

Efforts to preserve Indiana music history are catching on

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Rick Wilkerson, executive director of the Indiana Music History Project, donated 5,000 items to the nonprofit's collection of vinyl records, CDs, tapes, posters and memorabilia. (IBJ photo/Dave Lindquist)

Momentum is building for the Indiana Music History Project, which began nine years ago as a “hopes and dreams” nonprofit and now has a physical gallery people can visit five days a week.

In October, the gallery in the lower level of a Flanner Buchanan Funeral Center in Broad Ripple added a digital listening station known as the Indiana Music Audio Kiosk. In November, the Indiana Music History Project announced plans for an oral history program to document the stories of at least 50 people who made a musical mark in the state.

The kiosk was funded by a Heritage Support Grant from the Indiana Historical Society, courtesy of the Lilly Endowment Inc. The oral history program, which will be augmented by a series of “Amazing Indiana Music Stories” trading cards, was funded by the Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation Inc.

Rick Wilkerson, executive director of the Indiana Music History Project, said the philanthropic support indicates that people care about preserving the legacies of Indiana A-listers such as Michael Jackson, John Mellencamp and Axl Rose as well as artistic icons Wes Montgomery, Hoagy Carmichael and John Hiatt under one roof.

“If you believe statistics, 90% of all adults in the United States are fans of music,” said Wilkerson, a former record store owner and an Indiana State University alum. “How many of that 90% have fond memories of something from their own state? Probably a very large percentage. If it’s half, then about half of the people in Indiana cared about some aspect of Indiana music—whether they saw a band, went to a show, had a friend in a band or had a brother in a band.”

Wilkerson personally provided a wealth of items to the Indiana Music History Project’s collection of vinyl records, CDs, tapes, posters and memorabilia. The 71-year-old donated about 5,000 items, including 1,500 vinyl LPs, 1,500 CDs and 1,000 vinyl 45s.

“I’m not a record store guy anymore,” said Wilkerson, who operated Missing Link Records in Indianapolis from 1993 to 2008 and subsequently founded the shop that became Irvington Vinyl & Books. “Now I’m all about legacy, preservation, promotion and honoring the musicians.”

At the Flanner Buchanan location, the Indiana Music History Project has a 1,000-square-foot room that serves as the public gallery. Admission is free to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Behind the scenes, the basement space provides an archives room, a room where items are photographed and digitized and a room where audio recordings are digitized. A desk for processing donated items occupies a corner of the archives room.

And count Bruce Buchanan, CEO of Buchanan Group, parent company of Flanner Buchanan Funeral Centers, as a star supporter of the cause. He made it possible for Indiana Music History Project to become a museum of sorts and he’s the organization’s board chair.

But Wilkerson knows the funeral home setting is unconventional.

“People don’t want to come to a funeral home to have fun,” he said. “They don’t mind coming down here and looking around. But I don’t think I’m ever going to have a 300-person event here.”

Wilkerson said he’s formulating a series of off-site fundraising events for 2025.

“We’re not always going to be in a funeral home,” he said. “This is like a laboratory for us.”

The lab is packed with a century’s worth of Indiana music gems, from an autographed photo of songwriter Cole Porter to a collection of poster reproductions that advertised pre-fame gigs for the Jackson Five in East Chicago and Whiting. Indianapolis blues pioneers Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell are represented on their own poster, and the gallery features part of the TV set for one of Jimmy Mack’s teen dance shows.

Online, the Indiana Music History Project streams songs from its collection at a [live365.com station titled Indiana Music Radio](https://live365.com/station/titled/Indiana%20Music%20Radio).

Indiana Music History Project is the third name associated with organization previously known as the Indiana Music and Entertainment Museum and the Indiana Entertainment Foundation. Technically, Indiana Entertainment Foundation remains the name of the nonprofit.

Wilkerson said he lobbied the board to focus on music. Personally, he points to two experiences that sparked his interest in preservation.

By attending an edition of the Indiana Jazz Exchange series between sister cities Indianapolis and Cologne, Germany (an alliance formed in 1988), Wilkerson said he realized the public should know more about Hoosier musicians. Wilkerson later read “The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock ‘n’ Roll,” a 2011 book by Preston Lauterbach that detailed the role Indiana Avenue nightclub owner Denver Ferguson had in building a network for touring musicians in the 1940s.

“Those two things kind of stimulated something in my passion,” Wilkerson said.

With the Indiana Music History Project, he’s finding more and more people who feel the same way. The organization has presented exhibitions at the Indiana State Library, Central Library, Kurt Vonnegut Museum & Library and Indianapolis International Airport.

“It’s a brick-by-brick thing,” Wilkerson said. “You make one connection and it builds into another. You get one thing right and then you get a chance to do a couple of more things.”

For more information, visit indianafound.org.

