

[https://madison.com/entertainment/music/we-don-t-really-have-a-home-hip-hop-artists-carve-out-performance-spaces-in/article\\_2de182b3-073b-5434-ad99-9ec8528e6d61.html](https://madison.com/entertainment/music/we-don-t-really-have-a-home-hip-hop-artists-carve-out-performance-spaces-in/article_2de182b3-073b-5434-ad99-9ec8528e6d61.html)

ALERT TOP STORY

## 'We don't really have a home': Hip-hop artists carve out performance spaces in Madison

Melissa Perry

Apr 20, 2023

**M**adison music lovers packed the top and bottom floors of Cargo Coffee on East Washington, caffeinated drinks in hand, on a wintery night in February.

The space had completely transformed from a bustling coffeehouse to an intimate performance space, as the lights were turned down low and Cargo's tables were adorned with black tablecloths and centerpieces. Attendees had their eyes directed toward a humble "stage" made complete by a sound system, a DJ and of course, space for artists to perform.

The event, hosted by the Madison-based start-up LessWork Local Lifestyle, featured local hip-hop artists who have been carving out performance spaces in unconventional venues as they struggle find a home in traditional music venues in Madison.

"I thought it was fantastic," said Dana Perry, music coordinator for Cargo Coffee about the show. "The vibes were great. The music was top-tier. The mission was on fire, it was just wonderful."

### People are also reading...

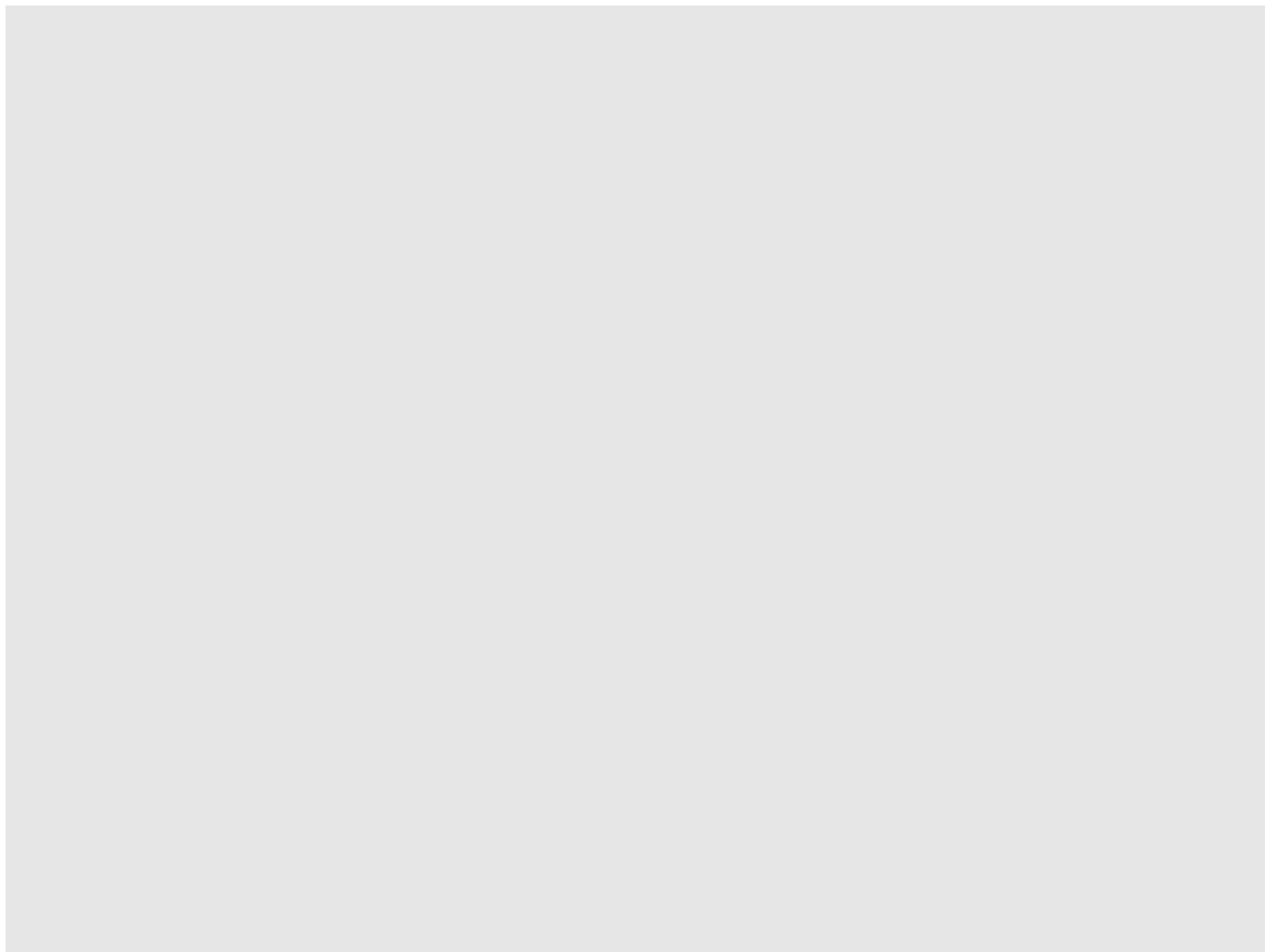
#### 1 Police: UW professor ticketed for exposing breasts to student

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

#### 2 Facing steep enrollment declines, UW branch campuses told to find "a path forward to viability"

### 3 West Side Texas Roadhouse getting ready to open

### 4 Middleton 3-star linebacker commits to Big Ten program



Shibon Evans "Soultry Shibon," left, and Akiya Alexander "K.I.L.O aka SkitL'z," perform at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue during a hip-hop and R&B show hosted by LessWork Local Lifestyle, which Alexander co-founded. The coffee shop provides a performance space for hip-hop artists, who say they struggle to find venues in Madison.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

Some artists and community leaders say that Madison lacks infrastructure and performance opportunities for small local artists in general. But this is particularly pronounced for Madison's hip-hop artists, who have spoken out for years about the inequities that permeate the city's music landscape.

"If I relied on Madison as my primary economy, I would have quit a long time ago," said music producer Pacal Bayley, also known as DJ Pain 1. "There's no infrastructure that would support even live bands in Madison. So for those of us who have already

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website, you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

been marginalized because of the music we make and the culture we represent, there's nothing for us in terms of economic support or professional opportunity.”

## 📄 She broke barriers as an opera singer, then devoted her life to helping Madison's kids

As hip-hop celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, many artists want Madison to recognize the cultural importance of a genre rooted in Black culture, the same genre that has been labeled as “violent” or “dangerous” by critics since its inception.

“We have a lot of talent. We have a list of about a hundred different rappers in the greater Madison area, and I don't think most of Madison has any idea about that,” said Karen Reece, president of the Urban Community Arts Network, an organization that advocates for equity within Madison's music scene. “What makes that special is that people are doing it because they love it.”

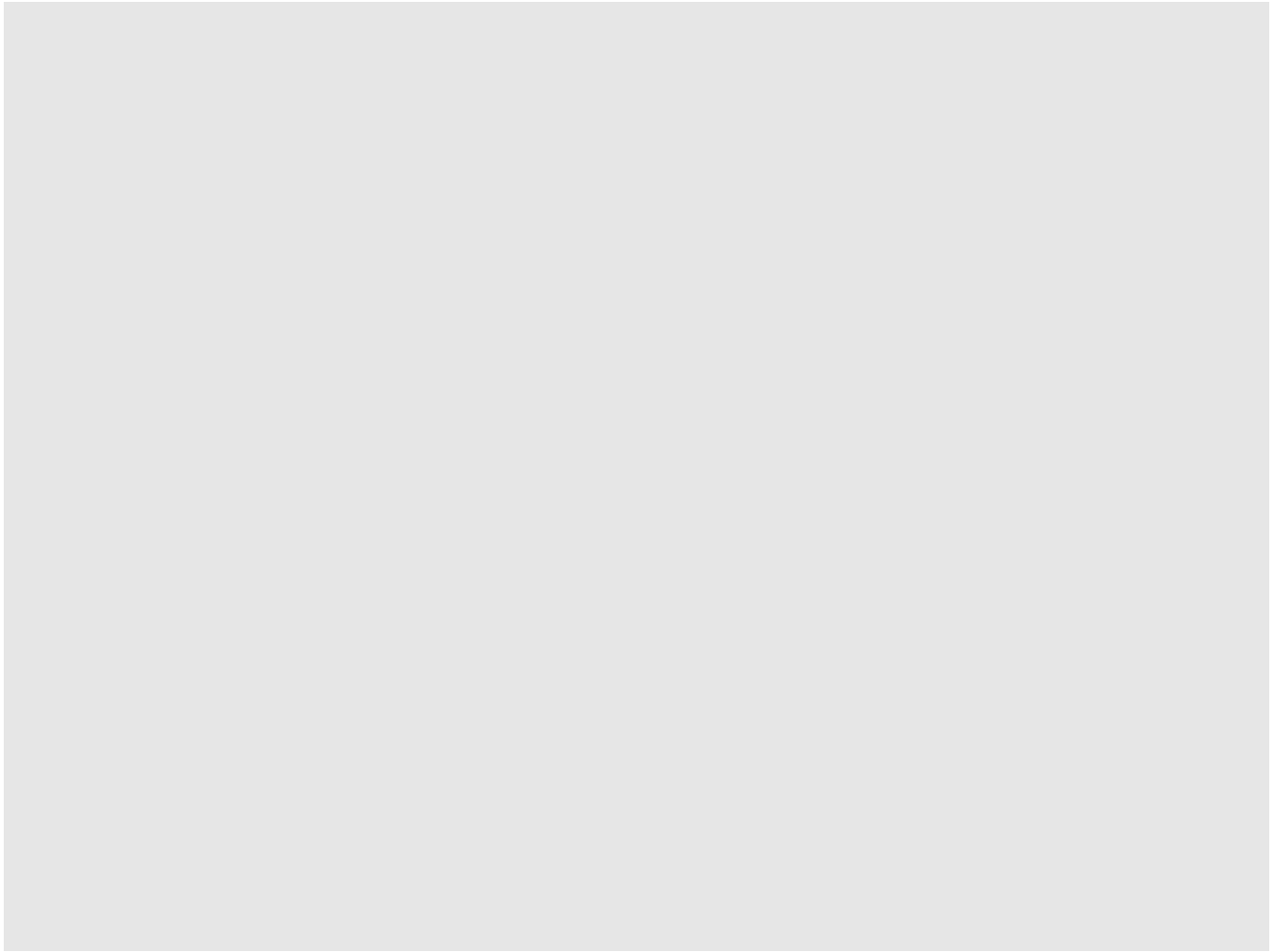
## A complex history

Hip-hop has a complicated history in Madison. In the 1990s and early 2000s, altercations at local hip-hop shows made headlines, further influencing public perceptions and narratives about the genre. In the years that followed, several local music venues such as The Frequency, which **closed** in 2018, responded by banning the genre from being played or performed altogether. In 2017, **a report** from The Daily Cardinal discovered that several downtown bars had filtered hip-hop from their TouchTunes jukeboxes.

“Black culture is the most consumed culture on the planet right now and so it's a little funny when you walk into a bar and they refuse to book hip-hop acts. They don't play hip-hop music. They don't keep it on their jukebox,” said Justin Watts, a member of the local hip-hop group Supa Friends, who goes by the stage name Maruchan Chef. “There is a lot of weird subversive racism when you want to start comparing hip-hop's ability and exposure in some areas versus others.”

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing and analytics. You can opt out of cookies at any time. [Privacy Policy](#)

Local hip-hop artists in Madison are being overlooked on this website and their contributions would learn more about the history behind hip-hop before attaching a stigma to it.



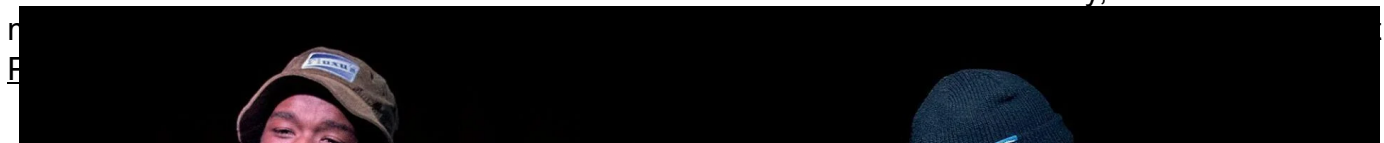
Ian Evans "ICE atm," of Madison, performs during a hip-hop show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison. "It feels like we don't really have a platform," Evans said of the city's hip-hop scene.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

He became interested in the genre in middle school. Evans, who is from Sicily, Italy, recalled hearing a song from a popular Italian rapper that first sparked his interest in hip-hop. Since then, music has become an important outlet for him as he pursues a professional career in Madison.

"I just like the freedom that rap music provides more than other genres and I really like expressing myself. It feels really therapeutic," he said. "I think we just need to realize that it's not just a type of music, it's a culture and we should try to understand it instead of just trying to group it in a box."

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as





## The numbers

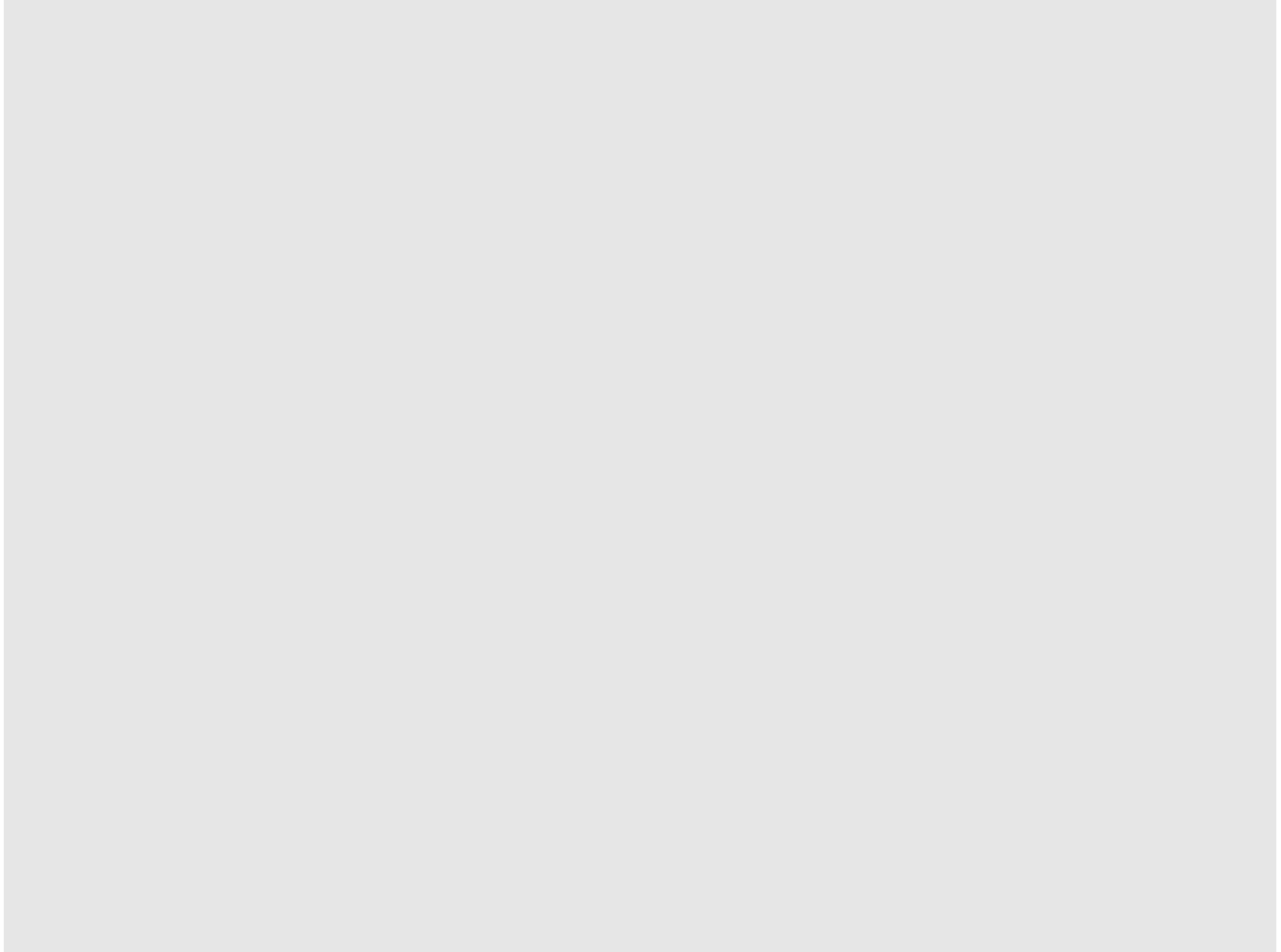
A prevailing assumption that artists and UCAN have been working against for years is that hip-hop shows are dangerous. This assumption was tested in a 2017 study from the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at UW-Madison that studied the relationship between live music events and violence in the city by analyzing over 4,500 calls made to the Madison Police Department from 2008-2016.

The study, which compared the rate of violent incidents by genre, found that live hip-hop shows were not associated with the highest proportions of police calls, offenses, or violence using any analysis. Other genres that the study looked at included rock, bluegrass, country, and EDM. According to the authors of the study, “This research shows that caring about people’s safety should not be limited to Hip-Hop and, in fact, there may be other music genres that present more threats to safety than Hip-Hop.”

“I think I think it's progressed a little bit, but it's still not completely where it needs to be,” said Rob Franklin, a local hip-hop artist who goes by the stage name Rob Dz, and board member of UCAN.

A common issue for many hip-hop artists is venue access. Franklin points out that there is often a disconnect between larger music venues and local artists, creating a gap in performance opportunities. This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing personalization opportunities. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

“A lot of venues in town when they bring hip-hop they bring national acts, but they all have their own tour support. They don't have any local support involved whatsoever,” Franklin said. “The challenge is making that bridge between venues and artists to where the artists will feel like they're actually included or thought of in that process.”



Hip hop artists Akiya Alexander, who performs as K.I.L.O aka SkitL'z, and Breyon Sommerville, who performs as 1neofmani, hosted and performed in a hip-hop at R&B show at Cargo Coffee. A group founded by the two performers plans to host a show once a month at the coffee shop.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

Other artists, such as Keenan Pulz, also known as Faded Francis, said that they have been denied performance opportunities by venues due to their genre.

“There's a venue that we contacted, which I know has had hip-hop events in the past.

They were interested at first in throwing the event,” he said. “Then at some later point, they reached out and said we can't book you because you're hip-hop.”

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website, you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

Frank Productions, one of the country's largest concert promoters, operates some of the most well-known venues in the city such as The Sylvee, the Majestic and High Noon Saloon. In recent years, they say that they have made efforts to diversify the artists that perform at their locations.

"We loosely track what we're doing on our stages," Joe Burbach, local talent buyer for Frank Productions said. "We have a diversity and equity and inclusion subcommittee within Frank Productions here that keeps track of a lot of those things. So we're always trying to keep our stages diverse of color, genre and styles as much as we can."

## Generating Support

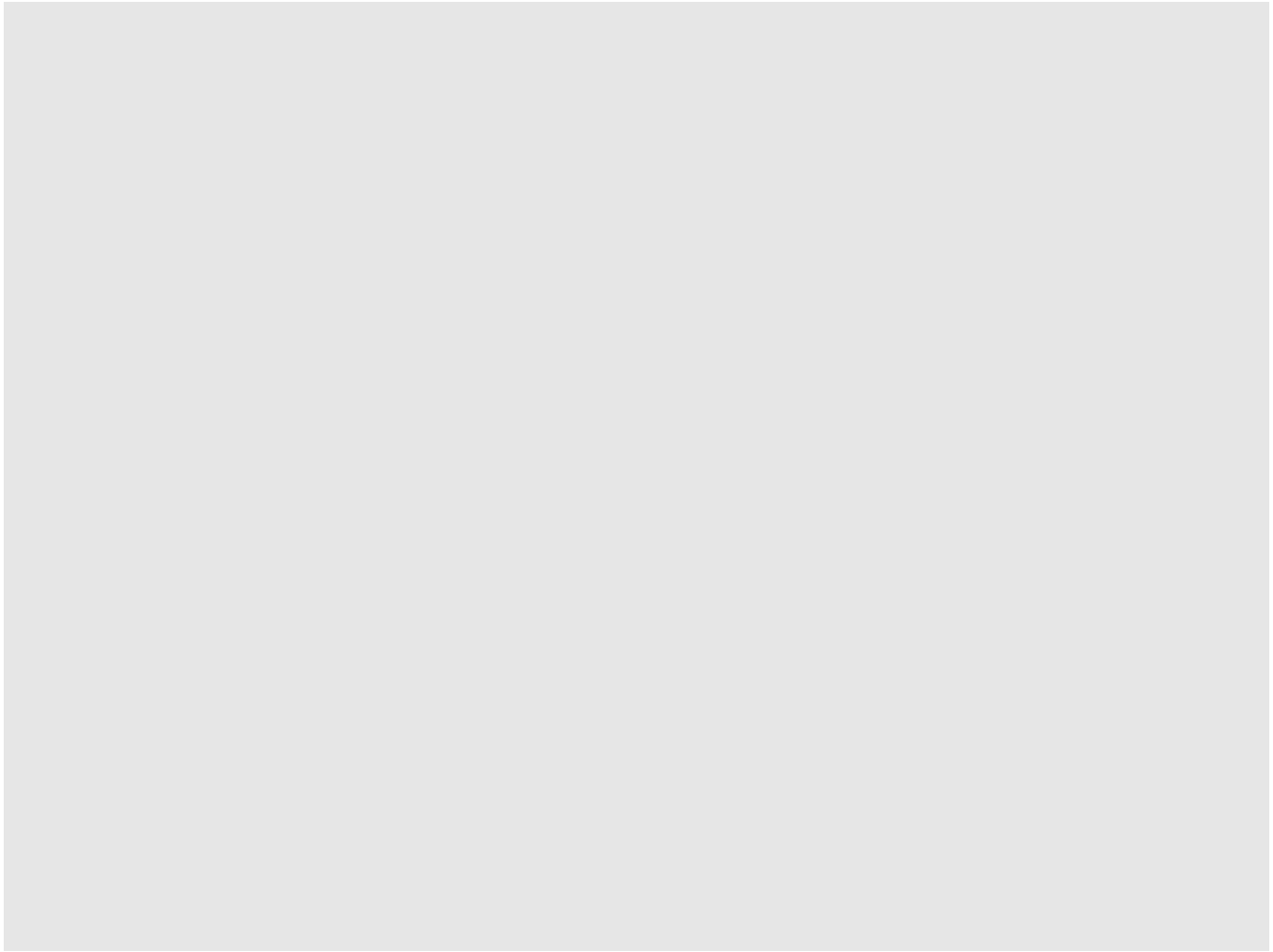
While many artists say disparities within the city's music landscape remain, one thing has changed: the conversation. In recent years, the city of Madison has become directly involved in discussions and task forces related to the issue of making the city's music landscape more equitable.

"We at least have attention to this issue," said Reece, UCAN's president. "There are people within the city that are willing to engage and they're willing to at least talk about it."

**UCAN**, formed in 2011, hosted the first annual Madison Hip-Hop Awards to uplift local hip-hop artists, which continues today. The group has consistently advocated for the genre by meeting with the city's police department regarding public safety and concerns related to the over-policing of hip-hop shows and participating in the city's Task Force on Equity in Music and Entertainment.

"We go through these periods of time in Madison hip-hop. It's kind of has been a two to four-year cycle," Reece said. "Everything's going great, people are doing shows, artists are collaborating with each other and then something will happen. Like there's a fight at a venue and then everything shuts down and now there's no opportunity to book a hip-hop show at a music venue and that goes on for six months to a year."

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Fred Steinmetz "FTBK," left, and Colin Lime "Keylime," both of Madison, perform during a hip-hop show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions at The Rigby Pub.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

In 2018, the city's task force shared a **report** with the city council that outlined several recommendations, including the creation of a full-time position focused on promoting equity in the city's music scene, along with anti-bias training for bar and music venue staff.

Since then, the City of Madison has worked toward implementing some of the recommendations from the 2018 report. While a full-time position has yet to be created on the city level to promote equity within the city's music scene, city planner Angela Puerta has been given a 20% staffing assignment to work on projects related

to Madison's music scene and the city's Department of Civil Rights is working on developing on voluntary anti-bias training for local venues. This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Following the city's task force, the Greater Madison Music City Project was formed to further discussions about Madison's music landscape and provide recommendations to the city. In August of 2022, the GMMCP released a report in partnership with Sound Diplomacy, a global consulting group, that laid out 17 recommendations for the city. Some of these recommendations include establishing a cultural office, revising sound ordinance policies and developing a grant program geared toward diversifying the music scene. Currently, the group has plans to meet with local venues and artists, with the goal of gaining more public support for potential policy changes.

"We're trying to explore what recommendations are feasible and generate support," said Puerta, who is also a member of the GMMCP. "We need to reconvene and figure out how we can remove some of the barriers that are coming from the city and what kind of ordinances we could change."

## Making a Home

Many hip-hop artists have worked to create opportunities for themselves. In 2021, Franklin led the creation of **Mad Lit**, a free outdoor concert supported by the city that has given many local Black artists the chance to perform. Franklin, who works full-time for Madison Public Library, frequently mentors and leads hip-hop workshops for local youth.

"For me, it became a thought process of how do we still make ourselves recognized in this downtown area that has traditionally not been welcoming for folks of color?" Franklin said of starting Mad Lit. "I was like, 'You know what? We'll just throw a show in the street.'"

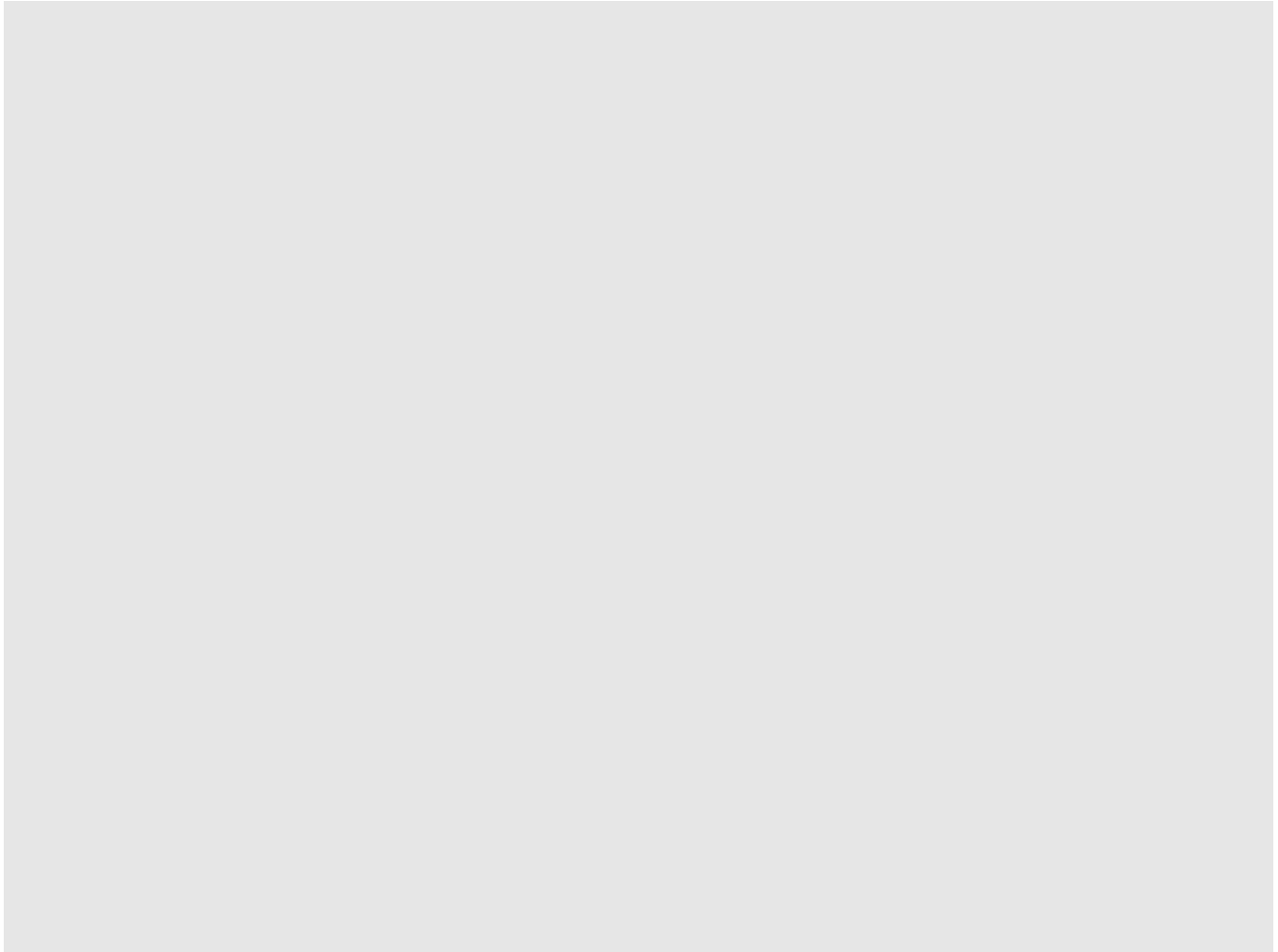
This summer will mark the 3rd year of the Mad Lit festival and Franklin expects the biggest turnout yet.

"It really took a year for more folks of color to take the chance to come downtown because a lot of times most people of color don't really feel welcome here," he said.

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

"Once people realized that 'Hey this is a space for us' then more people of color started coming downtown. So I expect this year to be bigger and better."

Some artists like Keenan Pulz, have hosted house shows. In February, **LessWork Local Lifestyle**, a local music start-up that provides performance opportunities and support to local artists, hosted a music night at Cargo Coffee, where a variety of local hip-hop and R&B artists performed. The event gave many artists who often struggle to book larger venues in Madison the opportunity to share their art.



LessWork Local Lifestyle hosts a hip-hop and R&B show at Cargo Coffee. "Our bread and butter is facilitating space to make music," said Dana Perry, music coordinator for Cargo.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

"I try to not just look for blame, but a solution," said local rapper Akiya Alexander, who goes by the stage name K.I.L.O. Aka SkitL'z and is a co-founder of Lesswork.

"There is a lot of stigma when it comes to hip-hop. We don't really have a home.

That's where Lesswork came about, we're looking at what we can provide and what we can do as artists." This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

Dana Perry, the music coordinator for Cargo Coffee, helped organize the Lesswork show at Cargo in February. Thanks to the show being such a success, Perry said that Cargo plans to have the LessWork team host a monthly showcase at the coffee shop on the second Saturday of every month throughout the summer, with the goal of highlighting even more local hip-hop and R&B artists.

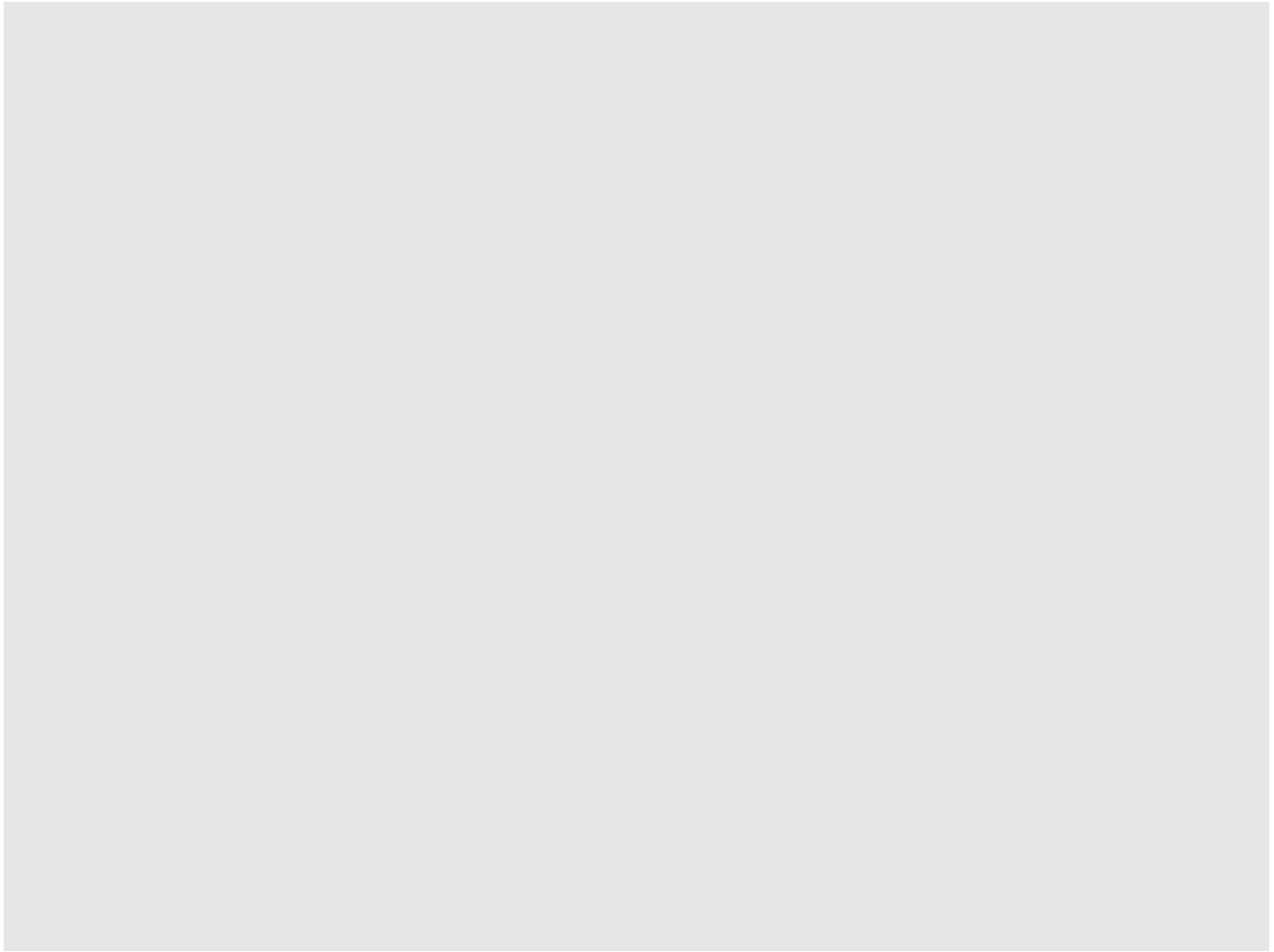
“Our bread and butter is facilitating space to make music,” Perry said. “What’s great about Cargo is that it’s intimate. A lot of times our listeners leave going ‘Oh my god, I had no idea there was such great original music right here in Madison.’”

### **A new dance team offers girls confidence through choreography at Vel Phillips Memorial High School**

The hip-hop community plans to continue to push the city and local venues to do more.

“Madison has a lot of talented musicians, but there's always a struggle trying to figure out how to take it to the next level,” Franklin said. “If I had all the resources in the world, I would have a venue with at least one night every weekend that has urban representation.”

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Keenan Pulz "Faded Francis" performs during a Hip-Hop Collective show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions. The Rigby Pub. After he struggled to book venues in Madison, Pulz would often host hip-hop shows at his house.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

And as public stigma lingers, artists encourage everyone, regardless of their music tastes, to try to appreciate the cultural significance that their art carries.

"I think it's a misunderstanding," artist Alexander (K.I.L.O Aka SkitL'z) said. "When it comes to hip-hop, it's a story. It's a lifestyle. It's a way of life. Music brings people together."

---

### **Photos: Hip-Hop in Madison**

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

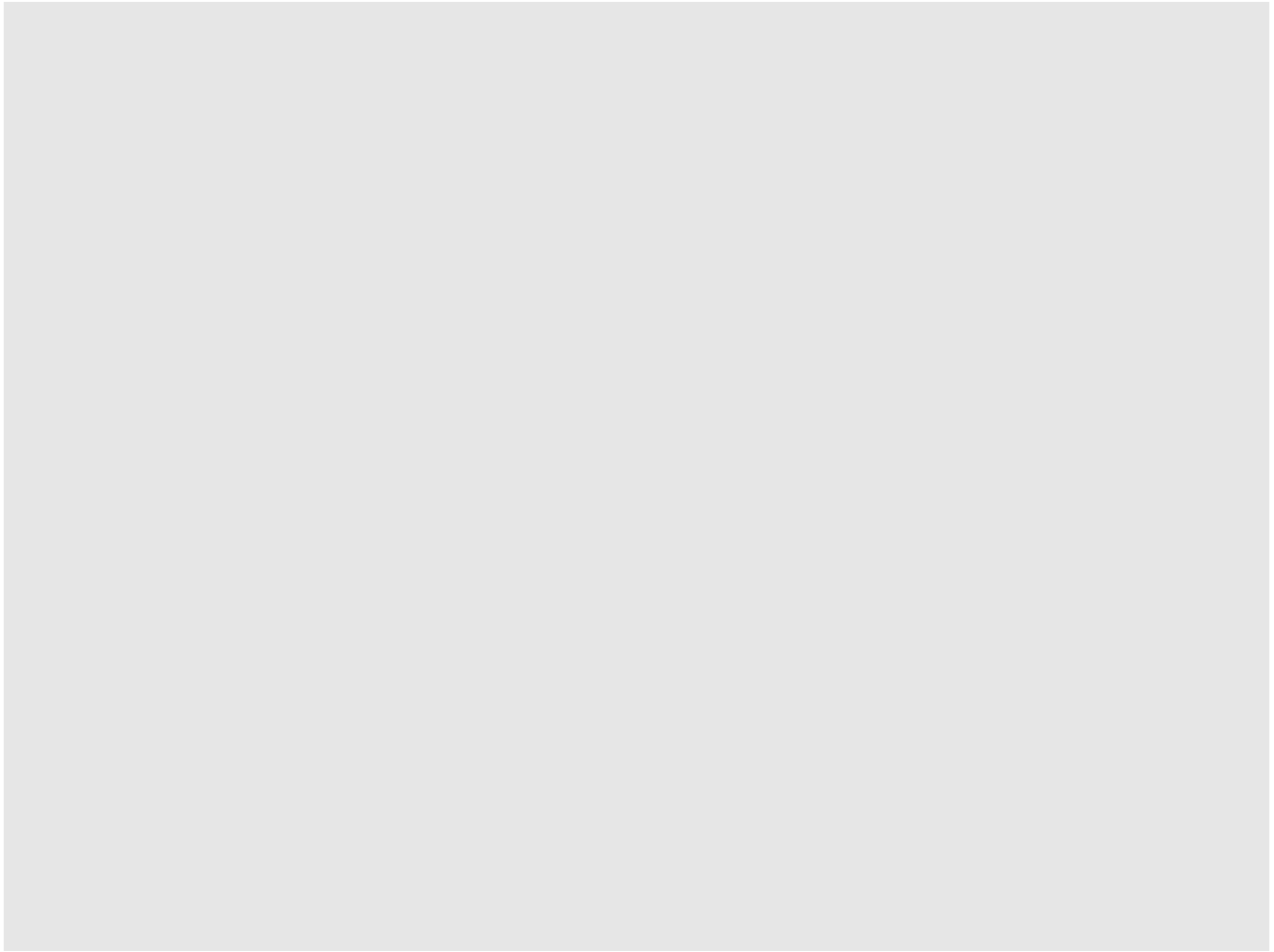


Shibon Evans "Soultry Shibon," left, and Akiya Alexander "K.I.L.O aka SkitL'z," perform at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue during a hip-hop and R&B show hosted by LessWork Local Lifestyle, which Alexander co-founded. The coffee shop provides a performance space for hip-hop artists, who say they struggle to find venues in Madison.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

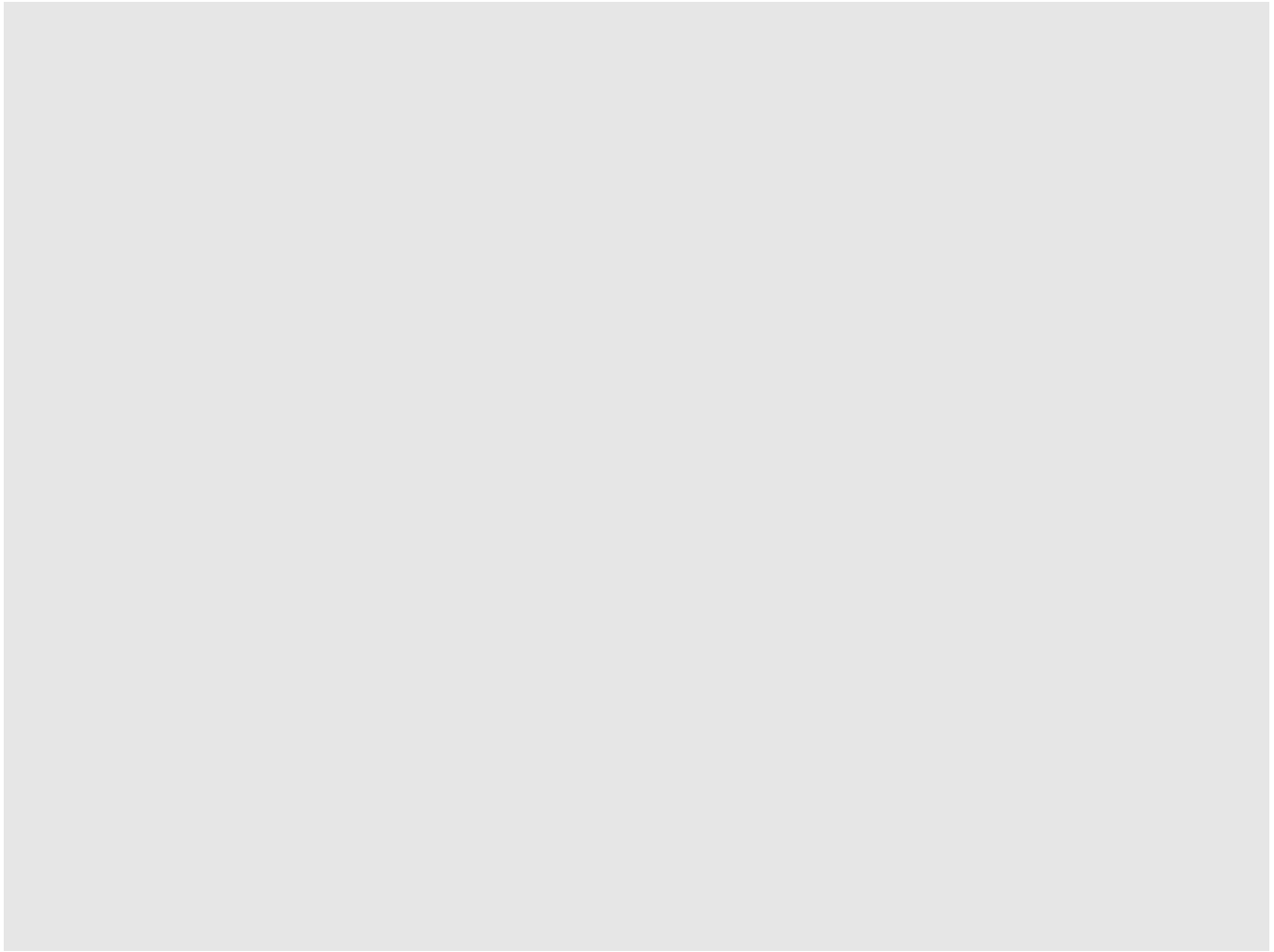


Ian Evans "ICE atm," of Madison, performs during a hip-hop show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison. "It feels like we don't really have a platform," Evans said of the city's hip-hop scene.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

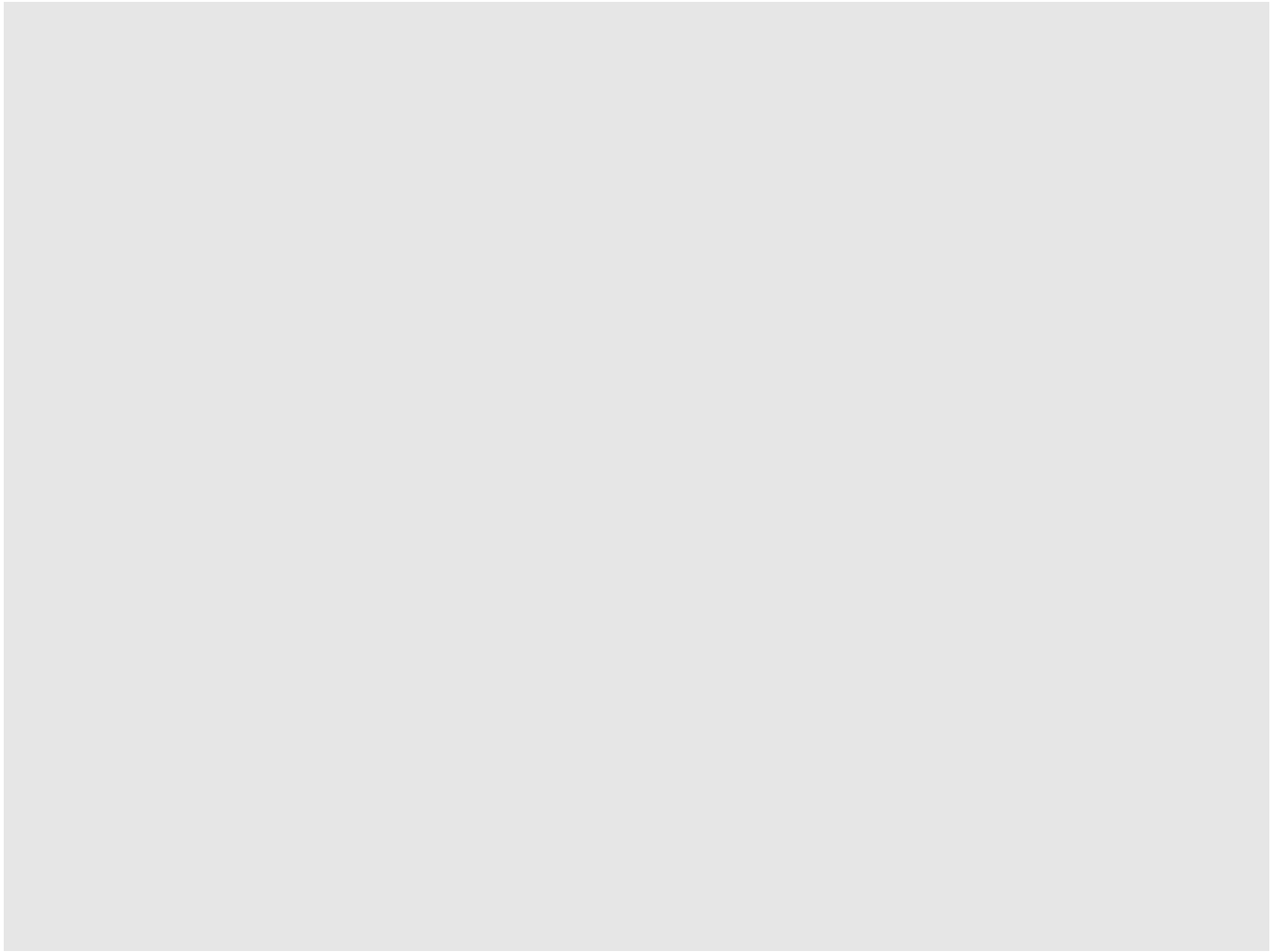


Hip hop artists Akiya Alexander, who performs as K.I.L.O aka SkitL'z, and Breyon Sommerville, who performs as 1neofmani, hosted and performed in a hip-hop at R&B show at Cargo Coffee. A group founded by the two performers plans to host a show once a month at the coffee shop.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



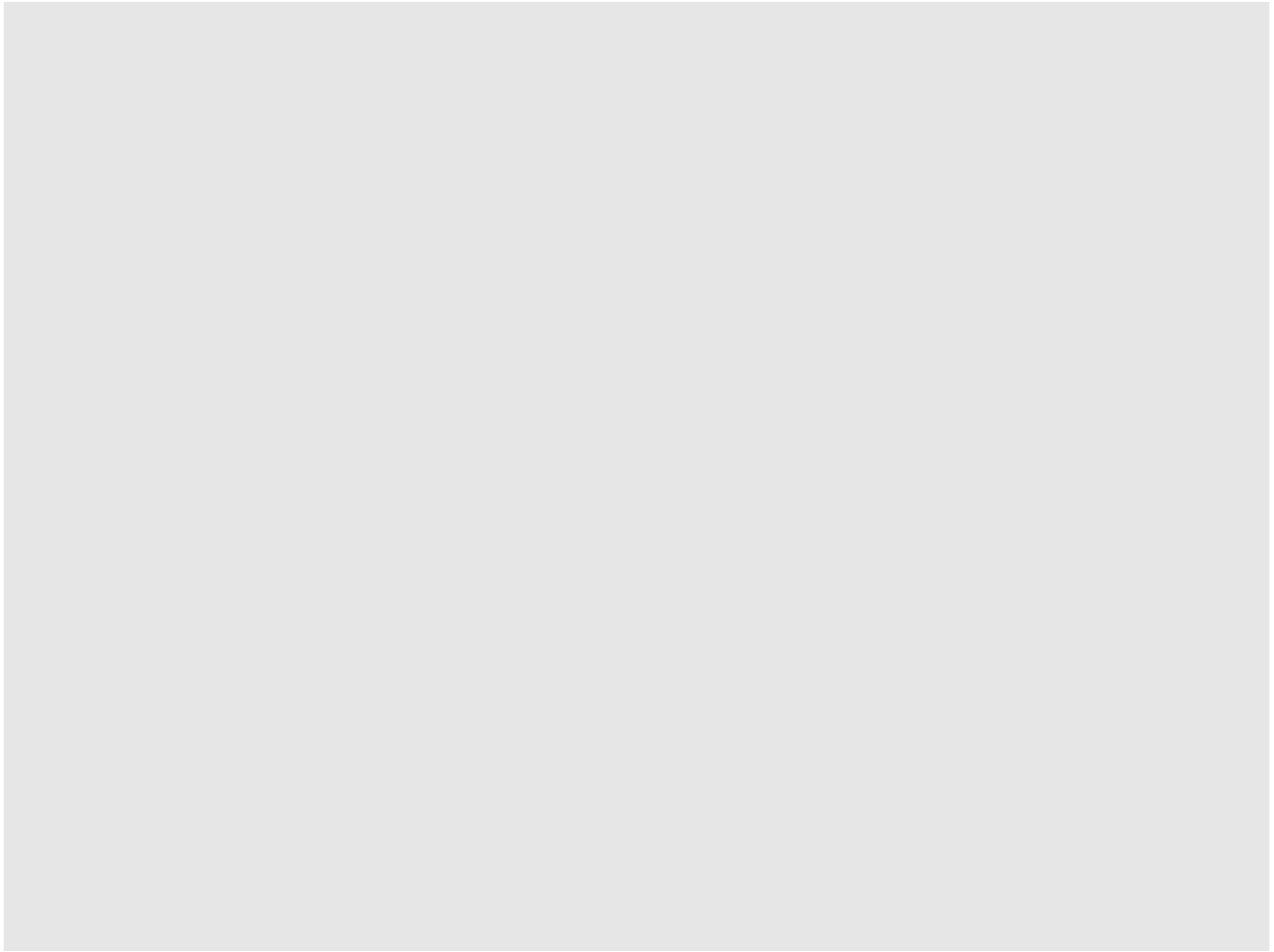
Fred Steinmetz "FTBK," left, and Colin Lime "Keylime," both of Madison, perform during a hip-hop show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions at The Rigby Pub.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



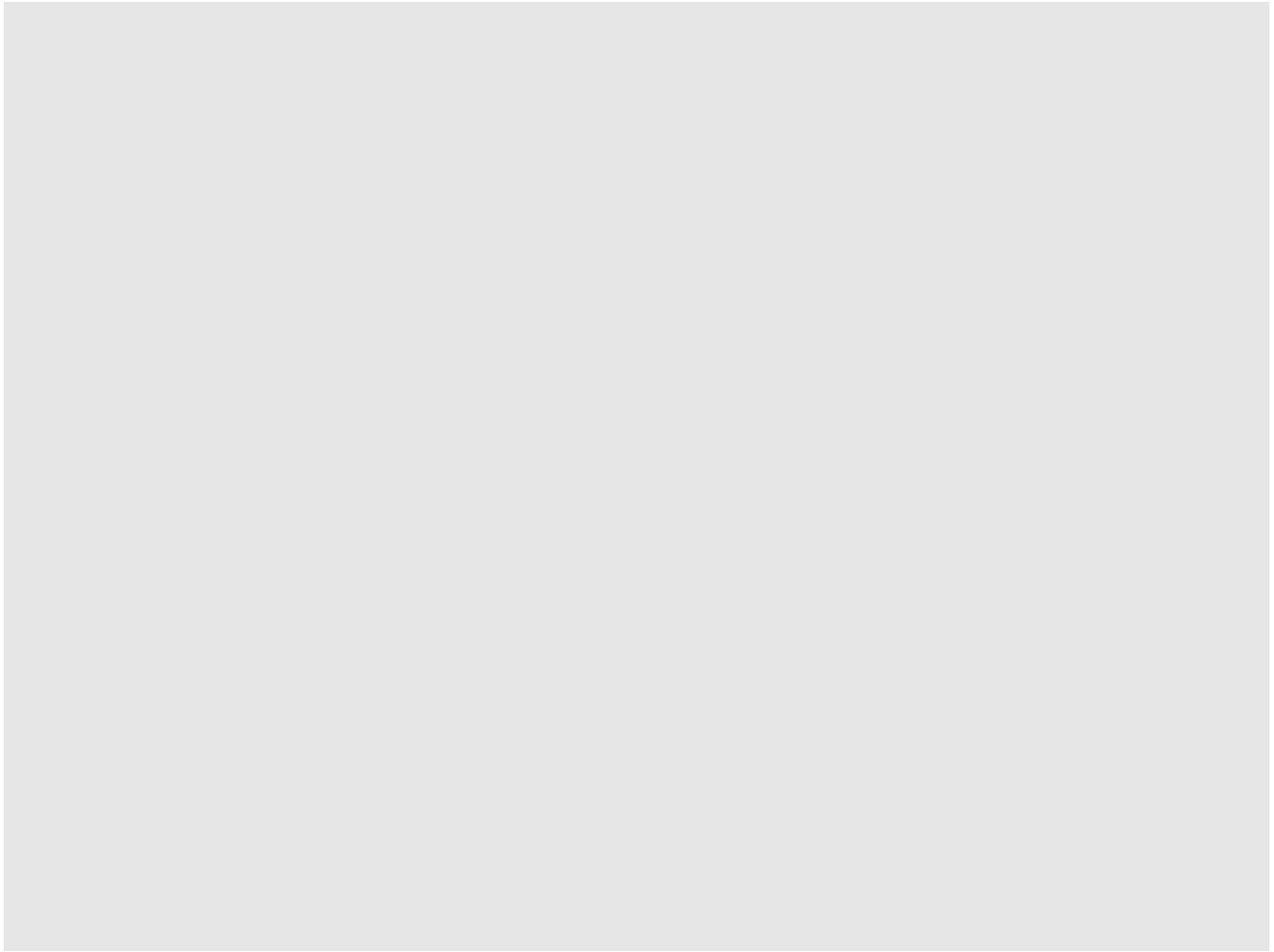


Gino Carter "DJ Sneaky Gator" talks with Shavanna Butcher "Goddess Nacole" before she performs at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue during a hip-hop and R&B show hosted by LessWork Local Lifestyle in Madison, Wis., Friday, Feb. 24, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

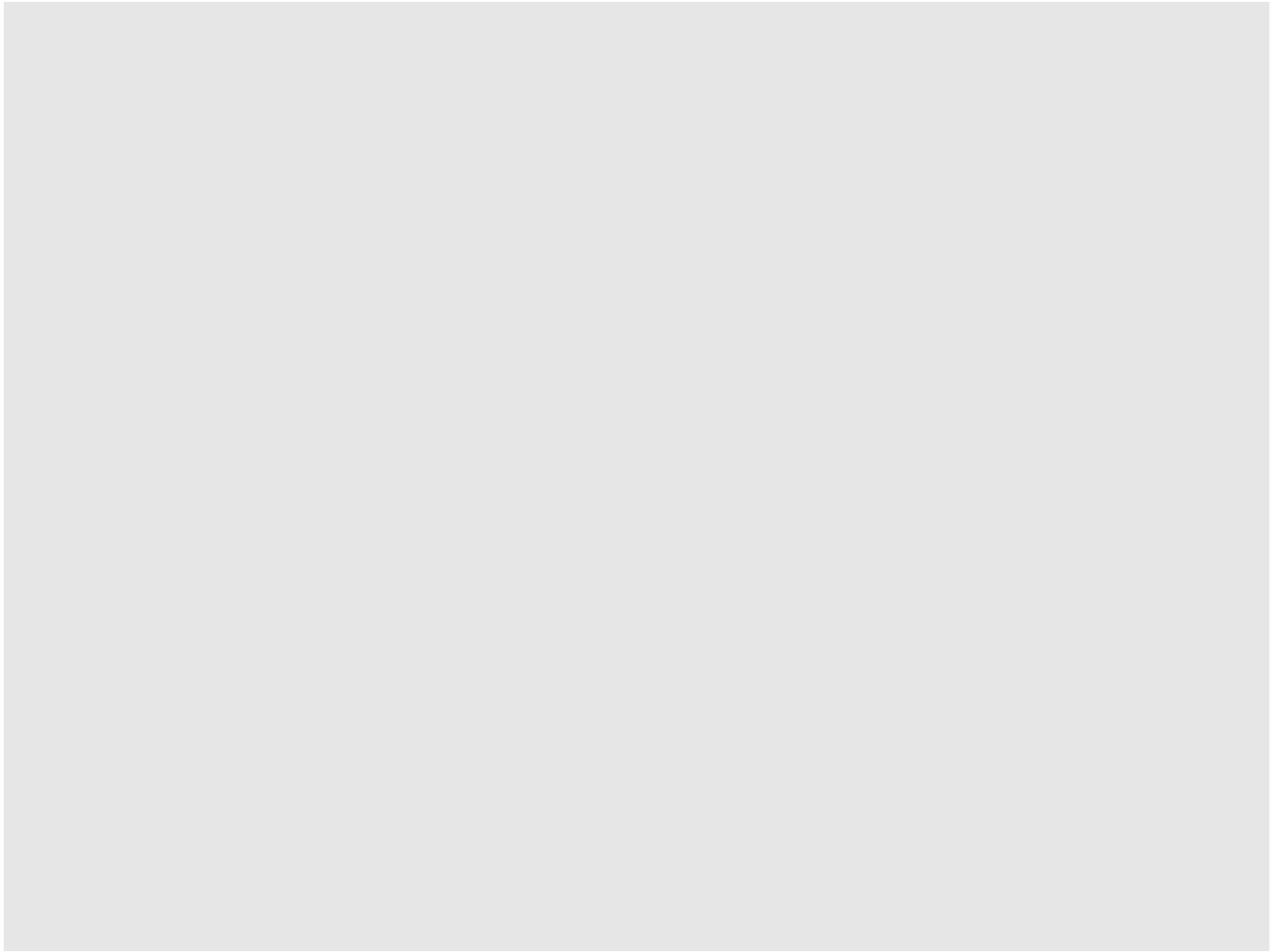


A sign outside The Rigby Pub for a Hip-Hop Collective show in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

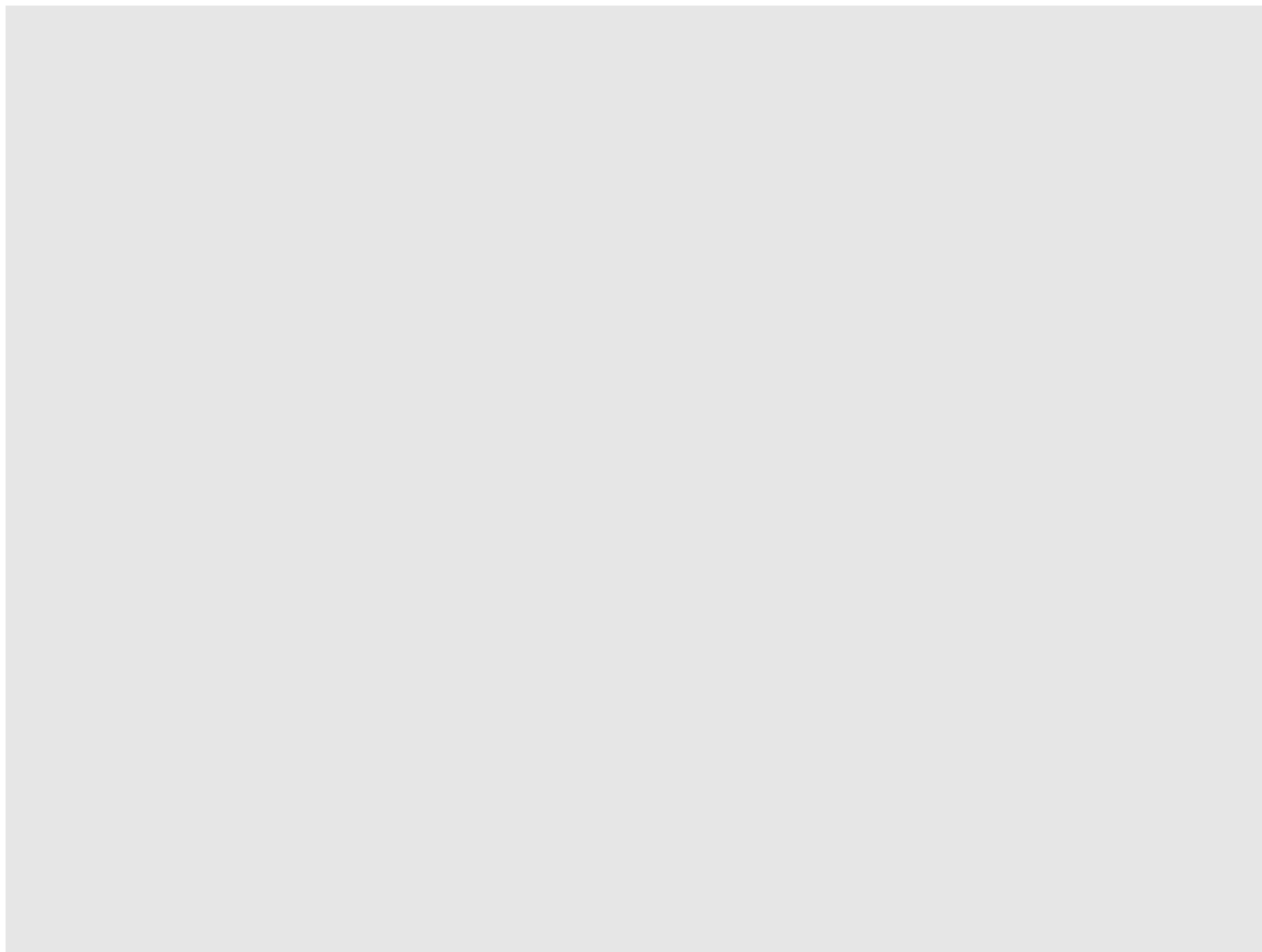


Keenan Pulz "Faded Francis" performs during a Hip-Hop Collective show hosted by Milwaukee Limited Productions. The Rigby Pub. After he struggled to book venues in Madison, Pulz would often host hip-hop shows at his house.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Shibon Evans "Soultry Shibon" performs at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue during a hip-hop and R&B show hosted by LessWork Local Lifestyle in Madison, Wis., Friday, Feb. 24, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

---

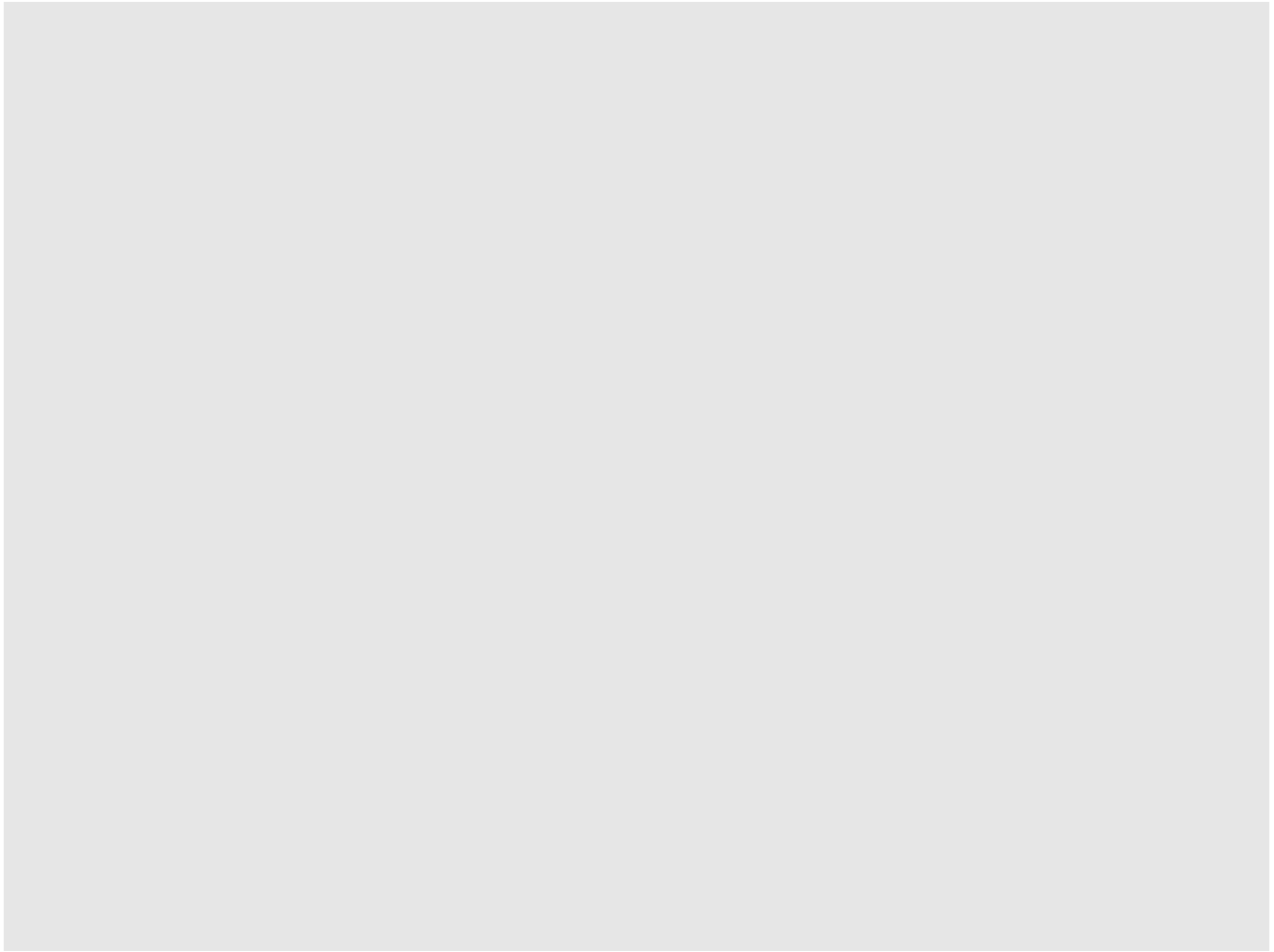


Tyler Smith "Ty Ler," left, and Ian Evans "Ice ATM," both of Madison, leave the stage to perform in the crowd during a hip-hop show hosted by Hip-Hop Collective at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

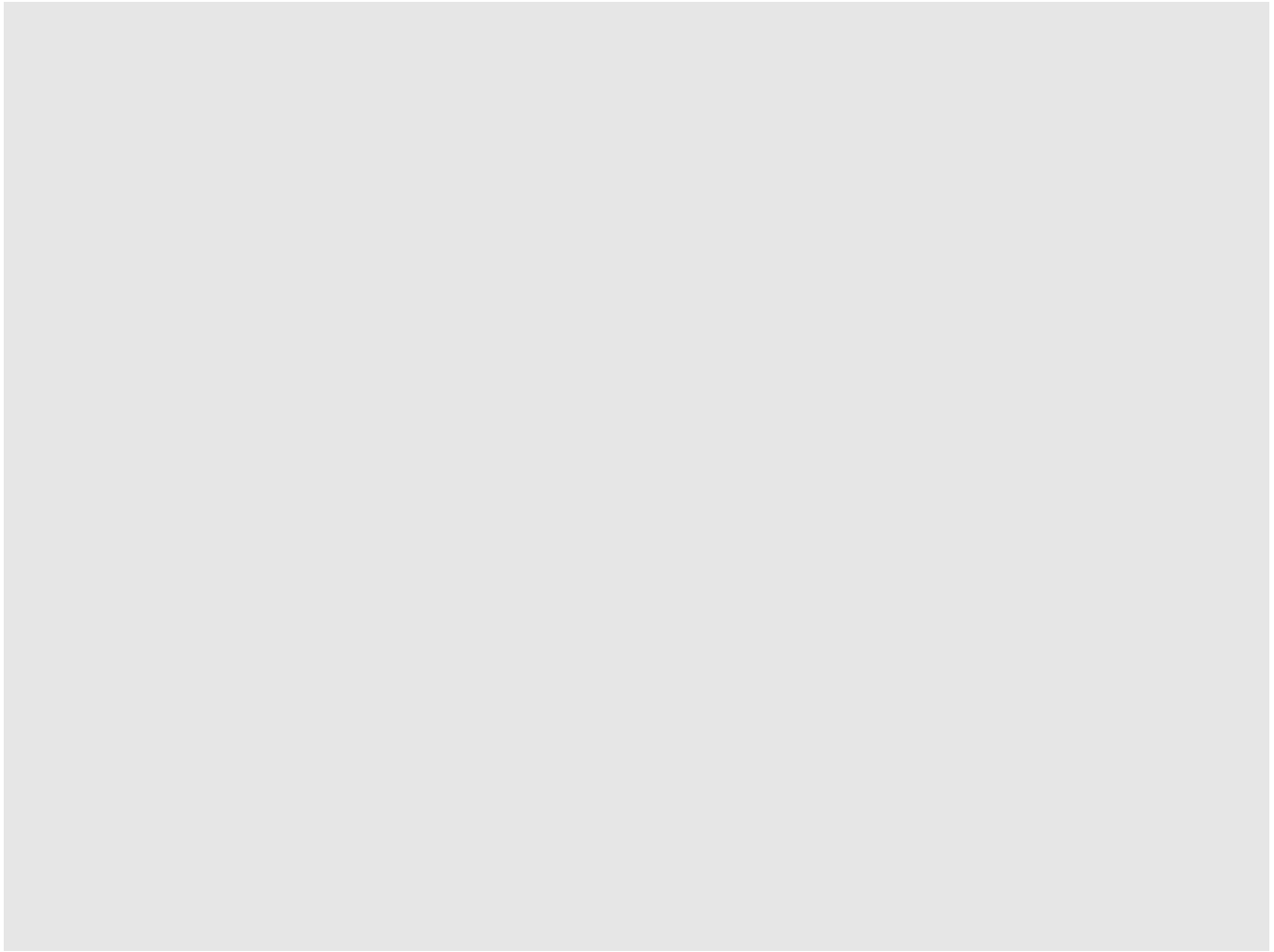


Julius Lacey "Son Em All," of Milwaukee, performs during a hip-hop show hosted by Hip-Hop Collective at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

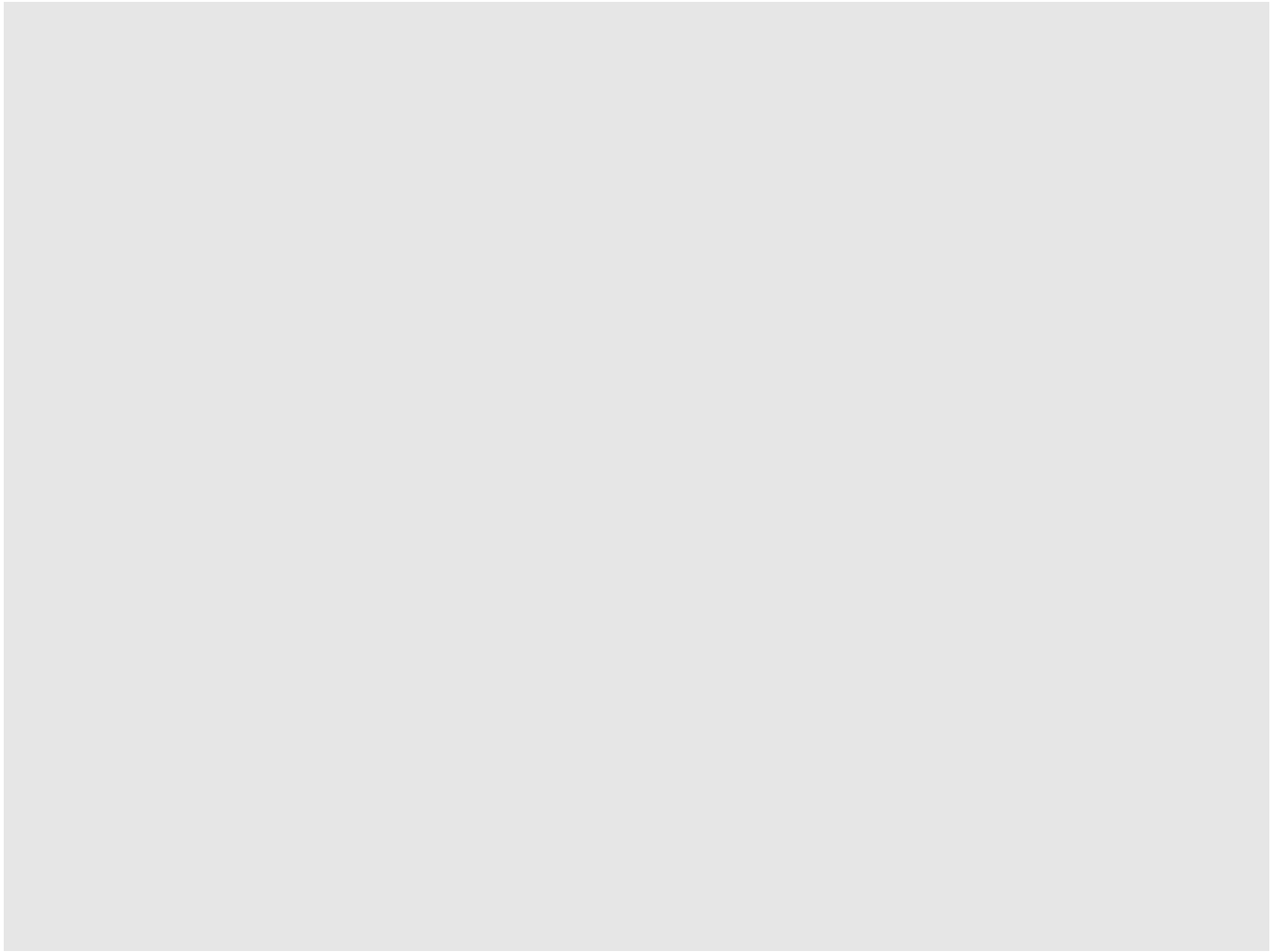


Tyler Smith "Ty Ler," left, and Ian Evans "Ice ATM," both of Madison, perform during a hip-hop show hosted by Hip-Hop Collective at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



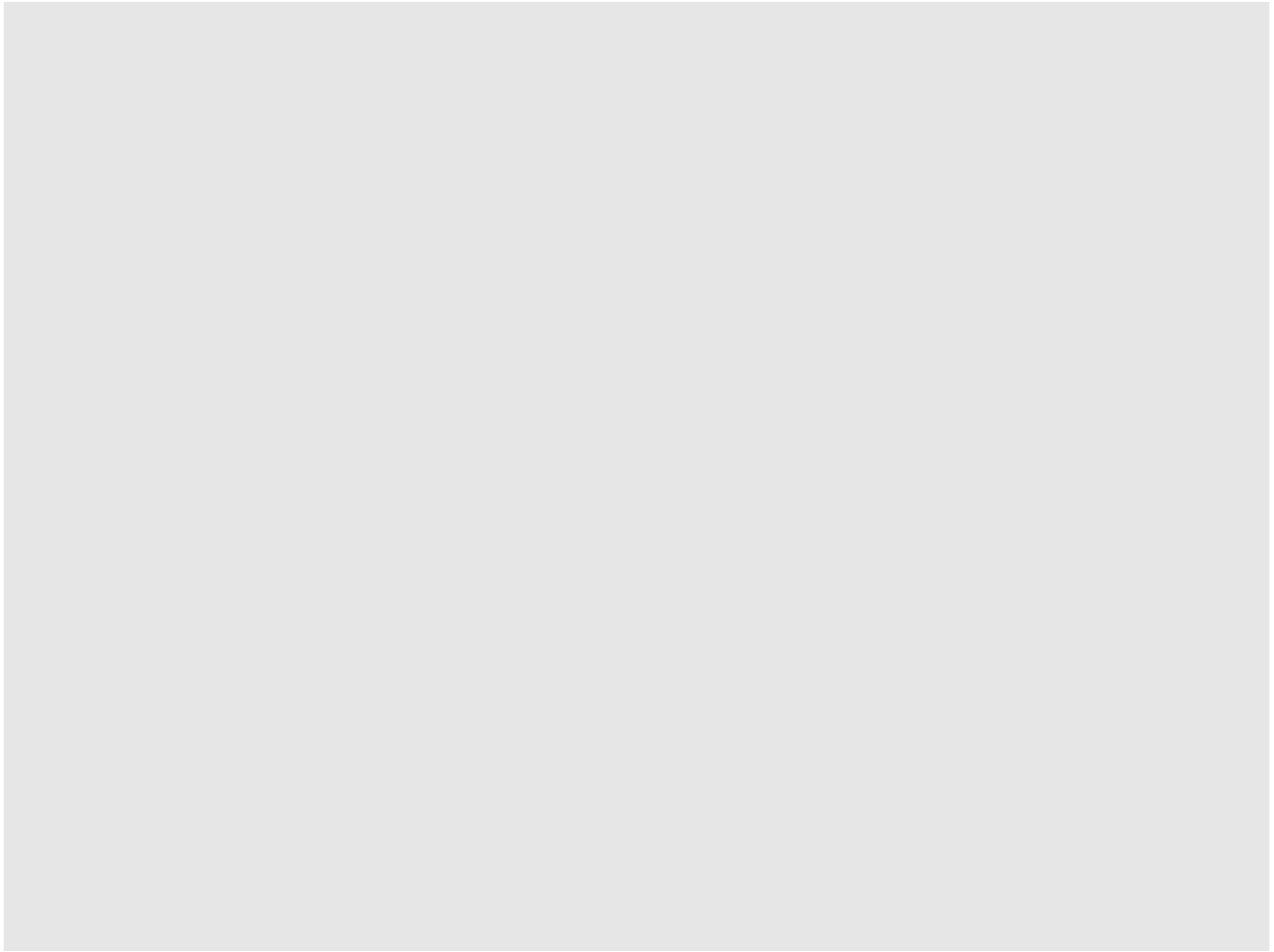
LessWork Local Lifestyle hosts a hip-hop and R&B show at Cargo Coffee. "Our bread and butter is facilitating space to make music," said Dana Perry, music coordinator for Cargo.

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



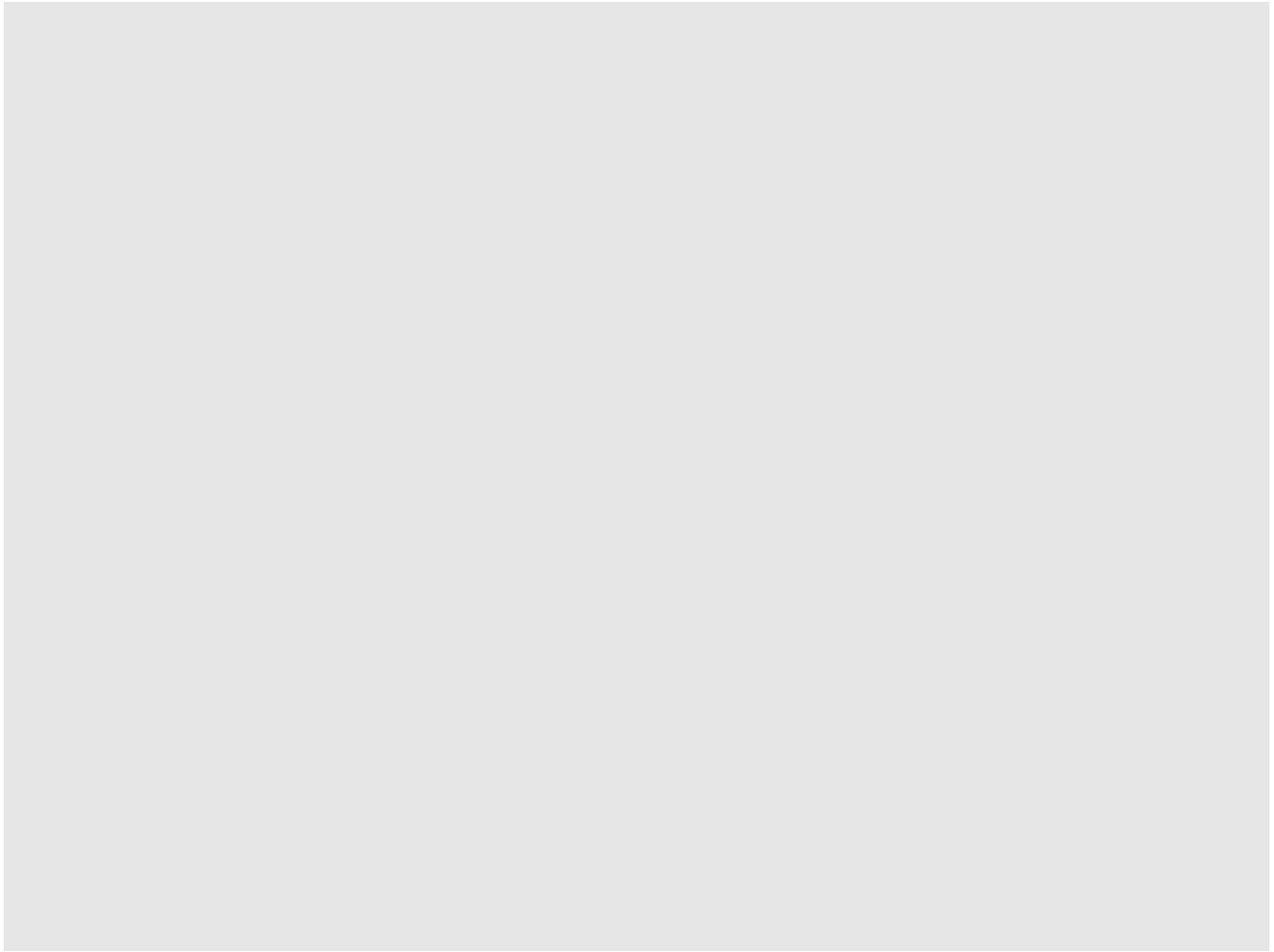


Shavanna Butcher "Goddess Nacole" performs at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue during a hip-hop and R&B show hosted by LessWork Local Lifestyle in Madison, Wis., Friday, Feb. 24, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

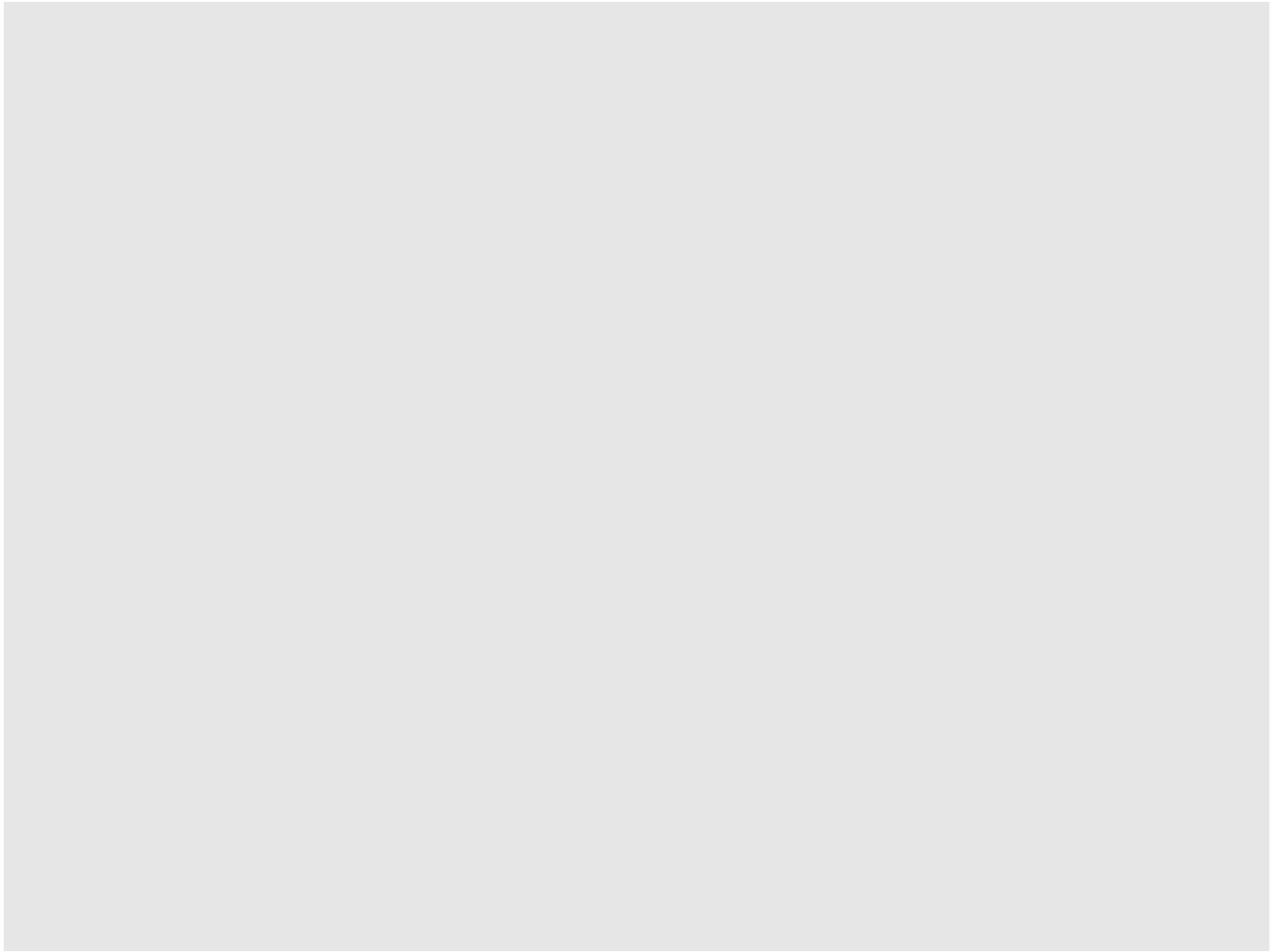


Jo Fernandez puts out t-shirts she made for hip-hop artist Keenan Pulz "Faded Francis" during a show hosted by Hip-Hop Collective at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

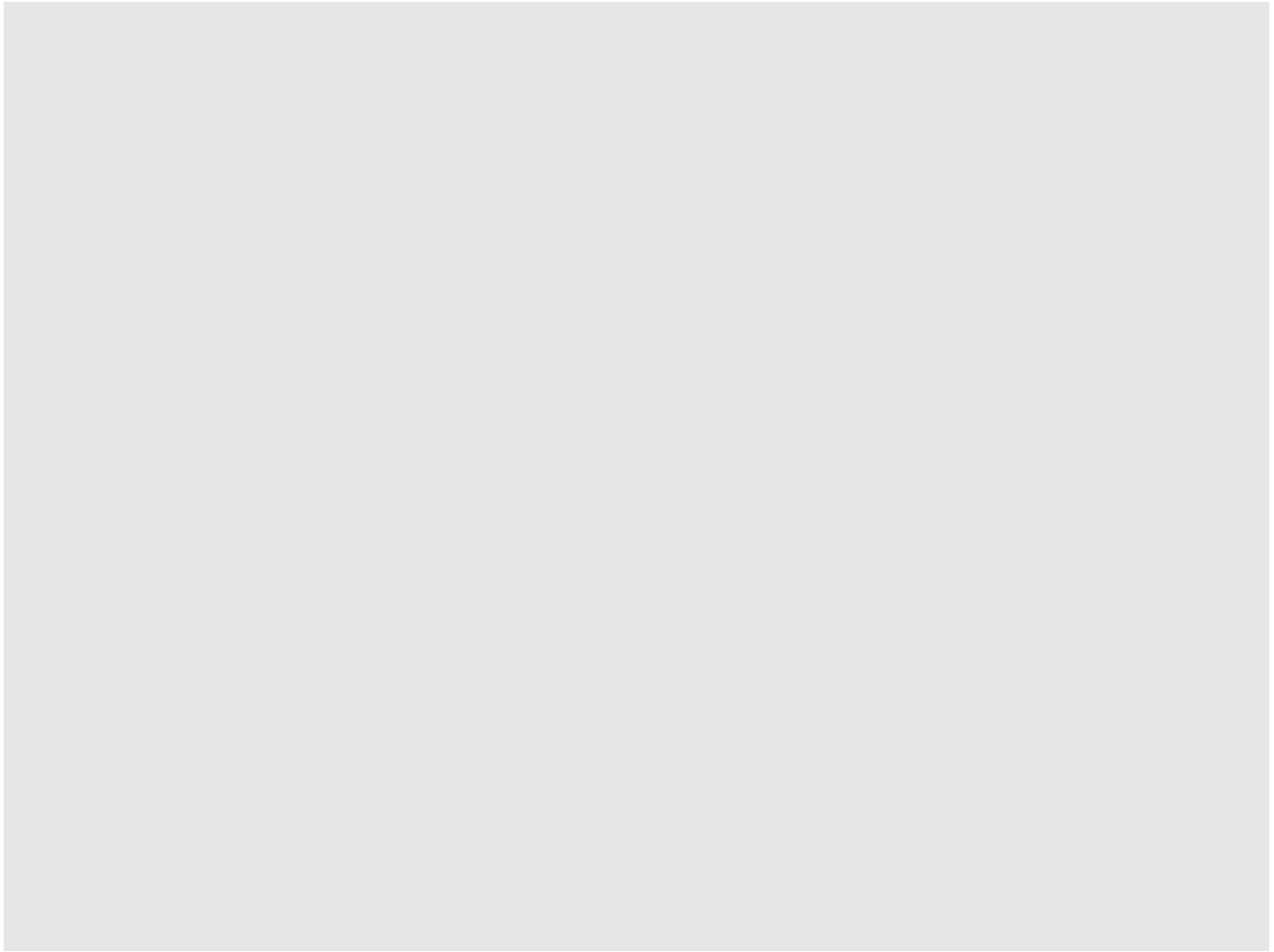
This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Hip-hop artist Breyon Sommerville "1neofmani," co-founder of LessWork Local Lifestyle, performs at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue in Madison, Wis., Friday, Feb. 24, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL  
AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

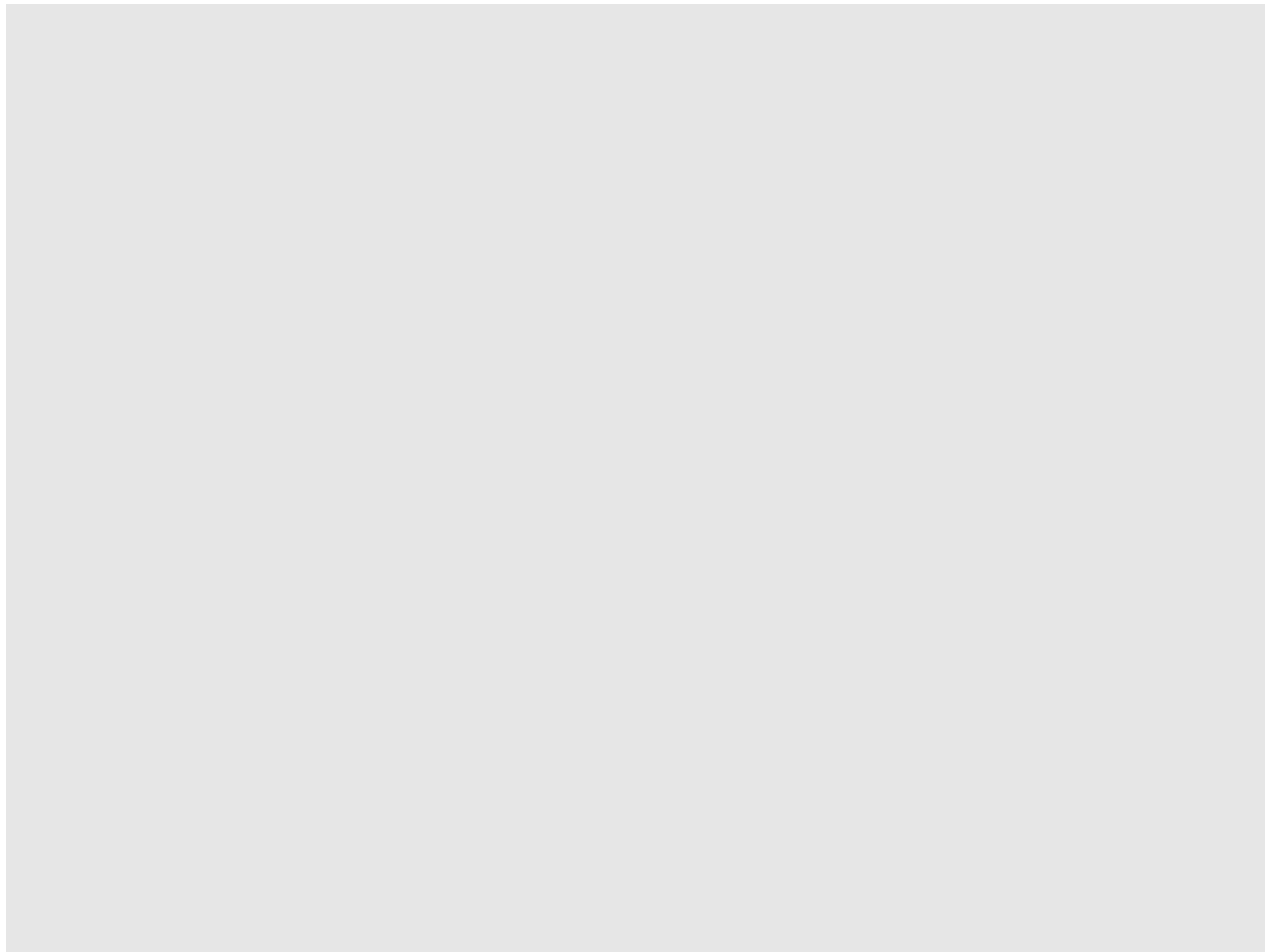


Keenan Pulz "Faded Francis" performs during a hip-hop show hosted by Hip-Hop Collective at The Rigby Pub in downtown Madison, Wis., Friday, March 17, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)



Hip-hop artists Breyon Sommerville "1neofmani," left center, and Akiya Alexander "K.I.L.O aka SkitL'z," co-founders of LessWork Local Lifestyle, say goodbye to guests at the end of the hip-hop and R&B show they hosted at Cargo Coffee on East Washington Avenue in Madison, Wis., Friday, Feb. 24, 2023. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

AMBER ARNOLD STATE JOURNAL

**By Melissa Perry**

---

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)