

## Turn your home into a concert venue

Musicians enliven even low-key parties

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Art Bowman clears away the tables and chairs in the den, drags out the folding chairs and transforms his Lawrenceville home into a concert hall. A musician walks in with a guitar. About 40 people show up, lay down \$20 a head and share the covered dish they've brought.

Together they all partake in a cozy evening of intimate, high-quality music.

Known as "house concerts," these evenings are a growing phenomenon around the country — and here in metro Atlanta.

Just a few weeks ago, Bowman, by day a self-employed writer on accounting trends, hosted the Wrights. They're a couple — Adam from Newnan and Shannon from LaGrange — who have appeared at the Grand Ole Opry about 20 times.

Bowman let it be known that the couple likes vegetarian food, and that made them feel welcome as they mingled and ate before the show. The Wrights' dressing room was the upstairs guest bedroom. They offered their sweet harmonies, bittersweet ballads and fun rockers beside the big-screen TV and the fireplace.

"It's really a house party that features musicians," Bowman said.

For performer and audience alike, house concerts offer meaningful shows untainted by the distractions of clubs, where the music often competes with bar blenders, pool players and chatter buzz.

Bowman makes it clear: This is a listening venue. If you want to talk about the kids' soccer game, go outside.

While house concerts have steadily grown more popular over the last decade, such shows have long been around. In the '60s, they were called "rent parties" to help starving musicians drum up money to keep a roof over their heads, said Fran Snyder, who operates a Web site that brings together hundreds of players and house-concert hosts.

A decent payday

In a way, today's house parties are bringing music back to its American roots, where people got together to share songs on a porch or in a living room, he said.

In metro Atlanta, house concerts take on different tones. Mary Jo Strickland hosts jazz artists in the living room of her cottage home in Decatur.

Like many of these hosts, Strickland is a social person who loves to entertain. She hosted her first house party a decade ago when she asked a Florida musician friend to “christen” her new piano.

People like being near the music, she said, even if they have to sit near the fridge.

“You can reach right out and touch the artist,” said Cam Graham, an east Cobb County resident who enjoyed seeing and speaking to a favorite artist of his, singer-songwriter Susan Gibson, at a local house concert.

That show was on an outside deck, and when some neighborhood kids climbed atop the fence and called out to the gathering, Gibson made up an impromptu tune about climbing fences and playing basketball.

For performers, these shows have grown from being fill-in spots between club dates to their big-money show in the town.

“I just got back from three house concerts in Utah where I made \$4,000,” said New York singer-songwriter Amy Speace, who has played house shows in Atlanta. “They are like the underground railroad for a performer.”

On a good night, a performer can earn \$1,000 playing a house party, including the sale of 20 or more CDs. Many earn only a few hundred dollars at a club.

The artists, Speace said, are incredibly grateful to the concert hosts, who are often enthusiastic music fans who don’t pocket a dime. (That’s also how hosts say they avoid breaking zoning codes in residential areas.)

Andy Ditzler, a 42-year-old library employee who plays in his own band and loves to bring friends together over music, built an extra room onto his Grant Park home for house concerts.

At his shows, the house lights really are the house lights, and the best seat in the house might be a cushion tossed on the floor.

As for Bowman, he’s always wanted to dip a toe into the music business. He likes to tell how in college he “almost managed a band.” Later he wrote music reviews for local publications.

Now he gets to run his own show with professional touring musicians. After the concert by the Wrights, the young couple, like many of the performers booked by Bowman, slept over.

And in the morning they all talked over bagels and coffee.

## STRIKE UP THE BAND

For more information on the Bowman house concerts: [www.myspace.com/bowmanhouseconcerts](http://www.myspace.com/bowmanhouseconcerts)

Mary Jo Strickland has formed a nonprofit that helps people host jazz house concerts: [www.SOJA-event.com](http://www.SOJA-event.com)

For more information on Andy Ditzler’s house concerts: [www.frequentsmallmeals.com](http://www.frequentsmallmeals.com)