

## Mad About Localism: Homegrown Talent Makes A City Shine

Local music, local foods and local festivals make Madison one of the 'Best Cities' in America. What can we learn from Madison's 'Loyal to Local' strategies?



*Gene Delcourt's fiddle class playing by the bike path. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*



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*Sexy Ester playing the FruitFest. (image: Rob Tierney©)*

## Local Talent

On University of Wisconsin's lakefront **Memorial Union Terrace**, I heard a songstress belt out ballads and a Cajun group turn a walkway into a dance floor. At a street festival, I heard power-pop that energized a sea of celebrants. At **Monona Terrace**, I heard Japanese folk-dance drumming. Walking from the Campus Inn to State Street, I heard a singer/guitarist/kazooist perform 'Pink Pants'.

On the Capitol building's observation deck, bagpipes played below. On the bike path, I pedalled past fiddlers. At a bakery, I listened to a jug band. At the history museum, I heard rockers play a free show with the passion other bands reserve for sold-out arenas.

These performers – Anna Vogelzang, Sexy Ester, Okinawan Taiko Drummers, Art Paul Schlosser, Sean Michael Dargan, Gene Delcourt's high school fiddle class, Boo Bradley, The Gomers, and Cajun Strangers – all have one thing in common. Each has helped to create an eclectic, exhilarating music scene in a town sandwiched between two lakes.



*Boo Bradley playing at Madison Sourdough. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*

You don't have to look hard to find raw, refreshing talent in **Madison**, the capital of Wisconsin and a incubator for creativity in **urban planning**, cuisine and music. Whilst talent in smaller cities is often overlooked, the talents here lay the foundations of a strong and vibrant culture.

The grassroots creative class has historically helped to elevate and advance culture in urban cities: consider London's British Invasion in the 1960s and the indie acts that made Austin a globally respected music hotspot before SXSW became a massive phenomenon.

Music is only one of the many reasons that Madison has catapulted onto a number of 'Best Places' lists for **bicycling**, food and even **happiness**. Another explanation for this small city's ability to punch culturally above its weight is its 'loyal to local' attitude.

## 'Loyal to Local'



*Memorial Union Terrace sunset crowd. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*

The “buy fresh, buy local” ethos rules here. Food and drink purveyors like the **Weary Traveler**, **Mother Fool’s Coffeehouse** and **Ladonia Cafe** - a new food cart with an already strong following - buy fresh and local, listing the origins of ingredients used in their fare to support community causes.

These businesses also support sustainable transportation, clean air and bike safety by participating in the nonprofit **Bicycle Benefits** initiative. For just \$5, you can get a sticker to put on your bike helmet that gives you access to discounts at restaurants, clubs and cultural centres when you cycle in the USA.

Many Madison residents support their urban planners’ efforts to build a more sustainable, healthy infrastructure, with people of all ages using the **bike-hike trails**. For those who don’t have their own bicycles, Madison installed **B-cycle** bikeshare stations around town using locally-made Trek bicycles.



*Capital City Bike Trail sculptures. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*

Like the food and drink purveyors described above, the city's bars support the community by serving brews crafted by environmentally-friendly homegrown businesses that use regional ingredients and supplies.

These include **New Glarus** (try the Spotted Cow), **Capital Brewery** (Wisconsin Amber), **Ale Asylum** (Hopalicious) and **Old Sugar** (whisky and ouzo – the latter is lighter than traditional Greek ouzo).

The close links to producers don't stop there. Hosted in Madison is **Dane County Farmers' Market**, America's largest 100% producer-only market: from there, you can buy directly from the growers, bakers and artisan food makers. The townies share a very inclusive attitude – for example, the annual **Mad City Vegan Fest** reaches out beyond the veg-curious to omnivores who join the fun in an area known for its dairy farms.

## Make Music, Madison!



*Memorial Union Terrace music. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*

Madison's talent appeared in full force at the *Make Music Madison* festival on June 21, which featured around 270 free performances citywide. Rain pushed musicians indoors for the first half of the day, but when the skies cleared, bands moved outside and people came to hear them.

The unusual venues included bars, museums, firehouses, parking lots, bike paths, railway tracks, **parks** and **libraries** – a marching band even performed on a boat cruising Lakes Mendota and Monona. Both professional and amateur musicians performed at the festival with the intention of showcasing Madison's homegrown talent. *Make Music Madison* saw a range of genres played, from indie rock to funk, from country to Celtic.

Michael Rothschild, a retired University of Wisconsin professor, proposed the *Make Music Madison* idea to city officials and community associations after being inspired by similar events in New York and Paris. Local technicians volunteered to develop the event's website, musician to venue matchmaking software and smartphone apps.



*Forward Marching Band playing on a pontoon on Lake Mendota. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*



Rick Tvedt, executive director of **Madison Area Music Awards** (the MAMAs), expressed his concerns about the effort: “My issue is that the festival is funded by the city to the tune of \$25,000 – it’s not clear how that fits into the initiatives to bolster the city’s music economy and, especially, the artists that live and work here.”

This is different, he says, from musicians playing for free (and they often do in Madison) to help bona fide charities. Tvedt believes a more sustainable strategy would be “a state-run office of music that treats music as an economic driver and invests in it.”

Cathy Dethmers, who runs **High Noon Saloon**, is more optimistic: “I like the idea of having live music in unexpected places for a whole day as it is likely to engage a lot of people who don’t typically experience live music.”

“[Madison’s] music scene goes through cycles and we are currently doing really well,” says Jon Hain, who runs indie artist-supporting **Uvulittle Records** and Mother Fool’s Coffeehouse, a venue that emphasizes emerging performers. “One component of that is that there are lots of small rooms to play. They are like incubators.”

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin told me *Make Music Madison* offers several benefits. “Few things [...] bring people together more than music.” Then there’s economic development: this kind of event is a magnet for “entrepreneurs, creativity, and young people looking for desirable place to live.” *Make Music Madison* served as the “opening act” for the city’s summer music season of neighbourhood festivals, outdoor concerts and free performances at downtown’s Overture Center for the Arts.

What about the street musicians like the kazoo man who play when and where they want? “We are proud to be a busker-friendly city,” says Mayor Soglin. “Busking adds life and vibrancy to our streets.”



*Madison skyline seen from bike path along Lake Monona. (image: Rob Tierney ©)*