

“MUSIC EDUCATION CHANGED MY life,” says Henry Donahue. “I was an unfocused elementary school student, wasn’t sure exactly where I fit in. The middle school band came to my school. A trumpet and drums duo, two kids that I knew from my neighborhood, did ‘Rock Around the Clock.’ It blew my mind. The idea that you could do that—and do it as part of your school day—really changed my life.”

He became the quintessential band kid, taking up trumpet and later guitar, developing a peer group and participating in every music opportunity.

“From that day to this day, making music has been a part of my life,” he says.

The confidence Donahue developed in those years allowed him, as a professional adult, to enjoy a decades-long career in publishing and as a creative consultant for an agency whose clients included large foundations and nonprofits, including Bloomberg, Ford, Bill and Melinda Gates and others. And in 2016, it brought him again to music education, not as a student but as Executive Director of the US nonprofit Save The Music Foundation.

Since 1997, the foundation has been working to ensure all American K-12 public schools offer music. Currently, about 3.6 million public school students in the US, roughly 8%, according to a 2022

SAVE THE MUSIC

Executive Director **HENRY DONAHUE** describes the strategy behind the now-independent music education foundation and the importance of strengthening “the base of the pyramid” in local communities.
By **CARLTON WILKINSON.**



study, have no chance for the kinds of music enrichment that were so formative for Donahue. Spread out over the country geographically, those schools tend to be in either urban or rural districts, and to serve Black, Latino, immigrant or relatively poor rural populations.

VH1 Save The Music was founded by Paramount (then known as Viacom) as a community service aimed at addressing that problem. Its mission was feted and supported by featured music celebrities and star-studded events, particularly its “Divas” fundraising concerts.

In 2008, the foundation became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, while still under the umbrella of Paramount.

Over the years, Save The Music has donated over \$75 million in instruments and music technology to over 285 public school districts—2,800 public schools across the United States. Record labels, talent agencies, Live Nation, AEG Presents and tech giants such as Amazon, TikTok and Meta have all lined up to support it. In 2021, Save The Music received a \$2 million grant from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

In 2019, the foundation dropped “VH1” from its name while simultaneously expanding its reach within the music industry.

“The advantage of being VH1 Save the Music was that we never had to demonstrate to anybody that we were a real thing,” Donahue tells the *Brunswick Review*. “The downside was that people saw us as an in-house operation.”

Under Donahue, STM has continued to evolve toward greater independence and relevance for the organization. In the last five years, its impact has more than doubled, from \$5 million raised in 2019 to \$10 million in 2024. It worked with 131 schools in 2024, up from 59 five years earlier.

“We’re twice as big now as we were in 2019,” Donahue says. “Dropping ‘VH1’ from the brand and really aggressively trying to re-center our work at the community level, that really, really helped us to do that.”

In January, Save The Music announced a final official separation from Paramount Global, and simultaneously unveiled the creation of a new endowment with a target of \$10 million. Paramount made a six-figure donation toward the endowment, and the relationship between the two organizations remains positive.

In a public statement, a Paramount spokesperson said, “Save The Music was founded nearly 30 years ago and since then, it has helped millions of students

“WE’RE TRYING TO BUILD OUT FROM THE STUDENT, SO THEY DON’T BECOME BACKGROUND ACTORS IN SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT BUT ARE ACTUALLY HAVING A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE.”

at more than 2,800 schools excel both academically and creatively through the enriching power of music. We’re honored to have been a part of this critical mission from the beginning, and we’re excited to see Save The Music continue to thrive in this next chapter.”

We spoke with Donahue about the work, the value of music in people’s lives, and what he sees for the future of Save The Music and music education.

Is it accurate to say that you’ve been quietly pushing back against the celebrity-event identity of Save The Music?

Yes. One of the important things I learned in my consulting career was that you want your work to be based in and with the community you serve. Everything that we do here reflects that. We want to start from the student perspective, what’s best for the student, the teacher, the school, the community. That defines our approach.

We still do tons of things with artists. But we approach it very differently. We did a partnership with [rapper, singer and songwriter] Jelly Roll and his team, where we took him back to the high school that he attended.

We did an event in Inglewood, California with Cordae, a hip-hop artist, and he brought his team. The students were excited to see Cordae, an artist they know, but he also walked them through his business structure. “This is my producer. This is my business manager. This is my guy at the label.”

In each case we’re trying to build out from the student, so they don’t become background actors in social media content but are actually having a meaningful experience.

What’s the strategy behind STM’s mission?

We approach it in a very pragmatic way. We want to build these projects at the community level in places where we see ourselves over three, or five, or seven, or 10 years of investing in 30, 50, 100 or more schools in a single place. Because once we get it going, more students making music in school, then the after-school programs do better. The venues do better. Teaching artists do better. So what we’re trying to do is invest in that base of the pyramid in the musical community or the musical ecosystem of that place.

We don’t donate cash directly. The school district is responsible for hiring the teacher, creating the space for a dedicated music room, scheduling music as a class during the school day. We give them all the instruments, equipment, books and stands. We

supply other wraparound services like teacher training and support. Because we're in these communities over the long term, we can also bring in other nonprofits to help support aspects of the program. These are part of multi-year plans for an entire community, supported by large, local philanthropies—we don't do "one and done."

Over the course of my now nine and a half years, we've invested in probably 1,000 schools. And there have been definitely less than 5% where it hasn't worked out. Even if they close the school or if they fire the teacher or there's some other bureaucratic obstacle, we'll move it to another school in that same community.

I feel strongly that this is the right way to do the work. The collaboration is super-important.

In the old days of VH1 Save The Music, it used to be much more school by school—adopt a school, donate the instruments to that school and then move on to the next school. We're much more deeply engaged now in the places that we serve.

Has the approach to music education broadened stylistically since we were in school?

We are genre-agnostic. I don't go anywhere with a fixed idea about what kind of music people want to make—even places with a strong musical culture identity, like New Orleans. We spend time with the students and the teachers and the community and try to understand what they're excited about. It requires a significant commitment from the school district to be a part of our program, so what I want to do is figure out what people are excited about and get behind that.

A dynamic teacher can get the kids excited about a style, whatever it is. In Columbus, Ohio, they have an amazing strings program in middle and high schools. A professor at Ohio State is the dean of teaching strings to young people. So whether it's classical and strings, or jazz, or rock or hip-hop—we support all of those.

What are the Save The Music success stories that you point to?

Our work in Newark, New Jersey is the model for how we approach everything now. We've invested in about 50 schools just in the city of Newark. STM has partnerships with the Newark Board of Education, the mayor's office, several NJ-based family foundations, and the Newark Arts Education Roundtable, an alliance of more than 50 local arts ed leaders. And our artist ambassadors are Queen Latifah and Wyclef Jean. Students having access to



"I FEEL STRONGLY THAT THIS IS THE RIGHT WAY TO DO THE WORK. THE COLLABORATION IS SUPER-IMPORTANT."

music in Newark went from 53% to 98% over the course of seven years.

That's really the example for how we want to build out our programs. New York City, Newark and other nearby towns in New Jersey together represent one of our current five focus partner communities. Miami is two. There's a large region in Ohio that includes Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati—that's three. LA is four, and Atlanta is five.

All those follow that same model—multi-year plans, a core group of local funders, a strong relationship with the school district or collection of school districts that are there, and artist ambassadors tied to those communities.

STM offers the J Dilla Music Tech Grant, named for the late artist and producer. Are music technology offers a new thing for most high schools?

From a music education perspective, I would say yes. And they can make a big difference. Normally music participation funnels down from elementary to middle school to high school. When we introduce beat making and DJ'ing and music production in high school, it goes up again dramatically.

In one high school we work with in Newark, the last time I was there, they told me 1,100 students had expressed interest in music tech, out of some 1,600 students total.

How do you talk about the value of music in education?

There are really two schools of thought on this and I think we have a foot in both. One is that music is a universal, fundamental human right. People have the right in their communities and their schools to have music and art and beauty in their world.

The other is a statistical approach: By investing in music, students come to school more. Test scores get better. More students graduate. The school's a nicer place to be, so teachers stay longer and that results in the students doing better in a variety of social and emotional learning factors. They're more engaged, less discipline incidence.

We try to be precise about how we talk about it, not to overstate music's benefits. But we can demonstrate that when you have music, the school and its students and the community all benefit.

Are there specific communication strategies you use?

We are very invested in social media. Nonprofits I've worked with often come to the table with this idea that there's one big video they can make, one story they can tell—the hero video. A more effective strategy is to be constantly in a conversation with your audience. We spend a lot of time in our communities with our teachers, with our students, engaging them in content every single day, posting multiple times a day. That is much more effective and has more reach than any single “wow” video.

So my advice would be, rather than spend \$100,000 on scripting the perfect video, a more effective approach would be to spend that \$100,000 on 100 or 200 videos and see what people react to. To this day, I don't have the ability to predict ahead of time what's going to be popular.

We also spend a lot of time and attention on search engine optimization to support that,

**“WE CAN
DEMON-
STRATE THAT
WHEN YOU
HAVE MUSIC,
THE SCHOOL
AND ITS
STUDENTS
AND THE
COMMUNITY
ALL BENEFIT.”**

capturing the attention of a person who's interested in some aspect and pulling them in.

The current Trump administration has reduced the support for the arts and education.

I got two grant cancellation letters over the weekend.

How is all that likely to impact your work?

I'll say two things. One, our NEA grant was very small, for a specific program in one of our partner communities. We're going to go ahead and fund that program from unrestricted funds anyway.

Second, music is one of the last nonpartisan issues on Earth. We work very closely with a lot of Republican governors' administrations.

We've made a grant to almost every middle school in West Virginia, for instance. The former governor, now Senator Jim Justice, is a huge backer of that. The President himself, through the Trump Organization, was one of our donors before he got into politics. So I think we're probably less impacted than most.

For the sector as a whole, though, it's been very, very challenging. Federal funding for the arts is one piece, and Title 1 and Title 4 education funding is another. Because we require the schools to pay for the teachers, any decrease in funding for Title 1 [supporting schools in low-income neighborhoods] is a concern for us.

Those schools are also dealing with immigration concerns—attendance declines when immigration action is in news. It's been really challenging.

Is there anything you want to bring up that we haven't discussed?

I have an amazing team. The organization itself is small, only about 20 people. I was very fortunate that when I took on this role, there was a core group of program people, who had been music educators, who've been here and stood by the organization and really knew what they're doing.

Chiho Feindler, who leads the program team, for instance, has been here since before I started—more than 15 years. She is a real leader nationally in the music education community. Danielle Zalaznick and the development team likewise are indispensable to this work. I'm lucky to have their knowledge and support to be able to grow the impact of Save The Music. ♦

CARLTON WILKINSON is a Brunswick Director and Managing Editor of the *Brunswick Review*, based in New York. He is an award-winning journalist, a music educator, recording artist and holds a Ph.D. in Music.