

All-ages Movement Project Profile

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If you see civic participation as a pipeline, where does that start? I strongly believe it happens for a lot of young people, particularly those that fall outside of mainstream leadership opportunities, in youth music spaces, even if there is no electoral agenda in that space.

– Shannon Stewart

Where do teenagers learn democratic values and recognize their own power to effect change on a civic level? According to All-ages Movement Project founder Shannon Stewart, one major avenue is involvement in youth-run music and cultural spaces. Writing about the role of these spaces in fostering democratic culture and youth leadership development, she describes places “where young people creatively express themselves, independently produce shows, records, and publications, learn democratic practices, make values based decisions, gain access to resources usually outside their reach, build networks with social and political capital, and grow into innovative leaders.”¹

Stewart co-founded a youth music venue, The Vera Project, in Seattle, Washington in 2001. It was a time when the heat was on the all-ages music scene in Seattle. The term “all ages” refers to music venues that allow people of all ages to attend their concerts, including those under 21. The 1985 Seattle Teen Dance Ordinance had effectively shut down these music venues by requiring so much insurance and security that it became prohibitively expensive for venues to hold all-ages concerts. In 2000, in a politicized time of protest about the issue, a community task force worked with legislators to propose a less-stringent All-ages Dance Ordinance and initiate a youth music space in Seattle partially funded by the city. The Vera Project was born. Stewart was 22 and most other organizers were also in their early 20s. Vera used (and still uses) a participatory structure of youth involvement and leadership to organize and produce its concerts as well as sponsor social and political events, such as anti-oppression trainings, and candidate forums.

As the Vera Project became increasingly successful, the organization received requests for mentorship from young people who wanted to create their own music venues in other places; these requests were hard to meet for a busy staff working on a small budget. Yet Stewart, a strong believer in the role of cultural spaces in building community and effecting social change, remained interested in bigger picture questions

¹ Shannon Stewart, *All Ages Movement Project Report*, (August 2006)
http://www.allagesmovementproject.org/Resources_files/AMP%20Findings%20for%20publication-1.pdf.

about the emergence and sustainability of youth-run participatory spaces around the country. She recognized that there was little systemic documentation about the field, partly due to the transitory nature of its youth leaders, who grow up and move on.

So after five years at Vera, Stewart left to spend four months researching and documenting youth music and art spaces nationwide, funded by the Rappaport Family Foundation, with the goal of creating a network of these organizations. She studied a wide range of cultural venues whose musical focus ranged from punk to hip-hop. The spaces also ranged from venues that focused on presenting concerts to organizations focused on youth music production (such as Youth Movement Records in Oakland).

Her report documents 180 organizations around the country that feature some or all of the following: youth empowerment, a popular music focus, a participatory structure, and the production of music-related cultural products. In exploring the level of civic and political engagement of these organizations, Stewart found the numbers significant: 75% of the youth music and art spaces who responded to the survey say they provide a space for “civic engagement and politically-oriented gatherings,” while 58% say they explicitly sponsor “popular education opportunities around social and political themes.” Sixty-six percent say they have “working relationships with elected officials in their area.”

The structure of the organizations that Stewart surveyed varied widely, ranging from youth-run collectives to Parks and Recreation Centers where more radical youth-run programs exist quietly under the radar. For example, the Department of Safety in Anacortes, Washington, is a collective art and music space, where four to eight residents ages 18-22 collectively live and help manage the space, which includes a music venue, a recording studio, an art gallery, a zine library, and a small cinema. At another site, the nonprofit Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the majority of the staff is between 18-30 and a teen advisory board makes decisions about all of the programming at the space, while an older executive director works behind the scenes.

As Stewart researched these varying organizations, she also put feelers out about the development of a network of youth-run cultural spaces around the country. In developing a network of these music and art venues, she saw an opportunity to bring together grassroots and DIY (do-it-yourself) organizations to increase their strength, longevity, and resource-sharing capabilities, building on the power of the participatory cultural organizing many of these organizations were doing individually. Stewart says, “Cultural space is so critical, but it is now mostly provided by corporations that are interested in youth only as consumers.” Stewart’s vision of AMP sought to strengthen and support organizations that offer youth access to cultural and civic space that was not corporately-run.

Starting off with a staff of one (Stewart), some dedicated part-time assistants, and a supportive board of directors, AMP kicked into action in 2007. Based on a survey of what the youth-run cultural venues that Stewart researched were most interested in, AMP prioritized two projects for the year. The first was a user-maintained, on-line

resource directory where organizations can post their profiles and basic information about their activities. The second was a resource book with links to resources on everything from putting on a successful show to civic participation. The resource book will include narrative snapshots of organizations. “The life cycle of these organizations is often short. We want to document the universal truths people have found in doing the work,” Stewart says. In addition to these two projects, AMP will be doing mini-exchanges between 13 organizations as part of the effort to compile resources for the publication as well as build relationships between groups in different geographical locations. “With as much as we rely on technology, I never want to lose sight of the importance of face-to-face peer connections,” she says.

The DIY ethos of many youth-run music spaces is a driving force in their development and sustenance, but it also poses some challenges. Stewart talks about the strong sense of identity that many youth space organizers have in being “alone, tough, scrappy pioneers. I think that because some organizations are so isolated, hold unpopular beliefs and are under-resourced, they are guarded, and in some cases see their struggle as a virtue.” In attempting to get organizations to really participate in the network, AMP must find ways to work around this mind-set. Yet Stewart believes that even in the context of DIY, people will realize that developing interconnected structures that link organizations “is consistent with how everything is going. Things like open source file sharing exemplify the current nature of cultural change and reflect values that have always been key to progressive grassroots and punk movements.” In other words, some of the freedom and non-centralized nature of the DIY approach will be augmented, not compromised, by the larger trends in communications that AMP is building on.

While a DIY orientation has been a guiding force in the development of many youth music spaces, there are other players and political orientations vying for influence in the all-ages music scene. One important group is evangelical Christians. Of the organizations that Stewart documented in her report, fifteen are overtly evangelical. Others are secular, but staffed and sponsored by evangelicals. According to Stewart, this trend has taken off in the last five years. “There have always been shows in church basements, but generally, there was no real relationship between the youth and the church. Now we have evangelical churches constructing youth music venues, where all the indie bands come to play.”

One of these organizations is Rocketown in Nashville, started by Christian rock star Michael Smith. George H.W. Bush led the capital campaign for Rocketown, which now houses three music venues, a coffee shop and an indoor skate park while also hosting a Sunday church service. Rocketown offers events such as Skatechurch, which makes free skating available in exchange for attending a Biblically-based discussion group about youth issues. When Stewart visited Rocketown, the staff (all ages 20-30) explained that though they are all Christians and attend the Sunday services, there is no connection between the music and the church unless they are approached by the youth to discuss Christianity. Yet whether organizations like Rocketown are directly proselytizing to youth, the increasing investment in youth culture by the evangelical movement indicates that evangelical leaders recognize the importance of youth cultural spaces as a

site of organizing and long-term social change, just as AMP does. From Stewart's perspective, this underscores the necessity of aligning progressive forces to building an all-ages movement that is not only dominated by the Christian right.

Yet the question of political involvement is a tricky area for AMP. As a network that respects youth leadership and the priorities of its member groups, AMP finds itself in a struggle to prioritize its goals regarding actively promoting civic and political engagement vs. focusing primarily on organizing vibrant cultural spaces. Though Stewart recognizes the deep interrelationship between these two goals, she notes that there are tensions. For example, some youth space organizers don't see their work as about civic engagement or political organizing while some organizations actually fear that direct civic or political involvement could endanger their venue's existence. Stewart leans towards supporting the development of more youth-run participatory spaces, however explicitly focused on civic engagement they are. She holds the conviction that the proliferation of youth cultural spaces inherently builds youth empowerment and an engagement in shaping the world, even if the cultural spaces themselves don't focus on civic engagement around policy issues or electoral organizing.

An important aspect of AMP's work as an organization attempting to forge an alternative all-ages youth cultural network is building a strong base of collaborative partners. Yet Stewart names this as one of her biggest struggles so far. "This is probably the very crux of all frustration with me in this field," she says. Repeatedly, Stewart's national networking partners working in the arenas of music, youth, politics, and cultural organizing are the first ones on the funding chopping block. "So with this landscape, I guess I'm playing my cards really carefully. When national organizations, working with local organizations aim to do great things and have to pull out, the ability to build trust with communities is severely limited. So AMP's unfolding slowly and a bit cautiously." Stewart continues to draw inspiration from the DIY ethos and creative resourcefulness of the all-ages music spaces she is trying to organize: "I could go on and on about this...But instead, I'm going to get back to work and try to figure out how to offer a different lens with which to look at it all."

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