



MEM
MUSIC EXPORT
MEMPHIS

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I write this in the first quarter of 2026, it's hard to think about anything but the year ahead of us: we're marking a decade of Music Export Memphis and planning so many ways to celebrate all year long.

But creating this report - as always - has asked me to think about the year behind us, and it's struck me as I looked back on 2025 that it was a year in which reflection - about how far we've come and where we'd like to go - took center stage.

We spent most of the year working on the development of a new three-year strategic plan, a highly collaborative process that deeply engaged our board of directors, the artists we serve, our funders, and community partners. Creating a strong plan and building sustainably for the long term means taking stock of who we are, where we've been, and the impact we'd like to have in the next 10 years and beyond.

The fact that I was on maternity leave during a significant piece of that work is a point of pride for me. It's an indication of how far we've come as an organization: our board of directors is the strongest and most engaged it's ever been, and their dedication to driving the plan (and the organization) forward in my absence meant that I returned to momentum AND a record year of sponsorships for our annual benefit, The Tambourine Bash. I'm so often bragging on our programs in this letter and throughout our annual report - and there's still plenty of that to do - but it feels so exciting to see how this dedicated group of folks has helped us mature and grow. (If you received this by mail, we've included a copy of the strategic plan for you. It's also available to view digitally at musicexport-memphis.org.)

But amid all that planning and taking stock, we kept doing what we do best: supporting Memphis musicians in building sustainable touring careers.

In 2025, we funded or featured more than 90 artists or bands for a total of \$120K+, with more than 60 percent of funds going to artists of color. (See the full list on page 7.)

Our Ambassador Access cohort toured the region across two weeks in July, playing shows in Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, and Kentucky before hitting the atrium stage at Crosstown Concourse for a free homecoming show in partnership with Crosstown Arts. Each year since its launch in 2022 this program has grown and evolved, which means 2025's cohort - who you can get to know through



photo by Justin Fox Burks

MEM Founder and Executive Director Elizabeth Cawein welcomes attendees to The Tambourine Bash at the Overton Park Shell.

our Q&A on the next page - were our most engaged and collaborative yet, and if you were with us for Tambourine Bash in October you got to witness it yourself as they took the stage to perform a stunning set of music including a new original song.

We continue to advocate for Memphis musicians - our strategic plan calls for the development of an annual advocacy agenda with input from both our Artist Advisory Council and Music Industry Council - and in March of 2025 we were excited to support the launch of the Memphis Music Strategy. Funded by the City of Memphis and private donors and stewarded by the Greater Memphis Chamber, MEM was proud to take a leading role in facilitating the study on the ground. The results were shared in a launch event at Minglewood Hall, and we continue to work closely with the City of Memphis Office of Creative and Cultural Economy on the path to bringing the first of the 30+ recommendations to life.

One of those recommendations was around the need for more professional development in the music ecosystem, and I'm also proud of the ways our own educational offering grew in 2025. Export 101, the name of all of our educational content including podcasts and hands-on workshops and talks, expanded to 5 in-person events in 2025, all hosted at the Memphis Music Hall of Fame in the newly dubbed J.W. and Kathy Gibson Center for Memphis Music. (Read more about the series on p. 6.)

Happy reading - I hope these stories have you excited about what's to come and ready to celebrate 10 years of making Memphis a city of choice for musicians.

With gratitude,
Elizabeth

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ON THE COVER

John Nemeth performs at The Pure Memphis Happy Hour at AmericanaFest in September of 2025.

Photo by Jamie Harmon



AMBASSADOR ACCESS LaDarryl, Keenya Creates & Ozioma 2025 Cohort at Tambourine Bash

How would you describe Ambassador Access to somebody who has no context for what it is, and maybe doesn't even know very much about the music industry?

Keenya: The first word that comes to mind is immersion. As an artist who had never toured before, this was an opportunity for me to learn what that looks like from start to finish, the highs and the lows. To learn from the ground up what that means, and really see if you have what it takes to do it.

Ozioma: I would say interactive. Beginner-friendly because, obviously, when you're entering into this program, you know nothing about touring, you've never done it before. This is the perfect program to set the table for you to get ready to branch out into different areas of your artistry, whether it's marketing, whether it's touring, whether it's stage readiness.

LaDarryl: You could kind of compare it to, like, an extended summer camp for a specific, specialized trade.

What surprised you most about the program, and yourself in the program?

Keenya: I was surprised by how much I liked touring. I'm a homebody. I love to be in my space and all that kind of stuff, but just being able to get out in unfamiliar places, with unfamiliar faces - it was really a growth experience that I benefited from a lot.

LaDarryl: I was fed a lot of knowl-

edge and I soaked it all up and the general direction is clear but there's a gazillion roads I could take. There's a huge buffet in front of me.

Ozioma: I just felt extremely comfortable. I felt like, I can ask as many questions as I want to, and I think that's particularly good for artists coming into this environment who may feel frozen up, kind of, because it's all so new. I felt so comfortable and supported stepping into these new spaces.

Where is your career going next, and how did the last year play a role in that?

Keenya: This past year was a huge reset for me. My sphere has broadened and there's a bit of prestige that comes with this program, so I find some doors aren't as hard to open as they used to be. I've got my plans in motion for touring and I'm interested in radio play for a project I'm putting out. With the experience and the connections that I have now, I'm like, I feel like this is an achievable goal. This is the right song for it, and this is a great moment for it.

Ozioma: For me? Well, tour! It's tour time now. I'm finishing up my project and I'm about to take it on the road. Ambassador Access set the table for me to create an experience with my artistry and my brand. I feel like I'm ready.

LaDarryl: Yeah, tour is definitely up next for me. In the short term, I'm trying to get my booking process kind of ironclad, so I'm trying to diversify my Memphis portfolio,

you know? The idea is that when it comes time to interact with other artists on the road, you know, I can say, hey, come to Memphis, we can have a show here or there.

What has been your favorite thing about collaborating and performing with your cohort?

Keenya: I feel like it was the start of me, like, connecting with a younger generation of artists. I enjoyed Ozioma's work so much that I actually featured her at my songwriter series that I do. It was just beautiful to see her shine in that context. And LaDarryl... hip-hop can be really boxed in. And it's just like, he took a match and just lit a fire to the box and was like, I'm just gonna do my own thing.

Ozioma: I would describe LaDarryl as eccentric. Like, nobody, nobody sounds like you. Nobody. Keenya, I would say sultry.

LaDarryl: I would call Kenya soulful, and Ozioma would be cosmic. And I think the specific needs of our three subgenres just blended really well together. You couldn't stop us from sounding good, pretty much.

Ozioma: I wholeheartedly agree. I think we just have naturally good chemistry. We all just vibe really well together, and I think that's my favorite thing about collaborating with all of us. We were all willing to roll with the punches, whether it was leaving some equipment behind, whether it was squeezing into a car together, like, we were all in. We were stepping out together and representing our city.

Ambassador Access is MEM's pipeline to touring: this innovative program over-invests in artists who've traditionally been under-resourced to create pathways to sustainable touring careers for more Memphis artists. With each cohort since our inaugural group in 2022, this program has grown and evolved. In 2025, **LaDarryl, Ozioma and Keenya Creates** took part in group workshops on topics from audience development to tour management to personal finances, received one-on-one coaching in marketing and booking, toured with gigs in four states, were matched with mentors aligned with their career goals, and - as always - finished the year building a proposal for their \$5,000 unrestricted grant. **Get to know them and the impact of the year in this edited Q&A.**



The Stupid Reasons
AmericanaFest
Nashville, TN



Lukah
SXSW
Austin, TX



In 2025 our Experiences were international, partnership-driven, and impact-oriented. We kicked off the year in snowy Montreal for **Folk Alliance International**, where we partnered with our friends at the Louisiana Office of Culture, Recreation and Tourism to present an official showcase stage that featured talent from our respective regions headlined by an artist we both claim: Lafayette, La. native and MEM Ambassador **Marcella Simien**. Connections Marcella made during the festival led to an invitation for her to take part in Music to Life's Changemaker Academy, an opportunity to grow her focus on social justice through music in a nationally competitive cohort.

In March, our partners at **Mempho Presents** called on us to help bring emerging Memphis talent to Austin for their incredible day/night party at the legendary Mohawk Club during **SXSW**. We facilitated the addition of four MEM Ambassadors to the bill, including **Lukah** (pictured left), **Mak Ro**, and **Cyrena Wages**, who opened for Memphis legends and luminaries **Lucero** and **The Bar-Kays**.

We rounded out the year back where it all began, in Nashville for our 9th annual Pure Memphis Happy Hour at **AmericanaFest**, where we debuted our new Mobile Listening Lounge, a traveling, high-fidelity audio vinyl experience in a 1973 Lovebug camper. Outfitted with **Egglestonworks Speakers** and handcrafted interiors built by **Caleb Sweazy** and designed by **David Quarles IV**, the Lovebug (pictured bottom left) features a collection of Memphis-made records pressed at (and courtesy of) **Memphis Record Pressing** and now pops up with MEM at any event possible. It's an immersive way to show off the holistic vinyl supply chain in Memphis, an element of our music industry we're proud to talk about wherever we go.

"Attending AmericanaFest, both through educational forums and other artists' performances, felt enriching and enlightening all at once. Having the Pure Memphis Happy Hour to promote also gave me reason to shake hands with various industry officials and network more than I have in one week of my life. Artists have a tendency to compare ourselves to those 'more successful' than we are, but I think being amongst so many who might not even be playing an event like ours reminded me how far as a band we already were and how years of working towards this goal finally has started to pay off. Working every day toward advancing our musical careers felt like what we have been working so hard to get to do, and I have described it as 'an entire chapter of my life in four days.' I have a list of fellow artists/managers/movers and shakers I met. I have plentiful contacts for playing in Nashville. I feel validated and inspired to continue to pursue this craft wholeheartedly because of MEM and AmericanaFest!"

- The Stupid Reasons
(pictured top left)

EXPERIENCES



Talibah Safiya

Cali Blues & Folk Festival
Cali, Colombia

EXPORT BANK

2025 marked year three of our partnership with **Cali Blues & Folk Festival in Cali, Colombia**. Each year, MEM selects one artist to send to the festival for multiple performances and to teach in the multiday Creative Camp for young, aspiring music professionals. It is a powerful cultural exchange that also has far-reaching benefits for career and creative growth for our artists. Here's an excerpt from Talibah's reflection on her time in Colombia last fall.

I've been to New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago, Montreal, Nashville and a slew of other places with Music Export Memphis, but the chance to perform at the Cali Blues & Folk Festival had me particularly intrigued. When I met Michael, who works with Colombo Americana in Cali, Colombia, he was so warm and elated about my record *Black Magic* that I knew right away this would be a beautiful trip and opportunity. My friend Marcella raved about the experience after having gone a couple of years prior so I was extra ready.

I traveled there with my friend AJ Haynes and in the weeks before, we met up in Utica, Miss., to rehearse. Utica was like a launching pad that helped AJ and I to deepen our connection to feel best prepared to travel together. I was locked in and ready to fly but people were consistently asking me if I was scared to travel to Colombia which let me know this place would feel like home. I see culture beyond the violence and fear that poverty births. I know that's the same culture that birthed the blues. Colombia understands the blues, I felt the kinship before I even arrived to the land.

But the land, wow. I flew into Bogota, and as the plane landed, I saw rich land, beautiful mountains, cows and just so much green. I was sending photos to my family as soon as I landed. The next day, I met my first group of students at Idipron and I immediately felt the emotion in the space. It was a community center in a low income part of town and the energy felt so familiar! The young people had been anticipating something and it was my arrival. Honestly, it brought me to tears immediately. I remember being the young person waiting on the professional living my dreams to come to my class and I'm so honored to have the privilege to do that for someone else! We talked about songwriting and how many songs come from the feelings we hold anticipating the feeling we want to access. I gave them a prompt and they shared some poetry with me that blew my mind! I had an amazing translator that beautifully shared what they were saying in English.

After an amazing meal at a restaurant called Padre, I headed to soundcheck for my first performance at the Centro Nacional de las Artes Delia Zapata Olivella. AJ and I set up our show on a very naked stage with a blue spotlight on each of us surrounded by white flowers. We did a very simple set with just acoustic guitar and vocals on some songs and electric guitar with some light percussion on others. When we did "Simply Beautiful," the crowd was silent, you could hear a pin drop. When we covered Natalia LaFourcade's *Sole-dad y el Mar*, they roared with excitement! It was such a wonderful experience.

The next day, we flew to Cali. Although I missed my friend Camilo, I made a new friend Johnny, who was a local DJ. Cali was warm and relaxed as opposed to Bogota which was cold and busy. On day 1, we met with students who were in a three day blues camp and after singing for them, we talked about the importance of maintaining African diasporic connection through art and culture. Then we sang together and danced salsa! Later, we went to see some of the students play at a local jazz club.

At my second show, I did a talkback with some young people and some curious older people about the blues and its birth in the American South. We talked about its relationship to gospel and how that paved the way for American music generally speaking. Our show that night was so much fun. The students from the blues and folk camp came to see us and the audience that evening said the show was "chimba" which means amazing amongst other things.

I stayed an extra day to eat and go discover new music at record shops and I flew back home listening to *Slow Stories* in Spanish podcast on Apple Podcasts because I know I'll be back. Thank you so much Music Export Memphis for helping to facilitate this trip. I had the time of my life taking South Memphis to South America!

EXPORT 101

Since 2023, we've been growing our professional development program - Export 101 - in an effort to create more "export ready" talent in our music ecosystem. Our goal with Export 101 is to address skills gaps in the music workforce to allow more of our city's musicians to build profitable touring careers, while calling Memphis home. We started this program in response to a gap identified by our staff and our Artist Advisory Council. We knew that if we wanted MEM to continue to fund a growing and more diverse set of musicians from Memphis, we needed to invest in education, training, and creating pathways for emerging artists to build the networks required to succeed.

In 2025 we continued to produce new episodes of our Export 101 podcast while expanding our workshop series, thanks in part to a partnership with the Memphis Music Hall of Fame, who host our events at their new space, the Gibson Center for Memphis Music in the former Hard Rock Cafe on Beale Street. Through four workshops over the course of the year we covered personal finance and tax prep, booking and promotion, DIY touring, and building release strategies for independent artists. Export 101 workshops are always free to attend thanks to generous support from Tennessee Arts Commission and Tennessee Entertainment Commission.



(Clockwise from left) IMAKEMADBEATS speaks during the release rollout workshop featuring UNAPOLOGETIC.; McKenzii Webster moderates Export 101: Booked and Busy on DIY booking; LaDarryl, Keenya Creates and Ozioma reflect on their Ambassador Access cohort experience and share touring tips.

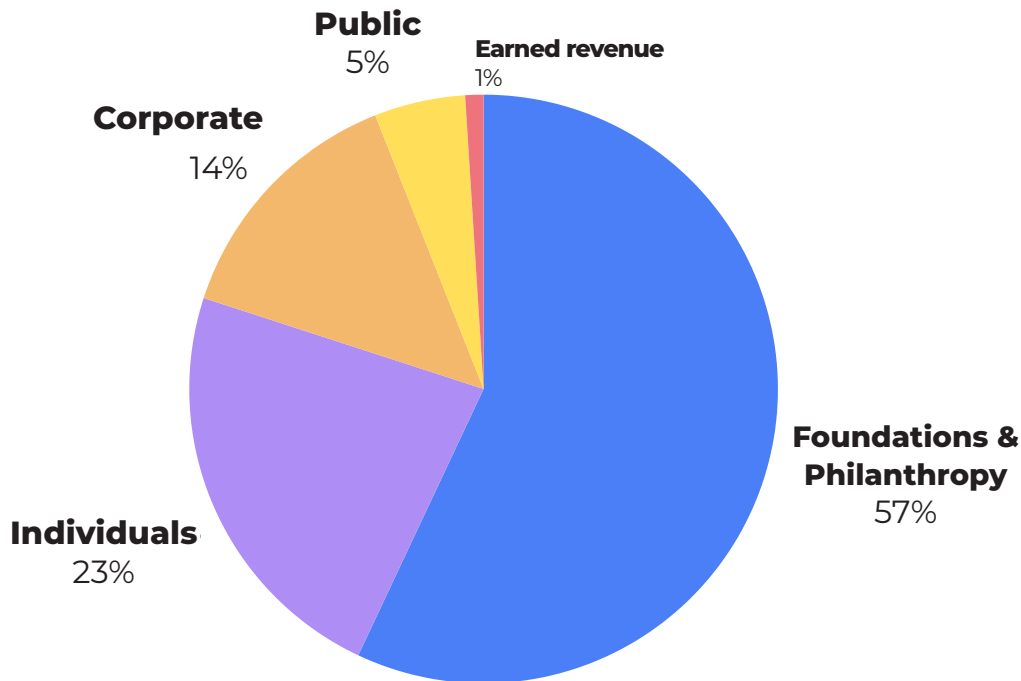
ARTISTS FEATURED + FUNDED

In 2025, MEM funded 91 musicians or bands with a total of more than \$120K+ in grants, stipends, and other support.

A Kiss Before Dying*	Mallory	Kazha	Sean Murphy
A\$H	Dead Soldiers	Kathy Zhou*	Singa B
Aaron James	Deaf Revival	Kid Maestro	Slumdog
Alexis Grace	Deborah Swiney	Lina Beach	Southern Avenue
Alice Hasen	Degenerate Breakfast	Lil Wyte	Speaker Girl
Ashley Ave.	DJ Nico	Lukah*	Suroor*
Aubrey McCrady	DXPE	Mak Ro*	Talibah Safiya
Benton Parker	Fresco Trey*	Marcella Simien*	Ted Horrell
Black Cream	FAKE	Mike Dragges Sr.	The Narrows*
Blvck Hippie*	Ghost Town Blues Band	Millie Manny	The Stupid Reasons
Boo Mitchell	Hi Rhythm	Optic Sink	Tony B Dickerson
Carla Thomas	Jadewick	Owl Bear	Tony Thomas Three
Chinese Connection Dub	James Godwin	PreauXX	Turnstyles*
Embassy	Jeff Hulett	Qemist	WINDOW
CmaJor	Joey Killingsworth*	Rachel Maxann	Wagoneer
Corey Lou	John Nemeth*	Runi Salem	Walt Phelan
Cyrena Wages*	Jombi*	Samosage	Wyly Bigger
David Collins & Schaeffer	Joybomb	Savannah Brister*	

*Indicates featured or funded more than once

FINANCIALS + GOVERNANCE



FAN (\$500 - \$999)

Tommy Kha
Eric Barnes
Jeff Hulett
Ken Steinberg
Shea Wellford
Bryan Smith
Fred Ridolphi
Margaret Mclean
ami wittber
Timothy Lee
Lynn Shaw
Craig Demoss
Pravi Thakkar
Paige and Bill Proctor
Meg Prewitt
Shannan McWaters
DJ McCabe

McLean Wilson
Beth Cawein
Chris Duncan
John Fisher
Dudley Lee
Franco Pucciarelli
Jennie Dill
Jack Torregrossa
James Huang
Melissa Llewellyn
Rob & Vicki Baird
Amy Wright
Tommy Pappas
Jay Hoffman
Mark Parker
Ashley Bonds
Suzanne Cohen

Corey Trotz
Paul Chandler
Matthew Crow
Ted Townsend
Jimmy Lackie
Taylor & Chantall Jenkins
David and Bonnie Thornton
Keith Tonkin
Shannon and Brian Dixon
Leah Gafni
Mary Lou Entzminger
Liz Gilliland
Margaret Dean
Ward and Linda Archer
Todd Richardson
Jonathan Finder
Cecilia L.W. Heffington

ROADIE (\$1,000 - \$4,999)

Grind City Brewing
MLGW
Recording Academy Memphis Chapter
Tennessee Arts Commission
Tommy Pacello Foundation
Meg and Scott Crosby
Weetie and John Whittemore
Baylee Less-Eiseman & Monte Eiseman
Bill Ganus

Cameron & Amy Mann
Lee & Eliot Morris
Jordan Petersen-Kamp
Stephanie & Spence Wilson Jr
Bruce Newman
Robert Wyatt
Molly & Jason Wexler
Frank & Linda Smith
Daniel Swain

OPENING ACT (\$5,000 - \$9,999)

ArtsZone
FedEx Arts
Alan Pritchard & Anne Davis

Deupree Family Foundation
Jonathan Schallert Family Foundation
Memphis Brand

I'M WITH THE BAND (\$10,000 - 24,999)

Anonymous
Connect Music Group

Tennessee Entertainment Commission
Duncan & Abbie Williams

LIVING LEGEND (\$25,000+)

ArtsMemphis
Assisi Foundation
Hyde Family Foundation

McEniry Family Foundation
Mempho Presents
Mississippi Center for Cultural Production

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