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New Madison songwriting conference, festival unveiled for 2017

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Roy Elkins, the CEO of the music software company Broadjam, was joined by a bevy of local musicians to announce the city's new songwriting conference and festival on Tuesday night at the Brink Lounge.

A new music conference and festival on songwriting coming in 2017 could help turn Madison into a "great music city," said organizers at a Tuesday night launch event.

The municipally funded Madison Songwriter Conference & Festival, first teased earlier this month, will be held over four days next June. Its mission, as outlined at the launch party held at the Brink Lounge, would be "to provide songwriters and composers the knowledge to pursue, the expertise to implement and tools to guide their journey to make a living making music."

Roy Elkins, the CEO of the music software company Broadjam and a principal organizer of the conference, said that the "core elements" of a great music city are already here in Madison — performers like the funk and soul drummer Clyde Stubblefield, institutions like the University of Wisconsin School of Music, history like the legacy of Smart Studios where bands like Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins would come to record music.

Building off those key ingredients, an annual event like the songwriter conference and festival could put Madison on the map, according to Elkins.

"If we do this right, Madison will be a destination," he said after the event. "If I could visualize a few years out...this is going to be one of the key destinations for sponsors in the industry to go."

The event, as the name suggests, will apparently feature two different components: a conference with education and networking, and a festival with live music.

Speakers on Tuesday said the conference will include panels, workshops, and training sessions on different elements of songcraft, as well as on skills like career management, licensing, and "how to make a living through music." Among the confirmed speakers at the conference are Garbage drummer and Nirvana producer Butch Vig, along with rocker Kip Winger.

The festival will feature musical performances at venues like the High Noon Saloon and the Brink Lounge. Elkins said the lineup would primarily be focused on local musicians, and likely wouldn't feature national headlining acts — although he said he wouldn't rule it out "if McCartney calls and says he wants to play the festival."

The conference and festival will at least partly be funded by money from the City of Madison, joining other musical events like the one-day citywide event Make Music Madison and Bandswap to get municipal funding.

In addition to presentations from Elkins, the musical entrepreneur and fellow festival organizer Corey Whitmore, and Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce president Zach Brandon, the launch party also featured close to 30 different musicians and figures in the local music scene who came to endorse the event.

One by one, the bevy of artists, producers and personalities – which included the likes of Vig, popular radio host Stu Levitan, and the drummer Joey B. Banks – came on stage or chimed in over recorded videos to give their support. Many of them repeated the hashtag-ified phrases "they need to know" and "this is Madison now."

While there was some genre diversity among the artists showcased at the event, the focus seemed largely on blues, rock and Americana acts. However, Elkins stressed that he hopes to engage musicians of all kinds at the event next summer. For example, he said that there will be a specific "track" for hip-hop artists who attend the conference.

"That's very, very important to me," he said. "I think the hip-hop community is underserved here."

The conference and festival is scheduled for June 15-18. Tickets for the conference will be about \$200, although high school students will be able to access everything for free, and some local artists may be able to get discounted tickets.

E. Lorenzsonn

Erik Lorenzsonn is the Capital Times' tech and culture reporter. He joined the team in 2016, after having served as an online editor for Wisconsin Public Radio and having written for publications like The Progressive Magazine and The Poughkeepsie Journal.