

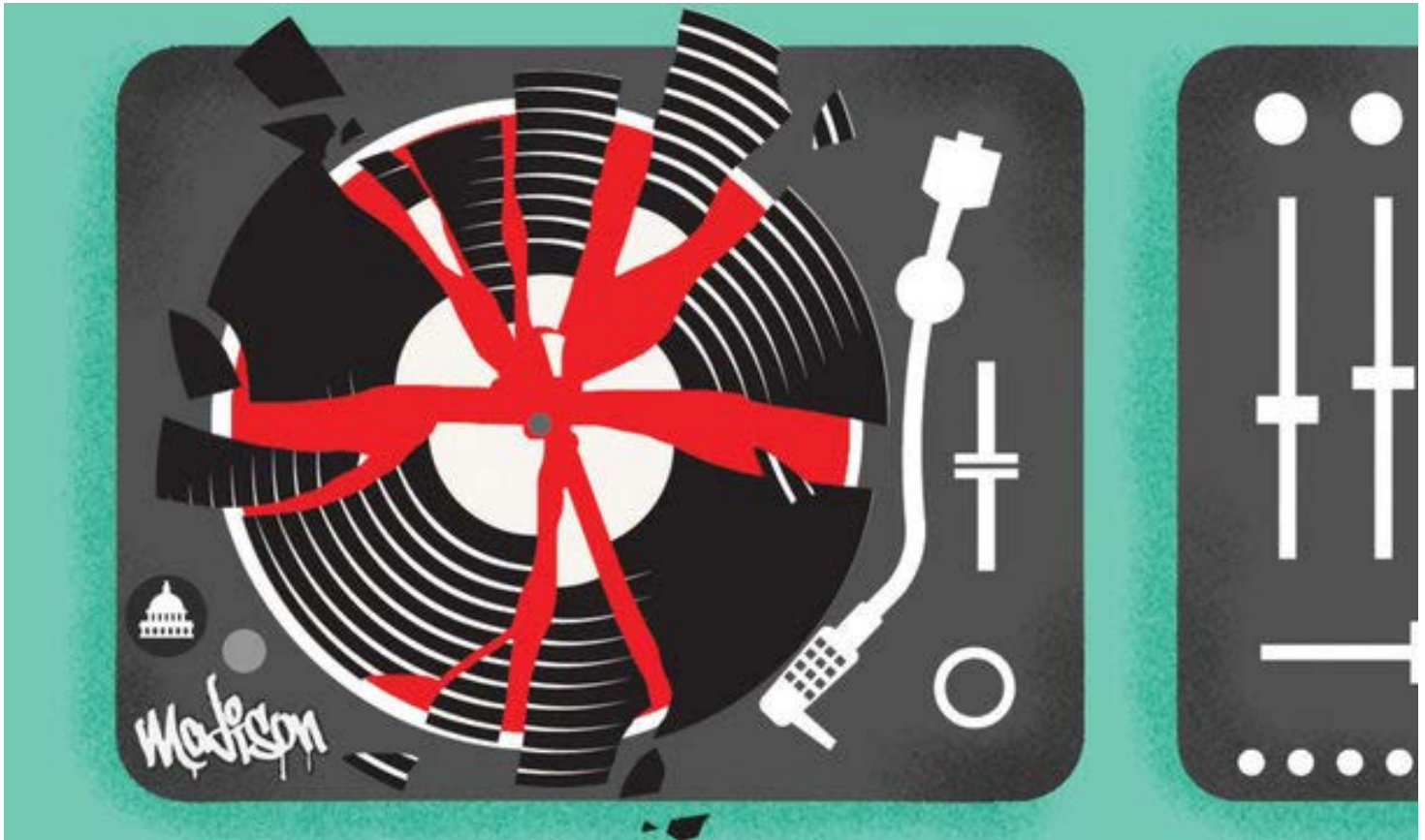
Arts and Culture

Task Force on Equity in Music and Entertainment breaks the anti-hip-hop cycle in Madison

Local hip-hop artists, fans have faced adversity

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Local hip-hop artists and fans have faced adversity in Madison in recent years. Particular clubs have periodically banned hip-hop shows, removed hip-hop records from jukeboxes and enforced dress codes that target wearers of hip-hop fashion — actions perceived by many in the local hip-hop community as discriminatory and overreacting.

“Hip-hop goes through these two- to four-year cycles where everything’s great. And then something will happen and everyone stops booking [hip-hop acts] for six months to a year,” says Karen Reece, president of the Urban Community Arts Network, better known as UCAN, and chair of the Madison Task Force on Equity in Music and Entertainment. “It’s completely devastating and it’s fragmenting. It’s difficult to build community when you’re constantly being shattered.”

That’s what a report by the task force, presented to the Madison Common Council in February, is meant to address. The group’s 31 recommendations for the city include hiring a full-time staff person to promote arts and entertainment equity, providing city and venue staff with anti-bias training, ensuring that festivals receiving city support include hip-hop performances and investing in venues and programming for hip-hop.

With the report written and submitted, the task force — which included music promoters, venue owners and city staff — completed its mission. But rather than let the report languish on a shelf, the council accepted it with the recommendation of Alderwoman Marsha Rummel to refer its authors to council staff to work on a possible implementation plan.

Rummel says she appreciates the work of the task force, which is the culmination of nearly nine years of advocacy. “Now it’s on us, as a city and community, to create diverse and inclusive nightlife with access to all types of music for all people,” she says.

Task force vice chair Robert “Rob Dz” Franklin — a local hip-hop artist and activist — agrees. “The time for people saying they’re going to do something is over,” he says. “We’re part of this community. Recognize us. Work with us.”

The task force report doesn’t include estimates of how much it would cost the city to make its recommendations a reality. Reece says she hopes a fiscal analysis can be done by the city.

“There’s mountains of data and best practices behind all the things listed in the report,” she says. But to get the city to commit will take “real momentum from the community pushing for it and coming up with a plan and saying exactly what we need financially and resource-wise to make sure it happens.”

For the past seven years, UCAN has organized an outdoor hip-hop summer concert series on the Capitol and Library Mall ends of State Street. It’s one of the few consistent events at which local hip-hop artists can perform.

“Why are we afraid to push boundaries?” Franklin asks. “To me that’s the only way we’re going to get community balance, to get people of all walks of life and voices on [an equitable] level.”