

# The show must go on

YEAR  
IN  
REVIEW

Arts professionals share ups and downs of 2023

BY EDWIN ARNAUDIN

earnaudin@mountainx.com

Where were you the day the HVAC died?

In late June, the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium's heating, ventilation and air conditioning system failed, prompting the Asheville Symphony Orchestra to find a new home until repairs were made. Previously announced shows by **Nick Cave** and **Ray Lamontagne** were moved to the adjoining Harrah's Cherokee Center — Asheville, and in autumn, Asheville City Council whittled down plans to renovate the aging performing arts center to two options.

The city's arts scene also suffered a setback in June when Moog Music sold to InMusic. Three months later, a significant number of staff at the formerly employee-owned electronic instrument manufacturer were laid off.

Elsewhere, AVLfest shook off the ghost of Bele Chere, bringing a new four-day music festival to venues across the city in August; West Asheville institution Orbit DVD turned 20; and in November, Burial Beer Co. opened Eulogy, a South Slope music venue that carries on the spirit of the dearly departed The Mothlight while forging its own distinct identity.

Xpress asked six local members of the arts community to ponder the biggest issues facing the creative sector in 2023. Featured below are reflections from **Katie Cornell**, executive director of ArtsAVL; **Marcus "Mook" Cunningham**, recording artist and co-founder of Urban Combat Wrestling; **Silas Durocher**, vocalist/guitarist for The Get Right Band; **Bob Hinkle**, founder and CEO of White Horse Black Mountain; **Stephanie Moore**, executive director of the Center for Craft; and **Kevin Patrick Murphy**, founder of The Actor's Center of Asheville.



**CREATIVE TRUST:** Clockwise from top left, Katie Cornell, Marcus "Mook" Cunningham, Silas Durocher, Kevin Patrick Murphy, Stephanie Moore and Bob Hinkle reflect on local arts happenings over the past year. Photos courtesy of the artists

## What recurring themes did you notice within the local arts scene in 2023?

**Moore:** The arts continue to rebuild, yet this year in particular reflects a renaissance of innovative approaches. We are all trying to figure out how to get audiences back into our spaces.

The free ArtsAVL trolley connecting downtown to RAD is a fun way to encourage exploration. Several inventive offerings popped up, like Asheville Community Theatre's *Bat Boy* and the Center for Craft's *Krafthouse 2023*. Many new art spaces have increased their programming to provide important resources. Story Parlor and The Residency at 821 offer artist residencies to emerging and established artists.

Revolve [Gallery] has been hosting programs with organizations like Youth Outright and Campaign for Southern Equality. Connections are being made between all areas of our local art scene to grow and engage our community in new ways.

**Hinkle:** As a venue manager/booker, I've noticed that customers are regularly buying tickets for shows on the day of the event, unlike in the past when it was not uncommon to sell the majority earlier. Also, I happily note even more of an openness on the part of audiences toward music of different cultures and genres.

**Cornell:** One 2023 theme is the major impact visitor behavior has on local arts businesses. This year's national Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 report revealed that drops in nonlocal attendees in 2021-22 caused economic activity generated from local nonprofit arts events to drop 26% from the previous study. A recent survey by ArtsAVL also showed that drops in tourism this summer/fall led to major sales losses for arts businesses downtown and in the River Arts District.

**Murphy:** The recurring theme that I noticed in my medium, fortunately, was more female-run and -supported

projects. Women are directing, producing and booking jobs. ... And in general, there's a movement toward an open attitude and exploring more diversity.

**Cunningham:** Within my medium, being wrestling and hip-hop, I saw a huge combination of hip-hop and LGBTQ+ event collaborations. Whether wrestling and hip-hop, wrestling and drag, drag and hip-hop — it was awesome to see this.

**Durocher:** I think 2023 was the first "normal" year of gigging since the [COVID-19] pandemic. Venues, bands and audiences seemed to pretty much operate normally through the year, which has been a relief. As far as trends go, year by year I'm noticing a lot more bands releasing singles instead of albums and sometimes just doing digital releases instead of manufacturing CDs. It makes sense — things have been heading that direction for years — but it seems like a lot of people made the switch over the last year or two.

## What local arts initiative deserved greater recognition than it received this year?

**Murphy:** More attention needs to be paid toward education of children in the arts. Schools are cutting music and theater programs from basic education, and if that's going to continue to be the case, the artistic community needs to provide the opportunity. For example, The Actor's Center just started a scholarship fund specifically to help people who may not be exploring acting training because they can't afford it or their school doesn't provide it.

**Cunningham:** The local hip-hop scene. I feel this is a repeatedly overlooked community of Asheville and is hugely missing from the lineups in Asheville festivals. There is also no real local hub for artists in this genre, except unpaid open mics or the artists themselves paying to be a part of shows.

**Moore:** Designer **Sala Menaya**, who is involved with Noir Collective, organized a fashion show, "Asheville Black Excellence Experience," at the Foundry Hotel, which honored several leaders in our community. I found it to be such a thoughtful way to highlight her work and draw attention to so many important people working hard for Asheville every day.

**Durocher:** I'm a big fan of Music Video Asheville. I'm not saying the event doesn't get a lot of recognition but I'd love to see more and more people showing up every year. It seems like it's mostly attended by people who were involved in making the videos, but I think a ton of people would enjoy the event. I love making and watching music videos. MVA is such a cool and

FIELD GUIDE  
TO  
Asheville  
NEW EDITION  
COMING SOON  
CONTACT US TODAY! • ADVERTISE@MOUNTAINX.COM