of their lives.

The Paris home has no formal stage, although they are thinking of adding a raised platform this year. Russ Paris says they learned about the equipment as they went along—from the sound systems friends or performers would bring in as needed after they started eight years ago and from rentals at a local music store. Last year, they bought their own Mackie 408M 8-channel self-powered mixer running a pair of JBL MP412 speakers on stands, into which a handful of basic Shure SM58 microphones are plugged, though performers often bring their own. The lights

are off-the-shelf track lights fitted with colored gels purchased online from a professional lighting site. "They work surprisingly well without making our living room look like a soundstage," he says. "It's remarkable how much of a performance space you can create without taking away from the living aspect of your home."

The Parises have what Bob Bossin—aka the Old Folksinger and one of scores of performers whose careers are increasingly being rejuvenated by the house-concert phenomenon—calls "steam-powered home theater": relatively low-tech and often assembled as an adjunct to a home-theater system. "But it's important that the technology not get in the way of the intimacy that is at the heart of a house concert," Bossin cautions. He mentions the experi-

ence of his friend Ben Mink, who plays fiddle with k.d. lang, at a concert at the home of director Steven Spielberg: "The dressing room at his house was larger than the venue we were playing the next night."

ENTER THE PROFESSIONALS

But the trend is attracting more professional design. Acoustician and home-theater designer Steve Haas of SH Acoustics in Milford, Conn., noticed the phenomenon evolving over the last few years and has included it in his strategic plans, adapting his Concertino concert-hall-processing system for residential applications. After initial acoustical treatments are done in a home, a series of eight microphones are discreetly placed permanently in the intended performance room. These feed a



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YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHING ... like the mighty Flynn, a monomikered Boston-area singer-songwriter performing at a Fox Run House concert in March. One state to the south, the Church House crowd obviously is picking up good vibrations (FACING PAGE).



"IT'S REMARKABLE HOW MUCH OF A PERFORMANCE SPACE YOU CAN CREATE WITHOUT TAKING AWAY FROM THE LIVING ASPECT OF YOUR HOME."

central processor that then generates additional reflection and reverberations through speakers as an enhancement to the direct sound from the stage, giving it the acoustical "signature" of a concert hall.

Consulting, equipment, and integration start at about \$85,000—the cost of a high-end kitchen renovation—but Haas says existing home-theater components also can be adapted to live performances. He suggests adding two full-range speakers on the same sidewalls as the surround speakers but closer to the front of the room, which will increase lateral sound energy to both the audience and the performer, contributing to an enveloping space that creates a cinematic bridge between them. "Suspension of disbelief is a key goal with live performances just as it is with a movie-watching environment," he explains. A central switch toggles between theater and concert systems.

In renovating his historical Craftsman mansion in a Boston suburb, music aficionado Richard McCue wanted the larger

of his two living rooms to be able to accommodate classical concerts using his Steinway baby grand piano and as many as six chamber musicians. Architect/acoustician John Storyk says he was able to implement some of the tricks he's developed in designing recording studios. "As more studios move into homes, we're seeing these techniques migrate from professional spaces to residential ones," he says. "It's not really a stretch to see them applied first to home theaters and now to house concerts."

The first challenge was to address the potential for flutter and unwanted early reflections from sound bouncing around the room's cathedral ceiling, whose concave sides terminating in a flat top constitute what Storyk calls "an acoustical nightmare" that produces the acoustical equivalent of harsh comb filtering. To be consistent with the esthetic of the room, external anti-flutter acoustical devices had to be avoided. Instead, Storyk applied BASWAphon (www.baswa.com), a Swiss-made

absorptive acoustical treatment, in a three-step process that creates the appearance of plaster, which was able to blend with the rest of the ceiling.

The second issue was to make the stage area—McCue had a small riser built 6 inches off the hardwood floor to hold the piano and musicians—acoustically tight so that musicians could easily hear themselves and not be distracted by the natural reverberation of the rest of the room. Storyk resorted to RPG diffusers tuned for midrange and mid-high frequencies, forming a dropped ceiling covered by stretched fabric. The effect is to retain the instruments' energy while helping to diffuse it evenly throughout the listening area.

"The thing about all of this is that the cost of achieving effective acoustical treatments is following the same path as the electronics," says Storyk, who recently installed a live-performance stage as part of a home theater for a well-known Hollywood actor in Westchester County, N.Y. "You can now accomplish a lot more for a lot less."

He estimated the cost of McCue's living-room acoustical treatments at about \$25,000, but says similar effects can be achieved for less than half of that if esthetic compromises can be reached.

DIY COMES HOME

The house-concert phenomenon is part of a much larger sea change in how enter-

tainment is created, distributed, and experienced. The music industry has consolidated into a core of a few major labels that seemingly expend more energy on mergers and acquisitions—and lawsuits against their own customers—than they do on developing new music, creating a void that is rapidly being filled by independent recording and performing artists who use powerful and affordable digital systems to make their own records and a combination of the Internet and regional performances to sell them. Just as the megaplexing of motion-picture palaces has largely contributed to the growth of home theater, the Balkanization of music into dozens of subgenres and the inaccessibility of urban clubs is driving live performances into domestic spaces.

In fact, this grass-roots trend toward

music can be viewed as part of the larger do-it-yourself ethos of contemporary lifestyles, with as many resources available to help you through it as HGTV has garden solutions (see "Resources," page 53). The pool of performers who do house concerts is enormous, including Texas troubadour Ray Wylie Hubbard and former Manhattan Transfer vocalist Lauren Massé. They are

he says. "At the same time, they want to create an intimacy they can't find in urban nightclubs or huge concert halls." He speculates further that the increased ability of even casual musicians to now record entire albums at home using sophisticated but affordable digital-recording systems such as Digidesign's Pro Tools has made listeners more aware of how much music is



often songwriters whose hits are more well-known than they are, up-and-coming new artists, and those who once hit the heights and now are on the inevitable downward slope of a show-biz career. Most house concerts feature local artists, with the host as patron of the arts. It's a pool made ever larger by the increased emphasis on acoustic music by shows such as MTV's *Unplugged*. Russ Paris says that many of the agents and managers who once dismissed the idea of house concerts now embrace it for providing one more set of paying performance venues for their artists.

Steve Haas suggests the trend's roots are even deeper, going back to the emergence of an affluent middle class in Victorian times. "People want to have the same ability as royalty once had to have 'command performances' in their homes,"

a part of their lives and that technology will allow them to experience it commensurately more deeply.

As a result, you will spot some well-known names on the house-concert circuit, including Tom Paxton. In fact, says Cliff Eberhardt, a veteran of the New York neo-folk circuit and for whom house concerts now account for 20 percent of his shows, the names are beginning to crowd the house-concert regulars. And it's helping drive the level of house-concert technology up. "I did one house in Virginia that seats over 1,200 people that had a very sophisticated PA system, lights, and a stage," he says, talking on his cell phone the day after yet another house concert in Columbia, Md. "Some of the houses have guest rooms for performers set up like hotel rooms with miniature bottles of shampoo."

(Like all trends, house concerts have a pendulum that might be swinging the other way now. Eberhardt says he misses the invisible wall between performer and audience at conventional venues. "Doing house concerts, the performance can't be as theatrical—I find I have to be more chatty with the audience," he says. In fact, he's learned that the performance doesn't

be done as fund-raisers for charities, with the talent's payment becoming one of the expenses. Promotion of the show is the homeowner's responsibility, but the limited space in most houses means that a few e-mail messages and phone calls can turn an event into a sellout quickly.

As with home theater, the house-concert trend is bringing music into the home and

giving the homeowner more control over how entertainment is experienced. Given its growing network of enthusiastic supporters—and the attention being paid to it by architects and acousticians—the house concert is likely to remain a fixture for some time to come in the evolving connections among home, technology, and lifestyle. ➤



GOING THE MUSICAL ROUTE The Paperboys have delivered more than once for the Fox Run House Concert Series (RACING ROAD). It's high noon, musically speaking, for Gary Cooper at Fox Run (RVA 1277). Here, Greg Greenway (LFT) and Tom Prasada-Rao are in the house.

stop when the show does. "You're on for four or five hours, talking with guests and signing CDs. You have to be very social. It can get extremely tiring.")

NUTS & BOLTS

The mechanics of house concerts are amply covered in many of the online resources dedicated to them. Keep in mind, however, that these types of performances are not viewed as for-profit ventures by homeowners. In fact, if a homeowner is seen as turning a residence into a commercial venue, it will inevitably raise the ire of local zoning inspectors, not to mention neighbors. The usual "donation" at the door is \$10 to \$25, all of which goes to the artists, some of whom are able to process credit cards on-site for tickets and CD sales after the show. However, shows also can

RESOURCES

A FEW WEB SITES AND BOOKS THAT WILL HELP TURN YOU INTO A PROMOTER



GOOD OVERVIEW SITES
www.houseconcerts.com
www.houseconcerts.org
www.houseconcertconnection.com

HOUSE-CONCERT LISTINGS
www.musi-cal.com

FOLK HOUSE-CONCERT PAGE
www.folkmusic.org/shows/houseconcerts.html

HOUSE-CONCERT RESOURCES
www.alanrowth.com/musiclinks.html

"HOW TO PRESENT A HOUSE CONCERT"
www.galaconsort.com/house.html

BOB BOSSIN'S GUIDE TO HOUSE CONCERTS
www.island.net/~oldfolk/housecon.htm

HOMEMADE MUSIC'S HOUSE-CONCERT GUIDE
www.homemademusic.com/house

HOUSE CONCERT INFO PAGE
www.yellowtailrecords.com/houseconcert.htm