

# Columbus National **N**



**TV EXPOSURE RAISES PROFILE OF LOCAL ARTISTS**



# on the **Music** Map



**146** Public Television  
Stations

**84** TV  
Markets

**143** Million Potential  
Viewers

**25** States  
Covered

Photo Courtesy of DAN MITCHELL

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# The public TV show 'Songs at the Center' could do for Columbus what 'Austin City Limits' did for the Texas capital. That's music to the ears of those trying to attract new workers to central Ohio.

By **TC BROWN**

**T**he popularity of a locally produced public television series is putting central Ohio on the national map as a music scene, and the show is spreading so quickly it has been compared to a fast-growing vine.

But that's not all.

The positive attention "Songs at the Center" is generating for Columbus as an arts capital could contribute to the economic wellbeing of the region. Research shows that a vibrant arts and cultural scene is a powerful magnet for drawing highly educated, high-tech workers to a community.

As its third full season began in January, "Songs at the Center" continues to mushroom. In 2015 it aired on four stations. It's now on 146 public television stations in 84 markets in 25 states. And 12 percent of those stations are showing the program in prime time, a mind-blowing coup for a music show, according to public television pundits.

Last year, the show was available to more than 143 million potential viewers in 58 million homes, covering 55 percent of the country. The production's Facebook page says it best: "Like out-of-control Kudzu ... Songs at the Center is spreading unchecked across the American Landscape."

The program, created and hosted by Eric Gnezda, mostly showcases local singer-songwriting performers who sit in the round, playing before a live on-stage and in-house audience at the Peggy R. McConnell Arts Center in Worthington. WOSU-TV carries the program—its only national series—and American Public Television distributes it to other public TV stations around the country.

The production's tagline is straightforward: "Songs. Singers. Stories." It's a music show, no doubt, but because it is focused here, it also tells the Columbus and central Ohio story.

"We are getting the word out nationally that good stuff is happening here," Gnezda says. "And this is good for business. Study after study demonstrates a vital arts scene contributes to the health of a local economy."

Gnezda, a local songwriter and performer himself, mixes interviews with songwriters' performances and other on-stage interaction. The show airs at 11 p.m. Saturdays on WOSU, just prior to "Austin City Limits," an award-winning program that helped establish Austin as a music city and is now the longest running music show on television.

Gnezda believes "Songs at the Center," which also airs on KLRU-TV in Austin, has the same potential for Columbus.

"Forty years ago Austin was not known until 'Austin City Limits' put it on the map," Gnezda says. "There is no 'Midwest sound,' but that is an advantage because we can feature an eclectic mix. Programmers are excited because it is wide open."

And a mix it has been, featuring styles as diverse as Americana, country, folk, American gypsy music, blues, instrumental and Indie songs.

Doug Kridler, Columbus Foundation CEO and former director of the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts, says the program shows off the strengths of the region's arts and creative sector to outsiders.

"The benefits of this are huge because people want to live in a community that is vibrant," Kridler says. "The health and vitality of music in particular is a significant part of that."

The American Planning Association, among other organizations and researchers, has said that when a community recognizes and strengthens its arts and cultural scenes, they can contribute to economic development and become "excellent tools for identifying and promoting other community assets."

Two decades ago, people sought

work wherever they could find it, but that's an old paradigm now, Kridler says.

"In the front of their minds today they look for not only economic opportunity but also quality of life opportunities," he says. "This show helps us win the race for talent, and it absolutely makes a contribution for building a successful community."

Since "Songs at the Center" first aired in 2014, more than 50 local and Ohio-based singer-songwriters have appeared on its stage. But the show also draws a Who's Who of top singer-songwriters from outside Ohio.

Although their names might not be familiar to all, some have penned No. 1 songs and some have been Grammy winners and nominees, including Don Henry, Gretchen Peters, Tom Russell and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer John Oates, half of the renowned Hall & Oates duo.

After his appearance last February, Oates said, "'Songs at the Center' is a most effective national ambassador for the Columbus arts and music scene." That sentiment is exactly what the program aims for, says Jack FitzGerald, the show's executive producer and managing partner.

"We want to carry the message that Columbus has a real vital music and arts scene," FitzGerald says. "A vital arts and music scene is key to getting highly motivated young people to put down roots in a community, and from an economic development standpoint, the message we carry to the nation is crucial to Columbus."

FitzGerald is a former WTVN-AM operations manager who has known and worked with Gnezda for years. He started on this project as a consultant before becoming an equity partner last summer.

"When I saw the early version of the show, I was really impressed with the concept and production values," he says. "Both Eric and I felt very strongly that every aspect of this show (must) reflect on Columbus, including the music, lighting, staging and camera and editing work."

"We've been on a mission for the last 1½ years to carefully upgrade all of those things."

It's truly still a work in progress that has grown exponentially since Gnezda first hatched the idea. He became acquainted with and grew to love



Jack FitzGerald  
and Eric Gnezda







singer-songwriter in-the-round performances while living in Nashville. After moving back to Columbus, he began to consider a similar format here.

The idea merged with thoughts of past performances he gave at a hospital and other businesses where employees were brought on stage; out of that the notion for a television show developed and grew.

Gnezda took his pitch for a show to Jon Cook, the executive director of the McConnell Arts Center in 2013. Cook was enthusiastic.

“Eric grew up here and really embraces Worthington as part of a fabric of himself,” Cook says. “His idea to showcase local songwriters was a no-brainer. He needed a place to hang out to have musicians play for taping and this was his place.”

The program’s prosperity has been good for the MAC and the community, Cook says.

“Songs at the Center’ gives us the higher profile we strive for,” Cook says. “It raises the bar for the songwriting process and shows we are no longer just a test market; this is something we excel at and can share with the rest of the country.”

Gnezda initially produced five shows in 2014 with Andy Herron, the MAC’s operations director, and Alan Beavers of Alba Productions. The show ran in the spring on WCMH-TV’s affiliated MeTV.

The MAC provided startup capital and the three also invested their own money, while two other early sponsors who are still on board—The Basement

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**Jon Cook**  
Executive Director  
McConnell Arts Center

## **UNDERWRITERS FOR SONGS**

- The James Cancer Hospital & Solove Research Institute
- The Ohio Arts Council
- The Academy of Country Music
- The Entrepreneurs Organization
- The Basement Doctor
- France & Associates Insurance Brokers
- Gerber LLC Financial Services
- Greater Columbus Arts Council
- PNC Bank

Doctor and France & Associates Insurance Brokers—kept it afloat.

That summer, WOSU-TV picked up the program for 2015, running a 13-show season right after “Austin City Limits.” Each show is repeated once during a 26-week period.

In fall 2015, the program was syndicated after Stacia Hentz, WOSU’s program director, contacted American Public Television. Gnezda and FitzGerald pitched their program at APT’s annual Fall Marketplace in Atlanta.

“You need 25 national program directors to agree to carry the show before APT will do syndication,” FitzGerald recalls. “We walked out with 65 who agreed to carry it, which was further vindication that we were on the right track.”

The pair hired Kristin Fellows as a station relations manager, and from there the program took off.

“To be honest it was always in the back of my mind that the show had national potential, but I never dreamed it would explode the way it has in less than a year,” Gnezda says. “We’re hustling to keep up with it; there are 100 things we want to improve on every week.”

KCTS-TV in Seattle, which serves all of western and central Washington and most of British Columbia, was the first station to carry the show outside Ohio.

“The growth has been impressive and speaks to the quality of the artists featured and the production style of the show,” says Rob Dunlop, KCTS president and CEO. “This show posi-





tions Columbus well in that it showcases the talent of the city and its place as the heart of it all.”

Although the show draws high praise, there’s no plan to put it on cruise control.

“There are (146) program directors we have to impress every week, and many other shows are vying for program space,” FitzGerald says. “The pressure is on.”

In the early days, Gnezda relied on friends and local music connections to get performers, but the show’s reputation makes it easier to find talent today.

Gnezda also credits Charlie Jackson, owner of Natalie’s Coal Fired Pizza in Worthington, and Alec Wightman, a local attorney who also is a national songwriter promoter and former chairman of the board of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, as great resources for drawing talent. Wightman says he is surprised at how quickly “Songs at the Center” has surged.

“There are other shows around the country like this, but if you had told me three years ago this very local show on one station would make it to the market they’ve established in a couple of years, I’d have thought you were nuts,” he says. “It’s a good opportunity to give local artists a chance to be seen all over the country and a nice opportunity to catch the attention of national artists and attract them to Columbus.”

Wightman also introduced Gnezda and FitzGerald to principals at the James Cancer Hospital & Solove Research Institute who saw the program’s national exposure and agreed to sponsor the current season.

The Academy of Country Music, through its philanthropic arm, Lifting Lives, provided a \$10,000 grant—its first in Ohio—to help underwrite two music and healing shows, a particular passion for Gnezda.

“I’ve done a lot of work with cancer survivors, and on a personal level I’m very committed to music as healing art,” Gnezda says. “We can’t imagine a more fitting underwriter than the both of them.”

The Ohio Arts Council also provided more than \$12,500 through an ArtsNEXT grant, which in part promotes projects that define Ohio as a “cutting-edge place to make ... and experience the arts.”

“The grant is used to increase the reach of the broadcast, help scout talent and to widen diversity and variety of the music,” says Executive Director Donna Collins. “For 12 percent of their airings to be in prime time is unheard of for music programs on public television, and to have Ohio highlighted is really a big deal.”

While the musicians are paid, all shows are free, and people are seated on a first-come basis in the 213-seat auditorium. Another 30 to 40 audience members surround performers on stage. Gnezda and FitzGerald call the MAC a perfect performance spot.

“It blends the intimacy of songwriters in the round in a club atmosphere with the majesty of an auditorium,” Gnezda says. “It’s a perfect venue, and more than one songwriter has said it is one of the nicest facilities in the coun-

try for this genre.”

When shooting, it’s a long day. Four to eight songwriters do three songs each, and two to four shows are filmed. The show occasionally goes on location and has filmed at the Columbus Arts Festival, Shadowbox Theater, Natalie’s, Musicol and Sonic Lounge Recording Studio, and Gerber LLC.

Meanwhile, the local musicians are being seen, and in many cases getting their music sold, in cities across the country. It’s good for them and good for the region, says Michael S. Brown, vice president of strategic development for Experience Columbus.

“With America so fragmented with millions of options for all the availability of music, what Eric is doing is creating a real lighthouse,” Brown says. “Over time this program is being seen by millions of eyes, and that helps us put a stake in the ground for what kind of city we are.”

And as the new season progresses, continued growth remains on the agenda. “We would love to get in LA and Boston,” FitzGerald says.

Gnezda is confident.

“We have a TV campaign that shows the US where we are going, and artists here are getting sales from all over the country,” he says. “My mission is largely fueled by wanting to showcase our beloved city.”

*TC Brown is a freelance writer.*