

Have fun: There is never a wrong time to applaud

By Winthrop Quigley / Journal Staff Writer, Tuesday, June 25th, 2013

<http://www.abqjournal.com/214195/have-fun-there-is-never-a-wrong-time-to-applaud.html/upfront-19>



Ensemble HD members perform at Cleveland's Happy Dog bar. They are, from left, Amy Lee, Joshua Smith, Christina Dahl and Charles Bernard. Photo courtesy of Ensemble HD

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — My last UpFront column said New Mexico can improve its economy by improving and harnessing the human capital that 21st-century business requires. That takes leadership and imagination.

For imagination in action, I give you Joshua Smith, Albuquerque native, principal flutist of the Cleveland Orchestra and my oldest son; Sean Waterson, part owner of the Happy Dog bar; and Gordon Square, one of many troubled but promising areas in my troubled but promising hometown of Cleveland, Ohio.

Gordon Square is the commercial hub of the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood on Cleveland's west side. The neighborhood has been home to a succession of immigrants who came for the manufacturing jobs that at certain points in the 20th century were there for the taking. The Irish came first, followed by the Italians and the Romanians. One wave of working class immigrants followed another: African Americans who arrived during the Great Migration from the South, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, a marvelous stew of energetic humanity eager to work.

Then the 20th century economy bit Cleveland on the backside. Cleveland lost the price competition for manufacturing. Detroit Shoreway lost its jobs. The neighborhood's poverty rate grew from 28.7 percent in 1980 to 51.1 percent in 1995, according to a Cleveland State University paper.

Sean had been a lawyer with the Securities and Exchange Commission and some high-powered New York financial institutions when he decided to buy Happy Dog

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with a partner and return to Cleveland, where he'd been raised. He was leading an effort by Gordon Square merchants to revive the neighborhood by making it a center for the arts. Josh was hired by the Cleveland Orchestra while a student at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. They met three years ago at the home of Charles Michener, a former New Yorker editor who had also returned home to Cleveland.

The Cleveland Orchestra plays in a magnificent temple for the arts known as Severance Hall on the east side. Josh loves to play there, but a lot of people don't like to go there. You have to know the rules when you're in the hall of one of the world's great orchestras – don't applaud between movements, do applaud when the concert master walks on stage, don't wear what you would wear to a west side bar – and not everyone knows them. Josh was intrigued by what he calls pop-up events. The idea is to surprise an audience with music in unexpected places. Josh once gathered a few orchestra musicians to perform at a pizza place in Ann Arbor, Mich., when the Cleveland was on tour there.

Josh was looking for a way to show people that classical music is just good music “as easy to engage with as anything else.” He wanted a place where the audience could see how much fun the musicians are having, where audience and performers could shake hands and chat. Sean's bar had a stage where polka, rock, blues and country bands performed, and he was looking for ways to keep audiences coming. Sean hung a sign on the door announcing members of the Cleveland Orchestra would be performing, and Josh got some friends to agree to play for beer and hot dogs. To everyone's surprise, the night of the show there was a line of people around the block waiting to get in. Ensemble HD was born.

Josh and Sean had no plan. Somehow good things just started happening.

Over the past three years, Ensemble HD has performed maybe eight times at Happy Dog. The local public radio station broadcast a live performance. Sean and Josh raised some money on Kickstarter and produced a live recording. It was pressed on vinyl and is played on a record player because Cleveland has people who know how to make records and it just seemed like a different thing to do. The album art, design, liner notes, music and photos were all made by Clevelanders.

Ensemble HD has been profiled by The New York Times, The Economist and the BBC. Josh has done a presentation for the National Endowment for the Arts on getting music out of the concert hall and into the world.

Local government found some bond money to invest in Gordon Square. Art galleries and delightful small restaurants have opened. Sean started a bus service to take local residents to hear the orchestra at Severance Hall. The orchestra helps pay for the bus and offers discounted tickets.

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The orchestra saw the success of Ensemble HD, so it decided it was time to leave Severance for a week. Musicians popped up in bakeries and delis and in school classrooms all week long. Ensemble HD released its album at a Happy Dog performance. The next night, the orchestra sat on the huge altar at St. Colman Catholic Church, and gave a free concert for a full and joyful house of Detroit Shoreway neighbors. Josh performed a concerto. Everyone applauded at all the wrong times and it was wonderful.

Here's the point.

Imagination is powerful. Neighborhoods matter. Human capital is abundant and everywhere. People want to be surprised. Serendipity can be miraculous. Institutions (the church, the orchestra, the city) can be great partners. Small steps add up. You don't always need a road map to get somewhere. Having fun is a good place to start. There is never a wrong time to applaud.

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Winthrop Quigley at 823-3896 or wquigley@abqjournal.com. Go to ABQjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.