



For Bethlehem couple Rufus and Cyndi Smith, 'It's all about the music!'

## Mom and Pop Music: The House Concerts of Rufus and Cyndi Smith

Most of the seasoned road musicians I know got their start practicing their little angst filled hearts out in somebody's dark, dank basement. I know I paid my early musical dues honing my chops below ground level to an audience of less than enthusiastic spiders and cave crickets.

But this Bethlehem couple have turned their basement into a cozy, comfortable, and unbelievably professional performance venue with such an incredible vibe that it is now sought out by top shelf touring performers from across the nation. Rufus and Cyndi Smith have taken their infectious appreciation for music to a whole new level by bringing together select performers and devoted music aficionados in their own home. Back in the basement, the synergy they create is nothing short of transcendent.

From their website: "Support Local House Concerts" is simply the name we choose to describe our private gatherings, in our private home. These gatherings are NOT a business nor are they a business-related activity. They are strictly a hobby for us, and are simply gatherings of our friends and guests to enjoy live original music, fellowship, food ... and most of all, fun..."

Layne: Tell us about what goes on down in this bedazzling basement of yours.

Rufus: What happens here is this couch goes to the back wall and then everything else comes out. We have chairs out in the garage that we bring in and line them up. And we have different types of fun pillows. Everybody gets to go and pick out their own pillow. It's a lot of fun. But basically, it's an illusion down here. When it's dark at night and everything is set up like it is, you're no longer in this basement, you're in a performance room! The artists love it because of the vibe. The

walls are enriched with photos and mementos of the people who have played here. We produce our own laminates on lanyards for everybody that comes. That goes back to when we were starting these things in our store.

We once had a retail store called 'CDX CD Exchange' and we started doing in-store concerts down there. We even had people bring a covered dish. The artists get the laminates to take as memorabilia from the show, and then we make extras and they autograph them and they leave them here. And after a while, we have accumulated all these things here. We generate a lot of our own concert posters and it all adds to the vibe. We work closely with the Hickory Music Factory and anybody in town that's trying to make music, and share music, and bring people up, we're there to support them.

Layne: How long ago did you move to the area?

Rufus: How long ago did we move here? 1981 I think. I spent nine years in Chicago, but I'm originally from Florida.

Layne: And you are retired? What did you do before?

Rufus: I designed night clubs. It was interesting. It was a direction that I had never entertained taking. We went into discotheques. When discotheques first started, we had no idea it was coming. I was involved with a lot of folks in the music industry at that particular time in Chicago.

Layne: So how did you end up in North Carolina?

Rufus: Built a club in Asheville, and moved to Hickory and went to work at a printing company in Newton. And then we opened a music CD exchange store in Conover. Shortened 'CD Exchange' to 'CDX.' We had new and used CDs with listening stations, video screens, and the shirts and all that stuff back then.

Layne: So, how did the house concerts come about?

Rufus: Well we

### People & Culture by Layne Hendrickson



started doing in-store performances. And we had heard from a friend of ours that had done house concerts once or twice. He invited us to a show up on Barrett's Mountain with an artist that we are very fond of. I had no idea what to expect. I walked in and it was like coming home. It was so obvious to me. I could not believe how simple it was, and how fun it was. It just brought everybody together in a very relaxed atmosphere, and it was all about the music. People would bring covered dishes and they would eat, and the artist would perform. And I said, 'Well this is really something!' We started doing our shows, in store performances, back in 2005.

Once you get plugged into anything, you start learning the feasibility of the thing. We just started listening to the folks. We started out and it was extremely simple. Now we have taken a direction that's a little unique because my wife, Cyndi, my partner, has permitted me. This is my 'bass boat!' (Laughter.) She said 'Well, you enjoy this, let's go!' It's hard work for her too, we have some volunteers that help during the performances, but Cyndi does so much before and after.

So, it just started feeding off itself. We enjoy the talent, the energy, the tales of the road, the exchange of creativity and ideas. We enjoy folks like that sharing our home. We offer the musicians room and board, that's one of the perks for the house concert circuit. It's very appealing for them because it's a cash situation. Everything is right up front. They get their food and most of the time they get lodging as well. Whatever donations they acquire go directly into the gas tank of their touring

van, so to speak. With all the donations and savings on food and lodging, they are making pretty good money.

And also, what it gets them, people that come to house concerts are there to listen to the music. The musicians are used to playing coffeehouses and bars where they have to play over people talking. They have to play over rowdy and rambunctious people. And maybe at the end of the night, only two people will actually connect with them. When you do a house concert and the people are there, they know who you are because we furnish as much information as we can —That's our way of helping the artists as they pass through Hickory. This is not a selfish show. We want them to get as much of an imprint in this market as possible because we want them to come back— But here the musicians can connect with 30 or 35 people. And the people will enjoy the one on one relationship, eating with them, getting to know them. These things are very informal. The artists feed off the energy of the people. Once that relationship is established, it's magic.

We've had performers play in here that are well seasoned, they've been playing 10 or 12 years, and they're nervous to play in here because they have never played in a room where everybody in the room was quiet and wanted to hear what they had to say. That is the addiction. Once you enroll in that type of exchange, it becomes an addiction. There's nothing more rewarding for us than introducing somebody to an artist and have them enjoy them, talking about them and have that relationship established, and they become friends forever.

What's happened over the years is we've developed a sense of the caliber of artist to put on our stage. We do a lot of research and look for not only talent, but charisma, professionalism, stage presence. We want people that are able to throw a lightning bolt and engage the audience from the very first song. We both stand up here and we watch. We can tell by the applause, we can tell by the posture of the audience whether we're on it.

We have a gentleman coming on October 7th with his trio, Woody Russell. He is one of the best blues and jazz guitarists in the country. And one of the best blues-harp players in the country. We had him here before, we had an evening with music industry people here, a lot of music people who have been on stage, and back stage, and knew what was going on. They got

half way through the first number and the entire room got up and gave them a standing ovation! When we watch something like that, we have a tendency to start thinking about booking the next show here for this act, because this band and the audience are taking care of each other.

Layne: Are you remaining well attended?

Rufus: The last six shows have 'sold out.' They fill up and we have waiting lists. But it is seasonal. We back off a bit during the summer, because the kids are out and everyone goes to the beach. These are A-list musicians coming, so we want them to get as much impact as possible. We don't want to have just eight people in the room and a person up there playing. That may be nice and enjoyable, but we don't do that anymore.

The folks we get

performing here now, come based on our history. Musicians talk to musicians and you're as good as the last show you put on. We respect them, we give them good sound, good lights, good publicity and we take care of them as much as we can. We care about them and they realize that and they make the extra effort to contact us and they're going to be more flexible with us. But then the ball's in our court! We have to deliver!

And judging from the multitudes of beaming faces peering out from the ubiquitous photos and mementos on their basement walls, autographed and inscribed with glowing comments of thanks for Rufus and Cyndi and their shows, I'd say it looks like they deliver all right. Swing by [www.supportlocalhouseconcerts.org](http://www.supportlocalhouseconcerts.org).



Performer Danielle Miraglia wows an appreciative audience in Rufus and Cyndi Smith's home.



Rufus and Cyndi Smith have gathered state of the art sound and lighting equipment for their musical guests' use

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