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# THE MUSICIAN'S GUIDE TO HOUSE CONCERTS

Practical advice and great ideas to get your house concert dreams off the ground



By Fran Snyder



*This guide is made up of excerpts from Fran Snyder's forthcoming book, **House Concerts and Modern Touring for the Troubadour**.*

## **House Concerts: the lifeboats of the music industry?**

Just ask, and you'll find many artists who will tell you they simply could not tour without the added financial support of house concerts along the way. Keep digging, and you'll discover that money is just the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface we find that house concerts are bringing artists (literally) closer to their fans. Sometimes they even help artists rediscover what they enjoy most about playing music: an intimate connection with an audience.

### **What are house concerts?**

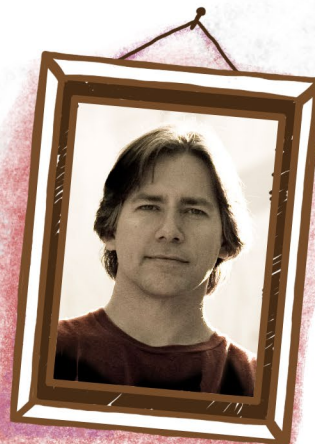
House concerts are private events in the homes of music fans. Friends, neighbors, and acquaintances are typically invited to attend a two-set performance and make a suggested donation of \$10-20 per person. Often there's a pot luck dinner or dessert, and it's not unusual for guests to bring a beverage along with their favorite dish.

### **What's the big deal?**

Well, one of the key benefits of playing house concerts is the ability to play in markets where you don't have a significant fan base. Play a public venue and you are expected to draw a crowd (or sell a lot of booze). Play a house concert and you are expected to be kind, fun, and damn good. Although house concerts usually welcome some local friends/fans of the artist, for privacy, safety, and legal reasons, the promotion is best done by hosts and their close friends.

### **And here's the really big deal**

You get all the money. You get dinner and a place to stay. House concert hosts are volunteers and the most important new patrons of the arts. They host events because they love the music, and they love impressing their friends with concerts in their homes. There are thousands of them around the world. And now, the tools exist for artists to pitch the idea to their fans.



## Playing in homes is not for everyone

If you are interested in playing house concerts, it is important to look at the advantages and disadvantages of your situation.

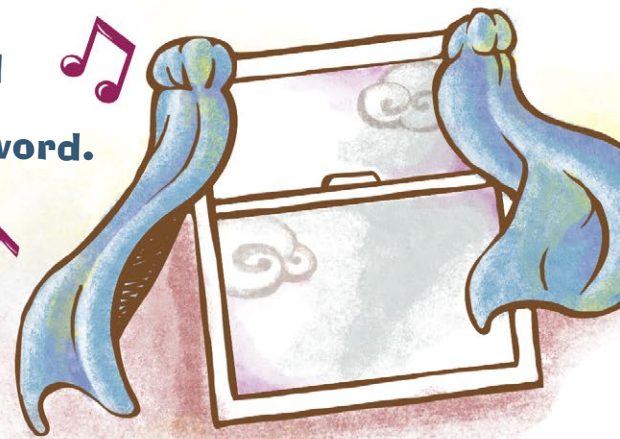
Most house concerts take place in average living rooms, with little or no PA provided. These shows are attended by people who will want to talk to you. They might sit within three feet of you, and they will be looking at you and listening to every word. This is not for shy artists. This is not for smelly artists. This is not for prima donnas. This is (usually) not for a full drum kit, backline, and entourage.

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**This is not for smelly artists.**

**This is not for prima donnas.**



It is unfortunate that women, of course, face additional risks, and for this we advocate that women travel in pairs, or stay with referred hosts whenever possible.

## Safety for hosts

In terms of personal safety, the risks for hosts are a little different, since artists are typically public figures. These risks are mostly associated with the potential for dealing with drug or alcohol abuse, dealing with night owls, and having a few unruly fans show up. These risks go up significantly if the host makes the mistake of promoting their shows publicly.

If you're looking at websites that support these events, you'll also find that the majority of house concerts feature folk/acoustic original music.

## Safety for artists

First, for touring artists, we know that safety is a relative term. We know that talented artists occasionally forego a hotel once in a while to save money, and sleeping in your car at a rest area or in a parking lot has its own safety risks. Even when staying in hotels, travel involves uncertainty and requires some vigilance.

Staying in the homes of untested strangers should also involve some steps to minimize risk. Do you have mutual friends? Can you check each other out on Facebook?

Many artists are now familiar with sites like [Couchsurfing.com](http://Couchsurfing.com), and online communities like [ConcertsInYourHome.com](http://ConcertsInYourHome.com) typically build in recommendation systems that provide testimonials from previous meetings.

## Why are house concerts having such a dramatic impact on the tours of small acts?

It's important to look at some important trends that are not often discussed in music circles.

### 1. Demographics

There was a time when teenagers were the most important market for most genres of music. If you want to sell CDs, that time is gone. If you want to sell to kids, you need to be on the cutting edge of technology, and find a way to sell digital items to digital natives. However, we have this massive population of middle-aged folks who own homes, have some money, and have spent 30-50 years buying LPs, cassettes, and CDs... they like taking home souvenirs after the show. Furthermore, they are often empty-nesters with at least one guest room and a desire to have more people around, and most of their friends are just like them.



It's no accident that acts from the '60s, '70s, and '80s are still powerful concert draws and unavoidable on the radio. The baby boomers are kicking your teeny bopper audience's ass.

## 2. Live music ain't all that's out there

In the past few decades, we've invented hundreds of new diversions, and most of them you can experience without getting off your couch. Most people now go to one or two shows a year. This means that the audience for any particular event (live music or otherwise) is shrinking.

## 3. Ahem, profits?

What happens when you build a touring infrastructure in the booming '70s and '80s and try to fill it in the slowing '00s and '10s? You have too many acts playing half-empty rooms, putting enormous promotional strain on the venues and the artists. Costs of traditional promotion continue to be expensive while the returns continue to diminish. Run a print ad for your next show if you want proof.

## 4. Label support

What's that? Most touring acts have to develop new markets without any significant money or people behind them. That can be costly and depressing. Without a support system for developing artists, music fans and public venues will be worse off.

## House concerts are good news

By forgoing venue profits, embracing small acts, and serving older and smaller audiences, house concerts are now the best vehicle to get artists on the road without losing money. House concerts create an easy way for the massive middle and upper class baby boomer generation to become patrons of the arts. They don't have to write five-figure checks, they just take in an artist they admire for one night. House concert hosts are also frequent contributors to fan-funding projects. Good friends to have!

Younger fans are getting into this too. While they may not be affluent, they can sometimes be great promoters.

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Plus, many are learning that they can help their favorite acts by putting on small shows during the week. A small living room can usually accommodate 15 people, and that can be a great alternative to competing with an espresso machine at the local cafe.

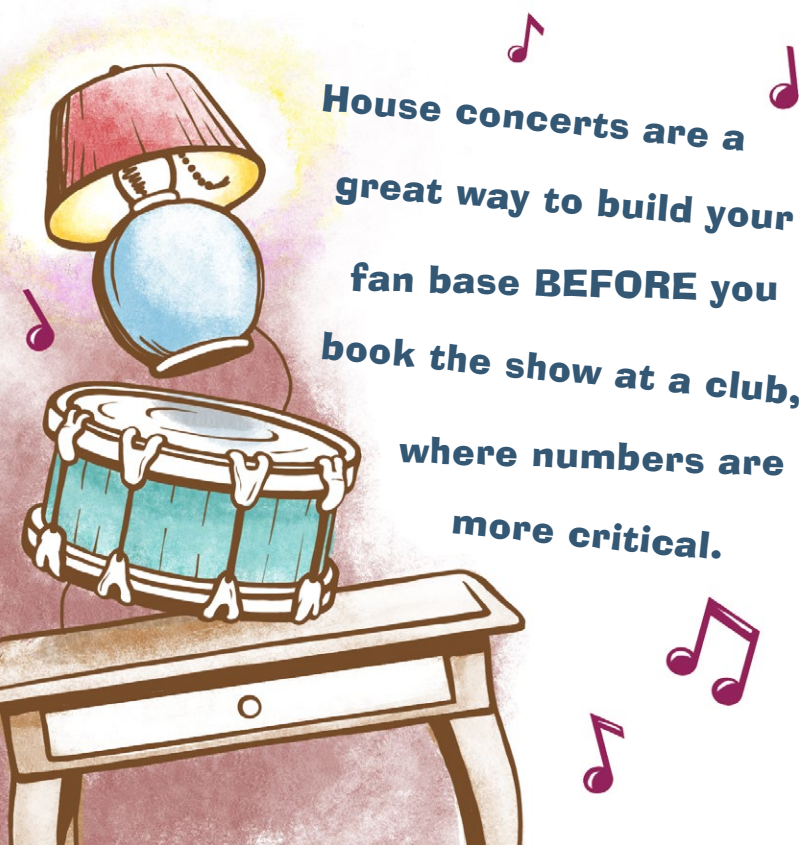
### How small are we talking about?

We have seen fruitful, fun evenings with as few as 10 attendees. Consider the value of: a free place to stay, a show you didn't have to promote, friendships, dinner, the opportunity to play for an attentive audience who wants to hear your original music, return invitations, and other perks.

After you factor those benefits in, how much money do you need to make for it to be a worthwhile evening? How many people's attention would you actually have at a club or coffeehouse? The usual target for the number of attendees is 25-35 people, and many house concerts draw more.

### What about public venues?

House concerts are a great way to build your fan base BEFORE you book the show at a club, where numbers are more critical. It doesn't do you, the club, or the audience any good to play for a half-empty room. Not all house concert attendees will go to late night shows at rock clubs, but intimate, good-sounding rooms often appeal to these folks.



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### What if I tour as a full band?

Although there is an underground scene for "house shows," there is less of a tradition for treating these acts as professionals. House shows usually cater to indie bands, and the party atmosphere tends to bring in less money. At [ConcertsInYourHome](#), we have found the distinction between "house concerts" and "house shows" to be a meaningful one. We like to emphasize the word "concert" to give a strong cue to the audience about the expected atmosphere.

If you are in a band, and want to supplement your tours with house concerts, figure out how to make the band small enough for a living room. Once you get the amps and kit in, most living rooms won't have any room left for the audience. Create an "unplugged" or a two-person show.

If you do have fans that want to do a full band show - in their basement, for example - be sure to minimize the risks they are taking. If your shows invite a mosh-pit, drug use, heavy-drinking, or aggression, you'll be putting hosts at risk. House damage and lawsuits are no way to thank your fans.

### DinnerAndSong and DessertAndSong... Meaningful shows on weeknights?

House concerts tend to happen on weekends. The traditional format of two sets and potluck dinner can stretch these shows into three-hour events, which is too much of a commitment for hosts and attendees who have to go to work the next day. Since 2010, two new formats, [DinnerAndSong](#) and [DessertAndSong](#), have made it easier to create in-home concerts on weeknights. DinnerAndSong is the most intimate, requiring only 8-12 attendees. They have a simple but enjoyable meal with the artist, and then a 40-minute concert following. The essential difference is that Dinner/DessertAndSong concerts are one-set performances.

DessertAndSong is the simplest and most flexible format, allowing the host to simply get a few pies and brew some decaf. Since the audience doesn't have to gather around the dinner table, it also allows larger crowds to attend if the demand is there.

Another great advantage to these events is that they require even less setup. For a 40-minute show, many

people are comfortable leaning against a wall, and you don't have to rearrange furniture to set up neat rows of chairs. The DinnerAndSong is so intimate that it makes carting in a sound system almost silly.

The smaller audiences and donations for weeknight shows are usually more than offset by the benefits, when you consider the other choices available. Would you rather play a coffeehouse, pay for your sandwich, and then hunt for a hotel?

At [ConcertsInYourHome](#), we encourage all new hosts to start with small exclusive events like DinnerAndSong. If they limit attendees, they can turn away people who don't RSVP right away. That is the absolute best way to build a buzz about a series and put it on the path to successful and sustainable growth.

When you consider how little of the general population know about house concerts, despite the fact that more than 10,000 of these events\* happen each year, it's difficult to overstate their potential impact. It's always been incredibly

difficult to keep an artist's career afloat, and the music industry reminds some people of the Titanic. If that is so, you might consider house concerts as the lifeboats.

## Workshops and lessons

If you are willing to do small shows, a great way to enhance their value is by creating an educational aspect to it. Are you an expert on Travis picking or clawhammer? Maybe you love to teach singers to open up their voice more. Maybe you have extra hand-drums that would make a fun drum lesson. People will pay more when they get to participate.

## Understanding your value to your fans

An artist reached out and told me that "it feels a bit like begging" when he asks fans to host concerts for him. *Ouch.*

It has always been a challenge for artists to maintain their self-esteem in light of the constant rejection (or worse, no response) that booking work involves. There is always room to improve our art – but let's get some perspective.

\* Conservative estimate based on the major sites and the fact that most house concerts are done direct-to-fan. The number could be as high as 100,000 events in 2013.



## You are not asking for a favor

What if, instead of asking for a favor, you were offering a special, exclusive opportunity for your fans to enjoy you and your music in a truly remarkable way? Isn't that what you are doing when you email them about house concerts?

## What you do is valuable

One of the things we often see from new members at [ConcertsInYourHome](#) is the desire to tap into "the existing network of house concerts" as if that should be the primary source of new gigs. Certainly, there is a lot of opportunity there, but our most successful artists leverage their relationships with fans to create many more opportunities.

## Here are some of the advantages of booking house concerts with your fans:

1. You aren't competing with other artists for their attention or commitment.
2. A great first show can often be turned into an annual event, something that is harder to accomplish with existing hosts who may already have a couple of annual acts and/or other artists who've attracted their interest for future shows.
3. Gigs can be booked more quickly with your fans (within weeks or a few months sometimes),

whereas experienced hosts are typically booking 4-8 months out or more.

4. Fans are often "friends" and make the show that much sweeter by providing an opportunity to reconnect a friendship as well as play music.
5. Fans/friends can sometimes be very passionate advocates to promote your show to their friends.

To reiterate the strategy, you are working to inspire people to the upper stratosphere of engagement with you. Although experienced hosts sometimes become ardent supporters, your existing friends and fans are the most likely prospects to get to that level.

For house concerts and for high-level support of your career, there is no greener pasture than your existing fans. Don't leave them behind.

## Negotiating an agreement

House concerts rarely involve contracts. Emails are sufficient as a digital handshake, but they should clearly state the expectations of each party.

Many artists are more comfortable asking for a minimum number of attendees rather than a minimum dollar guarantee. Either way, your expectations and hopes should be clear to the host and theirs to you.

## Money

Artists typically get a suggested dollar amount per guest, and it's often good to suggest a range. \$10-15 per person, or \$15-20 per person are most common.

Sometimes that amount can be against a guarantee. (e.g. \$200 or collected donations, whichever is greater.) In this case, if the donations totaled \$150, the host would kick in an extra \$50 at the end of the night. Typically, merchandise sales do not count toward the guarantee.

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We occasionally see hosts who are willing to pay a flat fee. They do this typically because they are uncomfortable asking their friends to contribute. The challenge with this is it can mean that the guests will be less “invested” in the show, and it might be more challenging to get or keep their attention. In short, it’s more like a party arrangement, and the result can be the same atmosphere.

## Terms of cancellation

Experienced hosts, not to mention a newbie fan, may not consider how to handle a cancellation if it becomes necessary. “The show must go on ethic” is not always strong, and sometimes the situation makes it impossible. Regardless, it’s up to the professional (the artist) to feel out the commitment and suggest a remedy ahead of time for such occasions. A small cancellation fee if the show is canceled within six weeks of the performance is sometimes negotiable.

## The date

Make sure you communicate the date as well as the day. Wednesday, February 4th, for example. This is a great way to prevent mistakes. “Wait, the 4th is a Tuesday, you meant the 5th, right?”

## The format

Since there are options for the house concert format, it’s important to suggest the best one for each occasion, and to be clear with the host what the show entails. One set or two?

## Dinner

Will dinner be before or after the show? Are you confident about your arrival time? Do you snack or eat before the show? Will you prefer to snack from the pot luck after the concert?

## The things you might forget to ask

### 1. Pets

Are you allergic to pets? Check with the host about their home BEFORE you confirm the gig.

### 2. Food

Are you veggie or vegan? Lactose intolerant? Do you require meat with every meal? Allergic to nuts? If you want to do a lot of house concerts, flexibility is key. Be prepared to try new things, or bring your backup foods.

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Many hosts enjoy the challenge of preparing something special for an artist, but usually, they have enough on their hands with the promotion and setup of the show. Be accommodating, or make it clear from the start that feeding you can be a challenge.

### 3. Inviting your friends

While many hosts are happy to welcome friends of the artist in their home, permission should always be asked. All guests should RSVP, and artists need to make a distinction between inviting people they know, as opposed to everyone on their mailing list. Be prepared to assume responsibility for the behavior of your friends while they are at the concert. If your friends are likely to show up drunk or stoned, or to get that way during the show, you are increasing the liability of the host if something goes wrong.

### 4. Time before the show

If you require some quiet time before the start of the performance, you should ask the host about this when you book the show. They might not realize that some artists can't go straight from gregarious guest to marvelous musician at the drop of a hat. Similarly, you should create a pocket of time to be friendly and social before and after the show. Hosts typically do this because they love to spend time with artists. Don't treat them like it's their job to accommodate you.

## How to create house concerts with your fans

### Your website

If you want to do house concerts on a regular basis, there should be a page on your website that describes what a house concert with YOU will be like. That page should have some pictures, video, testimonials, and should lay out the basics with a link to find more info or ask questions.

### Make a video

Invite 10 friends over and stage a show at your place or at a friend's. Ask three of your friends to shoot video with their iPhones. Make sure there's a lamp or two nearby so that your face will be visible. Find a loitering teenager and ask her to put the clips together with iMovie. Upload your single-song videos to YouTube. Done.

### Create a story

Are you asking a single friend to host a show for you? Are you planning a touring adventure? Are you offering a limited opportunity to only your most special fans? Context creates value. Make your house concerts part of something bigger and cooler. Maybe it is a "fan appreciation" program and you only do one per month. Make people get in line to host a show for you.

### Social media

Tell your house concert story. Take and share pictures, quotes, video, and your personal feelings about how these events resonate with you.

### Mailing list form

If house concerts are important to you, be sure to include a box on your mailing list form. "Would you like a concert in your home?" Some people will say "yes." Follow up.

### Promo card

Do you have a nice picture of yourself playing a house concert? A 4"X6" glossy postcard is a great thing for your merch table. Add a few quotes and an invitation for them to visit the house concert page on your website. Make sure everyone who buys a CD gets one.

### Tour gaps

Tell your fans where you want to go. Show them how they can help you get there. Do this on your house concert page and share it. Update it regularly and fans will notice.

Here's a great example: Edie Carey really leaned into house concerts a few years ago. When you looked at the touring schedule on her website, you often saw entries that were asking for gigs right in the middle of the already booked shows. For example:

- March 12th, Eddie's Attic, Decatur, GA 7pm
- March 13th, Looking for house concert, south GA
- March 14th, Looking for house concert, north FL
- March 15th, Hideaway Cafe, St. Petersburg FL 8pm

This is a great way to make your website work for you.

## Hosting House Concerts

Yes, artists do this too! For artists who perform house concerts, there are huge benefits to hosting at least a few shows. Here are just a few of the ways that performers can benefit by hosting house concerts.

### 1. Plant seeds in your community

If you want people in your home town to host shows for you, there's no better way than to invite them to experience such an event at your place or at a friend's house. Be the host, not the performer, so that everyone is clear that you aren't doing this for yourself. The best way to inspire generosity is to be generous. Let them learn from your example. Host a small weeknight event if you need to keep weekends open for your own gig opportunities.

### 2. Learn what hosts go through so you can better anticipate their needs when you perform

There are lots of little mistakes that performers and hosts can make when putting on events. Each of these mistakes can lessen the impact of the show and reduce

the performer's income. Knowing how to play both roles (performer and host) will quickly make you an expert in the house concert world, where you can make the most of each opportunity.

### 3. Network with artists you admire

Make a list of 20 approachable artists that you really admire, artists you'd love to open for. Look at their website, spot the nearby gaps in their touring schedules, and email them an offer to host a show for them. It could be even more beneficial than scoring an opening slot for them at your local venue.

When playing the dual role of hosting artist, it's important to tread lightly when socializing with the performer, or asking if you can open the show. Hosting house concerts should come from a place of generosity, not need or quid pro quo. If you do ask your invited performer if you can open the show, do it up front, and please consider:

1. You should have a professional site/page to put the performer at ease that your quick set will not be a drag on the show. (No one likes to fake enjoyment of another performer.)

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2. Limit your performance to two quick songs, and keep your intros short. It's usually best not to create a second intermission by adding a gap between the opener and the headliner's first set. Plus, you want to make sure that you aren't forcing the audience to go an hour without a break.
3. Acceptance of your house concert offer does not imply that you are entitled to co-writes or career coaching from the artist. Watch their eyes and demeanor when you ask questions. If they seem tired, back off.

House concerts (and their newer variations) have become the most cherished concerts for many professional artists, but they aren't for everyone. Artists need to be comfortable in close quarters, without much privacy, and generally enjoy being around people.

## House concert sites and networks

Prior to 2006, there were only a handful of websites that listed house concerts and artists. Since then, professional networks were developed to create tours and provide enhanced services and information. In addition, sites like [Meetup.com](http://Meetup.com), [Ning](http://Ning), and [Facebook](http://Facebook) have allowed informal house concert communities to link up and promote themselves.

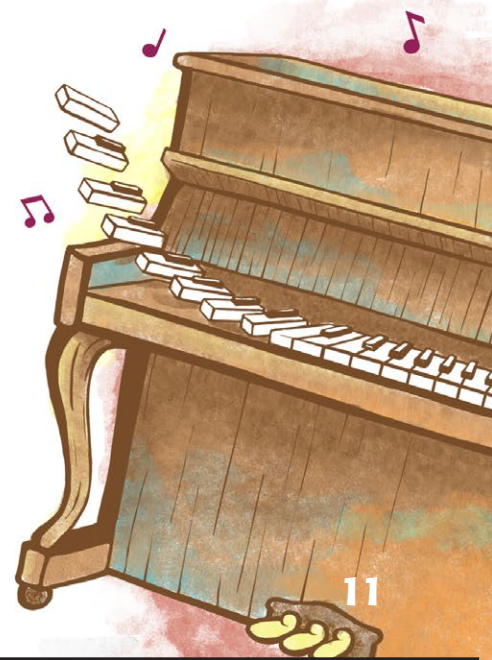
## Private Networks can be challenging and worthwhile to get into. They include:

- [HomeRoutes.ca](http://HomeRoutes.ca) – 16 house concert circuits throughout Canada.
- [ConcertsInYourHome.com](http://ConcertsInYourHome.com) – 2,000+ events worldwide, mostly U.S.
- [sofarsounds.com](http://sofarsounds.com) – International house concert promoter with a focus on media development rather than artist pay.

## Public Sites

A bit more democratic, but difficult to navigate.

- [House Concerts Australia](http://House Concerts Australia)
- [Euro House Concert Hub](http://Euro House Concert Hub)



## House concerts and your career

House concerts are having a major impact on the lives of troubadour types. If you are willing to be a guest in someone's home, these shows can offer significant advantages compared to coffeehouses and clubs. Breaking new markets can be tough, and a couple of house concerts along the way has saved many a tour.

That said, there is concern about existing clubs and the trajectory of your career. It's possible to build a career and fan base to keep you playing in living rooms for a very long time. Is that what you want?

If you want a shot at breakout success, it's wise to not let house concerts become your primary objective. House concerts should be used to develop your fan base for the great public venues in the markets you tour, and to fill the travel gaps where such venues do not exist.

Public venues are a valuable cultural resource. Although we don't serve them or ourselves by bringing events that only fill them to 20% capacity, we are foolish to not see the potential for growing our fan base to fill such venues. Public venues allow us to cut loose a little more, to enhance our experience with dramatic lighting and effects, and connect the community in numbers and atmosphere that can't be created in a home.

The intimacy and warmth of house concerts can be addictive. It can be a huge relief to let someone else be in charge of bringing the crowd. Don't let house concerts become the expedient choice for paying the bills. Create a strategy to fill the 50-100 seat venues in several markets. Then book house concerts in such a way to help you achieve that.



**Fran Snyder** is an artist and the founder of [Concerts-InYourHome.com](https://www.concertsinyourhome.com). In addition to these two roles, he's also hosted many shows and written more on the subject of house concerts than anyone else. Snyder is committed to solving the "touring problem," and has been featured in *American Way* magazine, *Billboard*, and the *The New York Times*. He continues to innovate different ways that artists can package their live show. Thanks to his work, many artists thrive on small successes, instead of starving until the big one.



The background of the page is a vibrant blue sky filled with soft, white, stylized clouds. At the bottom, a dark brown silhouette of a city skyline with various building shapes is visible against a green, rolling hillside. The overall style is artistic and illustrative.

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