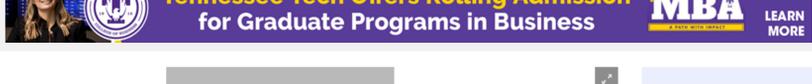




Food & Lifestyle

# Performing arts industry overcomes Nashville's growing pains, real estate costs and recession



Jessika Malone is an artistic director for The Kindling Arts Festival.  
JESSIKA MALONE

By Julia Masters - Reporter, Nashville Business Journal  
Jul 19, 2022

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Nashville is not only a destination for aspiring musicians, but its creative spirit also attracts a host of talent for the performing arts industry – which like all other sectors, is not immune to the positive and negative side effects of a growing city and a potential recession.

With people streaming in from major metros, Nashville's performing arts scene has become more experimental and diverse in recent years, however, rising real estate prices continue to push performers further outside the city and force the use of non-traditional performance space.

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Amidst these trends, The Kindling Arts Festival produced by artistic directors [Jessika Malone](#) and [Daniel Jones](#) returns for its fifth year on Thursday, July 28, and runs through Sunday, July 31.

The festival helps provide spaces for local artists to showcase their talents, a crucial component of their careers.

Over the course of the four-day celebration, 19 performance projects covering platforms of dance, theater, music, immersive art and multimedia from over 160 local artists will take place at five venues in West Nashville.

"A thriving arts scene is very important to overall quality of life for folks living in a community, and the performing arts scene is a vital place where ideas germinate, cross pollinate and a community can unpack experiences together of what it means to live in community and whatever issues they are facing at a given time," Malone said. "It's important that we protect the arts ecosystem so these spaces can continue to exist and serve the community."

The venues are OZ Arts Nashville, The Darkhorse Theatre, Nashville School for the Aerial Arts, Ozari Events and The Barbershop Theater.

Tickets and packages are available for sale online at [kindlingarts.com](#), with individual performance tickets starting at \$10 and packages starting at \$40.

A Nashville native, Malone attended St. Cecilia Academy where she first fell in love with performing arts, going on to get her Masters of Fine Arts from Illinois State University and make it her career.

The Business Journal spoke with Malone to get her insight into how Nashville's already vibrant industry has been impacted by growth and where she thinks its headed, considering Nashville's trajectory.

### How might an upcoming recession impact Nashville's performing arts industry, does it concern you?

It does give me cause for concern, because Nashville is becoming unlivable for artists for lots of different reasons. It is already so difficult for them. In large part, why we created the festival is for them to be able to secure space to simply do the things that they do. So, when you think about another recession and everybody's having to tighten their belts and be more discerning about what they do – I worry about where will artists live, where will they make their work. ... I do believe that the arts and culture is essential to life in Nashville and that Nashvillians have an innate appreciation for it and will always rally around it and help to hold a space for and want to participate in it as a meaningful expression of themselves. Regardless of the economic storms that might be coming, I believe that Nashville will always tend that flame.

### What are the most significant changes you've seen in Nashville's performing arts industry?

The city has grown; more folks are coming to town, and that means new folks with amazing talents and interesting perspectives. ... But as Nashville becomes a more desirable place for folks to live because of this national profile, you see the reality of gentrification happening. You see artists who have helped make a neighborhood amazing and attractive to folks then become priced out of those areas. Ten years ago, you had these amazing little clusters of neighborhoods where artists were working in studios and creating hubs of activity and being in conversation with each other literally being forced out of those buildings and neighborhoods and unable to access the physical space that they need to do their work.

### How have people moving to Nashville from places like New York City and L.A. impacted the scene?

Folks coming in from these other cities have a strong appetite for performing arts, and they are very interested in what's up at the moment and they are very interested in taking a chance on something that's experimental. They are hungry for something that challenges them.

### How does Nashville's scene stack up to other cities?

We're rooted in a very strong tradition of music, songwriting and storytelling, and that really informs the approach, the performances made in the city...In the last five to 10 years, the quality of work, the sophistication of the artistry and robustness of offerings is absolutely on par with what's happening in the other metro areas [New York, L.A., Chicago].

### Is there a style of performing arts that is emerging as the strongest here?

Dance is exploding in the city, and we have a very established theatre community. ... The visual art scene is very strong. We have incredible galleries. ... spoken word and performance of poetry is really buzzing right now.

### What trajectory is the industry on, and where is it headed?

I think we are going to continue to see more work that is experimental in form, and we are going to see work where folks are continuing to dig into interdisciplinary activity. Artists are experimenting with technologies and are excited by reaching out and across genre or discipline divide. ... We are a city that is growing and is diversifying, and we are going to see artists on stage that better represent the population in the city and are telling different stories than have been told in the south. We are going to see artists, by necessity, use more nontraditional spaces for performances. Traditional theater spaces are becoming inaccessible, and you are going to see them make use of spaces you had not thought would be one where performance would happen.

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