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STAYING IN

Bringing it all back home

House concerts offer a more intimate experience for both listener and performer.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

ASK anyone what's the best thing about attending a house concert — a semiformal musical performance in someone's living room or backyard — and the answers tend to be quick and to the point.

You get to hear the music. *Really* hear the music.

"I love having the eye contact with the performers," adds Ron Saraty from West Hills, who has been attending house concerts for five years. "It's that intimate environment and it's almost like they are playing just for you. It's like a jam session in someone's living room. It really is a blast."

From the days when fiddlers enthralled neighbors on their front porches to the rock era's teens banging away in their garages, house concerts have thrived. A throw-your-own concert is particularly appealing now, given the expense of attending a live show in one of the massive venues. You can bring musicians into your own home for one-of-a-kind shows where spontaneity and musical artistry rule — and for a price that's affordable. Most who throw house concerts request a \$15 to \$25 donation, money that goes directly to the artist. Several also said they routinely include neighbors on their guest lists in addition to keeping the volume at a reasonable level to avoid noise complaints.

"In a culture where there is too much of everything, living-room concerts really bring the people together," says Smithereens singer-songwriter Pat DiNizio, who, in addition to his regular club and concert dates, has been performing in private homes for five years.

DiNizio recently played a five-month tour across the U.S. performing only in people's homes. "We were invited in to 90 homes and backyards," he says. "It was the most amazing experience of my life."

Indeed, house concerts can be enlightening for up-and-coming performers and seasoned musicians.

"They are great places to try new material," says John McEuen, veteran songwriter and longtime member of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. "I can play longer sets without worrying about getting off the stage. You find out just how good you are when you play."

One drawback, McEuen says, is that "there are no dressing rooms. You end up changing clothes in someone's bathroom or bedroom." Having musicians and artists using your bathroom is one thing, but house concert organizers Russ and Julie Paris of Ventura County have put up out-of-state musicians in their guest bedrooms.

"Traveling can be a big expense for some of these acts," says Russ, who has hosted house concerts since 1997. "There are so many good musicians out there that are under the radar." It's not just the up-and-coming who have performed at the Paris pad.

In addition to McEuen, the couple have welcomed Chris Hillman (the Byrds), Bill Payne (Little Feat) and singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff. They've got a return appearance coming up with Laurence Juber, onetime guitarist with Paul McCartney's Wings.

While house concerts traditionally have been venues for singer-songwriters and folk musicians, alternative-rock acts have also found a place in the living room.

When Jason Falkner, former member of alt-rock band Jellyfish and pop group the Grays, announced he would play a living-room show in Encino, concert organizer Jay Gilbert said he received more than 150 reservation requests.

"Jason played almost three hours to a room full of people who are as devoted as you can get," he says.

Anna Borg, who arranges concerts in her Silver Lake duplex, describes her concerts as outdoor barbecues where families are welcomed. Borg supplies food and asks guests to bring their own beverages.

"We don't want to be caught up in a 'rock show' mentality where we have to worry about a fantastic sound system or lighting show," she says. "We don't want them to get out of control. This is supposed to be about music and fun."

Times staff writer Kevin Bronson contributed to this story.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Music in the house

Here are some Southland house concert organizers who stage performances regularly. Contact them to get on their electronic mailing lists.

Russ and Julie's House Concerts, Oak Park: houseconcerts@jrp-graphics.com.

Barbara Greenspan Traditional Folk Concerts, Van Nuys: efgcpa@pacbell.net.

Anna Borg House Concerts, Silver Lake: anna@tallboyrecords.com.

Jenny Richards Cabin Concerts, Modjeska Canyon: JennyLRichards@earthlink.net.

Scott Duncan Folk House Concerts, Westchester: scott@duncanhouseconcert.com.

More: Fans of folk music can find monthly listings of house concerts from the Folkworks publication, www.folkworks.org.

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Throw your own: 5 steps

1. Find a performer. Scout local clubs, coffee shops and bookstores. Between sets, strike up conversations with musicians to see if they give house concerts. You can search the Internet and listen to CDs, but you'll still need to know how performers are in front of people, so ask friends or other musicians.

2. Focus on music, not money. You're not going to get rich throwing house concerts. In fact, you'll probably lose money. Don't worry about taking out ads or creating postcards. Chances are with friends, co-workers and family members, you'll gather enough people for that first audience. In fact, you ought to check with local authorities (police or code enforcement) regarding possible city restrictions for large gatherings in residential areas.

3. Keep it simple. Concert organizer Jenny Richards said her biggest mistake was cooking and baking too much food for intermission. People need just the basics. "Now I only stress about moving the furniture around when the time comes," Richards says.

4. Take reservations. Many house concert organizers ask for reservations to keep crowds in control and to make sure there's an adequate audience for performers. Some organizers go so far as to sell tickets in advance. If you sell tickets, be aware you may need a business license and/or live entertainment permit. Most house concert promoters avoid both by keeping things informal and requesting donations.

5. Guard your privacy. For people you don't know, give out your home address only when you have a confirmed reservation.

— Brenda Rees