



MUSIC & MAKER

RELIEF FOUNDATION

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS PRESERVING THE BLUES

*Elusive legend Guitar Gabriel was among the first artists to inspire the creation of the Foundation.
Photo courtesy of the Music Maker Relief Foundation*

What music do we lose to obscurity simply because the artists, the bearers of these traditions, are overlooked, not given the opportunity to share their talents? The nonprofit Music Maker Relief Foundation has forged a people-centered approach to preserving the musical traditions of the South by helping pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern music gain recognition and meet their day-to-day needs. This year, the Foundation celebrates its 25th anniversary.

Music Maker preserves these musical traditions by providing resources to elderly Southern musicians living in poverty, recording albums, arranging concerts, organizing museum exhibitions, publishing books and more. In the past 25 years, the Foundation has directly supported 435 musicians through more than 12,000 musician grants, over 7,000 performances and the release of over 2,400 songs, thus ensuring that these musicians not be silenced by poverty and time.

The seeds of Music Maker were planted while Tim Duffy was studying folklore at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Here, he was inspired by the vibrant community of traditional blues musicians to find a way to preserve their traditions – not just through documentation and archiving, but by first taking care of the artists themselves. After a prolonged search, Duffy heard the elusive legend Guitar Gabriel, and set to work trying to introduce Gabe and his music to any possible audience. Gabe introduced Tim to a community of artists steeped in the kinds of Southern traditions that had been overlooked or given up on by many folklorists, like his fellow performer Captain Luke. The two artists had been acquainted since the early '70s, and had become fixtures in the Winston-Salem drink-house scene in North Carolina. Other artists like Willa Mae Buckner, Preston Fulp, Mr. Q and Macavine Hayes also played music that tapped deep into the circulatory system of American culture and identity, yet they lived in total poverty. Duffy tried to get them all gigs and help with their bills. But he wanted to do more.

So, in 1994, Tim and Denise Duffy officially founded the Music Maker Relief Foundation. “The Foundation started as a very heartfelt response to the very real needs of a small group of people,” says Denise Duffy. Once Music Maker was off the ground, bookings began rolling in. Music Maker artists regularly toured Europe and the States and graced high-profile stages like Carnegie Hall and the Lincoln Center. The organization broadened its circle, connecting with artists from Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and other places throughout the South. Not only did Music Maker help these artists with their basic needs and careers, but the artists developed relationships with each other. It is one of the “most significant things” about the organization, says Denise. “We didn’t even intentionally plan on doing it. [But] in playing together, they build this really strong community of artists. They become friends independent of the organization. And that’s meant more to artists a lot of times than even the financial help.”

Music Maker strives towards its mission through several initiatives. By bringing live performances to underserved populations, offering free access to music and educational

programming, and maintaining a multi-media archive for historic preservation, it builds knowledge and appreciation of these almost-lost traditions. It promotes artist music development by providing professional career development, an in-house booking agency, tour management and instrument, equipment and merchandise grants. Ultimately, the Foundation improves the lives of artists by affording monthly stipends for food, shelter and medical care, supplying emergency aid for artists in crisis, and connecting artists with nonprofit and government resources. For Captain Luke, for example, Music Maker has provided grants for sustenance and emergency relief, a monthly stipend for prescription medicine, help with car maintenance, assistance in setting up European and U.S. tours and production of his own two albums.

This people-centered approach to musical preservation has proven successful time and time again. The little bit that Music Maker gives artists gets multiplied exponentially as the artists sharpen and share their gifts, build and nurture community, and rekindle a passion for traditional music among themselves, their peers and their fans.

As part of the Music Maker Relief Foundation’s 25th anniversary celebration, several special projects were released in early 2019, including the book *Blue Muse: Timothy Duffy’s Southern Photographs* and its companion album, *Blue Muse*. Featuring 21 tracks mostly recorded by Tim Duffy, *Blue Muse* captures the complexity of traditional American music – from the hill-country blues of North Mississippi native Willie Farmer, to the gospel of southern Georgia’s Theotis Taylor, to Piedmont blues artists Algia Mae Hinton and John Dee Holeman, to old favorites like Guitar Gabriel and Captain Luke. The book and album are truly testaments to Music Maker’s history and its deep commitment to sustaining the roots-music heritage of the South.

Through its efforts, the Music Maker Relief Foundation not only changes the lives of these blues artists, but it presents these musical traditions to the world – building knowledge and appreciation of America’s musical treasures and giving future generations access to their heritage. To learn more and support the Music Maker Relief Foundation, visit musicmaker.org. 🎵

*Ironing Board Sam is just one of many artists aided by Music Maker, having received financial help with medical care, vehicle repairs and relocation to Chapel Hill, NC.
Photo courtesy of the Music Maker Relief Foundation*

