A PLAYLIST FOR THE PEOPLE
TEMPE

Free Orbit rides connect you to the arts in Tempe

Tempe Playlist
saturn sessions
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Written by Kimi Eisele, Southwest Folklife Alliance

While often billed as a way to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, living in the suburbs can produce a sense of isolation. As it turns out, the bustle—sounds, art, culture, people—are often what make a place feel like community. So how do you connect people living in two suburban zip codes in South Tempe, a city just outside of Phoenix, and give them a sense of community?

Through music and public transit, of course.

That's what the Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI)'s Team in Tempe did with the Tempe Playlist, an audio soundtrack featuring music and audio recordings from musicians living in the City's 85283 and 85284 zip codes. The playlist can be downloaded for personal listening.

Team members say the project created visibility for local artists, engaged city government in new methods of working, and benefited youth and residents by tapping into a common desire for community connection.

Within these areas of Tempe, "You come home, you close your garage, you go in your home, the next morning you come out, you open your garage, you get in your car, you drive away," said Maggie Fountain, Fine Arts Curriculum and Instructional Specialist for Tempe Union High School District. "But I think there is a deep longing to want to feel connected even in suburbia, and to know the neighbors and [have] a shared experience, to have these connections, to have this shared identity."

One of the keys to the project's success, the team says, was leveraging existing partnerships and creating new collaborations.

TEMPE

GLENDALE

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CHANDLER
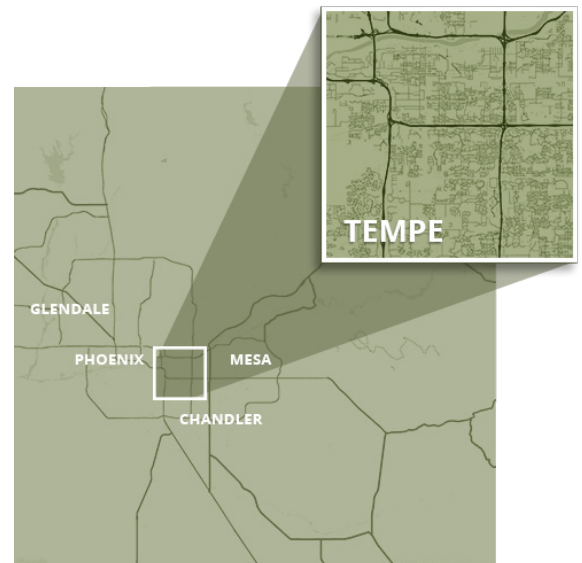
Photo: Tempe Playlist information on the Orbit Bus riding through south Tempe. Photograph by Michael Williams, 2019.

"A lot of connections were made: the City connecting with the artists, the schools connecting with the City, the schools connecting the bus. There were a lot of webs that grew over this," Fountain said.

Team leaders' experience and knowledge with their respective institutions and communities—city, schools, musicians—helped them build trust and move the project forward.

Samuel Peña, lead artist on the project, recruited local artists to participate. As a musician, he leveraged contacts he already had, but also worked to dig deep into hidden corners of the community to find those yet unknown.

"It would never have worked if Maggie [Fountain] and I were, like, 'Hey come be a part of this thing.' Many of them personally knew Samuel or heard of him; that testament of trust. [This project] would never have occurred without that," Maja Aurora said.

CREATING YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES

Peña worked with young musicians at Compadre High School, students in whom he saw potential, but who needed a little extra help. Through a partnership with KJZZ, a local radio station, he was able to record the students' tracks, revealing their talent to teachers at the school.

"The teachers that came in were brought to tears, blown away. I didn't know this existed here," Peña said.

Fountain, who has worked with Tempe schools for years, said this aspect of the project gave her a new perspective as well. "Samuel's work of pushing on Compadre High School was really good. It reshaped how I thought of that school and the students in that school and the needs of that school."

That work shifted how the school thought of itself, as well. So much so that when the Tempe Chamber of Commerce's Leadership cohort—20 community leaders—approached the school wanting to do a project with the teen mother program, school administrators steered them toward funding a music program instead.

"They heard about the buzz of this guitarist and the buzz of these talented musicians in their school and said, Let's build a music program there and let's buy them guitars," Peña said.

The project reached other youth as well by connecting them to a student broadcasting opportunities program with KJZZ called "Spot 127," which had just initiated a program in South Tempe. In another project partnership with Tempe's Changing Hands bookstore, youth were invited to speak about their experiences with broadcasting.

Peña shared that one young man named Kamal spoke with confidence about learning to host a radio program. "He just owned it. We shared that with Spot 127, they were like, 'Kamal? Really?'" I thought he was the most confident kid from the program, but it was the opposite until this," Peña said.

NEW PROGRAMS, NEW METHODS, NEW RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the new South Tempe Spot 127 program, several other programs were concurrently starting up during the time the CCI team was planning its project. The Orbit bus routes started operating, the Arts in the Park began, Peña moved to South Tempe.

This synchronicity allowed for easy collaboration and a spirit of experimentation.

"There weren't any 'shoulds' or restrictive things, because of all of these things were new. We just pulled them all together to do the project," Aurora said. "Nothing really had to be forced."

At the same time, as with any new endeavor, the project challenged the City to try new things, Aurora said. While the city transportation department was accustomed to working with artists in a public art capacity, this project invited up new ways of thinking, planning, and implementing works to benefit the community.

One designer in the transportation department, whose previous repertoire included flyers, postcards, and other mailings, figured out how to wrap buses with graphics, because the CCI team asked him to try it. "Once he saw it up, he got so much feedback from everyone else in the City, saying, 'We didn't know you could do that. We can do that?'" said Aurora. "Now he's doing like the whole side of the Tempe Center for the Arts."

The project also facilitated a number of important new relationships. Musicians were able to connect with one another for the first time or in new ways. Some were even able heal old wounds, Peña said, sharing the example of a public apology from one musician to another in one of the circle conversations facilitated. "That was pretty amazing for them. And for me too," he said.

As the project gave them more visibility, artists were able to create or deepen relationships with the City and the public.

"The artists that live in the zip codes 85283 and 85284 feel seen by the City, feel like [someone] took the time to look at me, to listen to me, to carve out a space, to help me be seen by other people in the City," Peña said.

Fountain said these new relationships will likely lead to continued performance opportunities in the future. "The City now has this list of 26 artists and they're booking them for the Arts in the Park, giving them preference" she said, adding that the musicians themselves have discussed branding themselves as "Tempe Playlist approved artists" as a way to build their credentials.

CHALLENGES IN SCALE & INCLUSIVITY

Because of their reach and vision, the team was challenged at times in keeping the project doable. They had to be reminded and remind themselves often to scale back to make sure they could complete their goals.

"There were probably four meetings which were scale meetings for us because we had these big plans and then we had the reality of time, effort, [and] budget. It was great leadership of Michael [Rohd] to say to us, 'Pints, pints, pints. What can you accomplish with gallon dreams, you can do with pints,'" Fountain said.

They also faced some challenges with decision-making and work styles. Peña sometimes felt "like a fish out of water" when it came to administrative work. But the team worked hard to cater to its members strengths.

"We were always trying to figure out is what's everybody's passion and bring the passion to the table because if the passion is at the table, the project would get done, right?" Fountain said.

Another challenge was making sure the project was inclusive. Team members were committed to equity—finding diverse artists, particularly those who may have the same access to equipment, recording studios, and audiences.

But this posed challenges, particularly for Peña, who struggled with how and how often to bring up the issue of equity.

"The lesson is, how do you have this tough conversation that makes everybody uncomfortable? How do you have tough conversations and keep trust, because the fear is that you lose the trust by having a tough conversation. That's the stressful part," he said.

He acknowledged the willingness of his team to accompany him on that journey, to make sure they did the best they could to create equitable opportunities, whether it was making sure people could attend meetings or supporting his efforts to find new artists.

Compadre High School Students perform an original song at a community event at Changing Hands Bookstore. Photo by Pixel Photography, 2019

Members of Team Tempe (right to left): Gayle Shanks, Maggie Fountain, Maja Aurora, and Aaron Thacker.

"Scheduling a meeting with 10, 12, 15 really busy people is hard," Aurora said. "But it's important to just keep rescheduling it, to get everyone in the room."

Aurora said keeping the conversation going about diverse participation was critical. "We were intentional about seeing the marginalized and seeing what would help them. What can we, in our positions, level that so that they can have that experience? It was an intentional conversation constantly about who is not here, who could be here, who wants to be here, but needs just a little bit more support to get them there? That was very much a part of our conversation," she said.

In the end, providing opportunities to a wide range of artists was time consuming, but worth the effort. "If you give resources to people in the margins and invite them to make art and they feel comfortable to do that,

it humanizes them really powerfully," Peña said.

It also made for a stronger, more representative playlist. "What are they, five? … seven?—flautists playing. And the next track can be this [Electronic Dance Music] track and then the next track could be a spoken word. And then the next track can be a rock band and the next track … It's a wide compilation," Fountain said.

The Playlist, she said, has given these neighborhoods a soundtrack and a sense of identity. "It's an oral asset map. And it's led to so much more."

The team recently received a National Endowment for the Arts ArtWorks grant to continue the program. Which is a good thing, Aurora says, because the City of Tempe is so enamored with the Tempe Playlist, it wants additional playlists on all of its Orbit buses.