

MARCH 18, 2021

In a year of unparalleled tumult, the **National Independent Venue Association (NIVA)** went from formation to national legislation in just 8 months, emerging in 2020 as the leading voice for America's independent venues.

NIVA was the driving force behind lobbying and grassroots efforts to pass the bipartisan [Save Our Stages Act](#), now officially named the [Shuttered Venues Operators Grant Program](#), which was signed into law as part of the second COVID-19 Relief Bill on December 27, 2020. The program allocates \$15 billion in federal emergency relief via the Small Business Administration, which as of March 1st 2021 has yet to become available, leaving an industry that had been and continues to be shuttered since March 2020 on the verge of mass collapse.

Formed in mid-April 2020, just three weeks into the pandemic's shutdown, NIVA now consists of more than 3,000 venues, promoters, and festivals representing every state, Washington, D.C., and Guam. With the support of its members and their fans, the organization successfully launched a nationwide movement to [#SaveOurStages](#), pulling together voices big and small to save independent venues and promoters on the brink of collapse due to COVID-19 shutdowns. Legislation was the driving focus, but there has been so much more.

In the months between the association's launch and the successful passage of federal aid, the [NIVA Emergency Relief Fund](#) was established to provide critical short-term assistance to those independent venues and promoters in the U.S. on the precipice of closing forever as they await federal relief. The organization also launched a three-day virtual music festival and fundraiser with YouTube Music called [#SOS Fest](#), expanded into the charitable non-profit realm with the creation of the 501(c)3 National Independent Venue Foundation, and began making plans for a post-COVID future with a spotlight on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the industry.

### **Coming Together**

In March 2020, independent venues that had once been bastions of social unity were forced shut as the dangers of COVID-19 required social distancing. This complete shuttering of America's independent live entertainment ecosystem threatened it with total collapse.

Independent venue owners across the country were staring into a void with no revenue and overwhelmingly high overhead expenses, and they were doing it alone. An entire American industry was about to go dark, with no one to save them. Washington didn't understand them, and hadn't thought about them. And yet these small businesses are a vital part of their community in every state, city, and congressional district.

Just weeks before the crisis hit, Marauder's Rev. Moose and World Cafe Live's Hal Real had discussed plans for an industry association. With no way of knowing the pandemic was about to hit, they agreed to invite industry leaders to meet in Philadelphia in the summer to come up with an organizational plan.

On March 12, 2020 Marauder organized a Zoom call as part of the firm's work running Independent Venue Week in the US with 75 independent venues and stakeholders dialing in to discuss COVID-19's disruption of the live entertainment industry and the potential impact on independent venues.

Among those on the initial call was Austin venue owner and future NIVA Treasurer Stephen Sternschein, who had just launched the "Banding Together" initiative to help displaced bands in the wake of SXSW's cancellation. Also invited to speak on the call were an event producer from the U.K. and a US-based entertainment lawyer specializing in the live industry. The message from the U.K. contingent was clear: "It's going to be so much worse than you expect." The message from the lawyer was equally chilling: "Hold on to every penny you have. This is going to be a financial disaster."

The situation was dire and the entire industry was facing the unknown. Research showed 90% of independent venues were on the brink of collapse.

The initial Independent Venue Week Town Hall call turned into a weekly occurrence that would extend throughout 2020. The second week's call capped out at 100 people because of Zoom limits. The same thing happened the following week, before the accounts were upgraded.

These early planning calls were essential to what would come next for the burgeoning coalition. Exploratory committees were created and discussions were held on how to get government help, rally ways to support one another, and secure bipartisan support for legislation to save the industry. A point person in each city would be needed to push messaging. Audrey Fix Schaefer (I.M.P./9:30 Club, Lincoln Theatre, The Anthem, Merriweather Post Pavilion) was brought on board to run communications. The group then held an election for Board Members.

On April 9, 2020 NIVA's official formation as a 501(c)(6) trade association was announced to potential members and the board was introduced: President Dayna Frank (First Avenue), Vice President Stephen Chilton (The Rebel Lounge/Psyko Steve Presents), Vice President Justin Kantor, ((Le) Poisson Rouge), Treasurer Stephen Sternschein (Heard Presents), Secretary Hal Real (World Cafe Live), and Executive Director Rev. Moose (Marauder).

As a new organization, NIVA knew it needed expert advice and guidance if it was to have any chance on Capitol Hill. So a committee was formed to search for and select lobbying partners who understood what was at stake and were unafraid of taking on the seemingly-impossible. NIVA needed to educate politicians on the cultural and economic impacts of these independent small businesses, and explain why, as gathering places, their business model had been crushed in such a way that was so dire and different from other industries.

NIVA President Dayna Frank, CEO of Minneapolis' famed First Avenue, was an early driver of advocacy being at the forefront of the new group's mission. Under her guidance NIVA carved the country into 48 precincts, assigning state precinct captains to work as on-the-ground organizers with local venues and elected officials in coordination with a national strategy.

On April 13, 2020, thanks to funding provided by See Tickets, Etix, and Lyte, the team brought on powerhouse Washington D.C. lobbying firm Akin Gump, led by Casey Higgins with collaboration by Ed Pagano, to represent NIVA on Capitol Hill and advocate for federal assistance for NIVA's members.

On April 16, 2020, at the second Independent Venue Week Town Hall since NIVA's creation, it was announced that venues from every state in the nation (save for Nevada and Alaska at the time) had signed on as members. By the end of that call businesses in Nevada and Alaska had also joined, and the organization boasted members including The Troubadour in Los Angeles, The Exit/In in Nashville, (Le) Poisson Rouge in New York City, xBk in Des Moines, and The Pabst Theater in Milwaukee.

After only a week of operations, the nascent organization had signed up 500 members across all 50 states, and set up a precinct system with 48 chairs in order to expedite regional and statewide operations. Akin Gump helped promoters become lobbyists, providing training to members in every state on how to reach out to elected officials, represent the cause, and secure Congressional support.

Adam Hartke (WAVE, The Cotillion) came on board as co-chair of the Advocacy Committee and the group introduced itself to Congress on April 22nd, 2020 in a [letter to leadership](#).

NIVA then launched the #SaveOurStages campaign, named by Stephen Chilton, to rally music fans to lobby Congress while simultaneously leading a communications campaign highlighting the dire economic plight of these local small businesses – and showcase the economic engines they are for their communities. The Marketing Committee was initially led by Lennora Jules from the Pabst Group, with NIVA's logo and additional graphic design needs created by her colleague Jason Gierl. Patrick Wilson, a booker with White Eagle Hall, turned website designer for a weekend and created the association's first online presence. Jamie Loeb came on board as Head of Video, spearheading all video communications for the group.

The group gained traction through extensive [press coverage](#). In Washington, a heartfelt letter championing NIVA's cause - led by Representatives Cleaver and Willams [to congressional leadership](#) (sent May 14, 2020 and Senators Cornyn and Carper [to senate leadership](#) (sent May 21, 2020 - put NIVA on Congress' radar screen when it garnered 43 Senate and 93 House signatures.

Grassroots support built quickly with an initial 500,000 emails going to Congress in support of the #SaveOurStages cause.

On June 18, 2020, 600 artists, including Dave Grohl of Foo Fighters, Mavis Staples, Lady Gaga, André 3000, Coldplay, Willie Nelson, Billie Eilish, Gary Clark Jr., Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, Miranda Lambert, Billy Joel, Earth Wind & Fire, Kacey Musgraves, Leon Bridges, Wyclef Jean, and Bon Iver, along with beloved comedians such as Jay Leno, Tiffany Haddish, Jeff Foxworthy, Jerry Seinfeld, and Tig Notaro, issued a [letter to Congress](#) asking legislators to provide urgent financial support for independent venues and promoters in the U.S.

The rest of the music business also rallied behind the cause, launching a July 14, 2020 [letter to congress](#) led by Spotify in support of the [RESTART ACT](#).

By mid-July 2020, less than four months into the organization's existence, champions of NIVA's cause had sent more than [1 Million emails](#) imploring their representatives to #SaveOurStages.

On July 22, 2020, Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and John Cornyn (R-TX) introduced the bipartisan [Save Our Stages Act](#) to save the independent venue infrastructure across America from the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns. NIVA also lobbied for extended unemployment and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, as 95 percent of its members' employees had been furloughed and needed more help.

August 2020 Senate Minority leader Charles Schumer (D-NY) came on board as co-sponsor for the Save Our Stages Act, holding a press conference in Brooklyn in front of independent venue Baby's All Right. Senator Schumer, along with local venue owners and LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy, spoke to the critical nature of independent venues in our cultural and economic ecosystem.

Despite the widespread bipartisan support of elected leaders and the grassroots efforts of industry, fans, and talent, the next COVID Relief Package had yet to pass.

In September 2020 the organization [celebrated the inclusion](#) of the Save Our Stages Act into the updated [HEROES ACT](#), which passed the House of Representatives, but was not voted on by the Senate.

With [no timely help on the horizon](#), the association expanded its focus in hopes of helping sustain members as they waited for federal aid. NIVA launched the NIVA [Emergency Relief Fund](#), with The Giving Back Fund as its 501(c)3 fiscal sponsor, to raise money and provide grants to independent venues and promoters at greatest risk of going under while awaiting the passage of the Save Our Stages Act.

The following month, NIVA launched its most public-facing effort yet, [a partnership with YouTube Music](#) and the launch of the [#SaveOurStages Festival](#), a three-day fundraising event streamed exclusively on YouTube featuring a diverse lineup of 35 superstars and emerging artists performing live (following testing and safety protocols) from 25 of the nation's most storied independent music venues.

“Some of the most recognized names in rock, country, pop and hip-hop are coming together for the most star-packed, culturally consequential music experience of the pandemic – the Save Our Stages Festival, October 16-18, 2020 on YouTube. With the fate of live music at stake, YouTube Music and the National Independent Venue Association (NIVA) have joined forces to produce #SOSFEST and raise money and awareness for the plight of independent venues forced to indefinitely close because of the novel coronavirus,” said [Billboard](#) of the event, which raised \$1.8 Million for the cause that weekend.

#### Creation of the National Independent Venue Foundation:

In November 2020 NIVA, more than 3,000 members strong, [announced the formation](#) of the [National Independent Venue Foundation](#) (NIVF) a non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

NIVF seeks to partner and fundraise through individual, corporate and foundation donations to expand upon NIVA's mission to preserve and nurture the ecosystem of independent live performance venues and promoters throughout the U.S. by also seeking to support a transparent, competitive marketplace serving a diverse and inclusive community of artists, fans, and industry workers.

While it is built on the same guiding principles as NIVA, NIVF focuses on separate, supplemental initiatives such as the NIVA Emergency Relief Fund. The Foundation aims to learn from existing best practices and training programs undertaken by NIVA's members and expand upon them to provide education and community programming, employee training and support, and economic development initiatives to further develop both organizations' efforts to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion. Long-term, the goal is to establish an endowment fund to assure sustainability of NIVA and Foundation programming for years to come.

NIVF is led by its board which is made up of President Hal Real (World Cafe Live, NIVA Secretary), Executive Director Rev. Moose (Marauder, NIVA Executive Director), Vice President Tobi Parks (xBk Live), Secretary/ Treasurer Laura Wilson (The Bohemian Foundation), and Board Members Torrie Allen, (Arts Midwest), Annie Brinn (Warner Music Group), Taneshia Nash Laird (Newark Symphony Hall), and David M. Mayeri, (Berkeley Music Group, The UC Theatre).

#### Legislation Passes:

As 2020 came to a close, NIVA celebrated the passage of the Save Our Stages Act, now known as the Shuttered Venues Operators Grant, in the second federal COVID-19 relief package.

The legislation will provide critical help to shuttered businesses by providing a grant equal to 45% of gross revenue from 2019, with a cap of \$10 million per entity. This grant funding will help recipients stay afloat until reopening by helping with expenses like payroll and benefits, rent and mortgage, utilities, insurance, PPE, and other ordinary and necessary business expenses.

“This is the lifeline our industry so desperately needs to emerge from a devastating year,” said Dayna Frank, Owner & CEO, First Avenue Productions and Board President of NIVA. “Without

independent venues and promoters across the country working to engage their communities, staff, and artists, our voices would not have been heard – we are thankful for those tireless efforts. Careers came to a standstill overnight, and people continue to face personal hardships, which is why legislation like this and extending Pandemic Unemployment Assistance is essential. Our immense gratitude goes, in particular, to Senator Klobuchar, Senator Cornyn, and Senator Schumer, for securing the future of independent venues and promoters for generations to come.”

Few gave this brand new organization with no staff and no lobbying experience any hope for securing emergency aid. Undeterred in its fight for the industry’s survival, NIVA worked with Akin Gump, led by Casey Higgins with collaboration from Ed Pagano, to bring the fight to Congress. “Without Akin Gump’s belief in our cause and advice on how to get this done, we could never have gotten the Save Our Stages Act passed,” said Adam Hartke, owner of The Cotillion and WAVE in Wichita and co-chair of NIVA’s Advocacy Committee. “They fought for us like they were us. The entire industry will forever owe them a debt of gratitude.”

This was a true grassroots effort. NIVA members reached out to their fans letting them know of the dire situation: venues having no revenue and enormous overhead potentially leading to their shutting forever.

#### Organizational Growth:

In January 2021, NIVA expanded its existing board from five to nine members. NIVA’s original board consisted of President Dayna Frank (First Avenue), Vice President Justin Kantor ((Le) Poisson Rouge), Vice President Stephen Chilton (The Rebel Lounge/Psyko Steve Presents), Secretary Hal Real (World Cafe Live, NIVF President), Treasurer Stephen Sternschein (Heard Presents), and Executive Director Rev. Moose (Marauder, NIVF Executive Director). The expanded board now includes: Amy Madrigali (Troubadour), Andre Perry (The Englert Theatre, Mission Creek Festival), Audrey Fix Schaefer (I.M.P./9:30 Club, Lincoln Theatre, The Anthem, Merriweather Post Pavilion, Lincoln Theatre), Grace Blake (Iridium).

The [NIVA Advisory Board](#) was announced February 11, 2021. It consists of: Boris Patronoff (CEO, See Tickets - North America and NIVA Advisory Board Chair), Amy Cranford (SVP of Publishing Administration, Sony Music Publishing), Cameo Carlson (President, mtheory Nashville), Christian McBride (Artist), Dave Grohl (Artist, Foo Fighters), Ed Suwanjindar (Artist and Label Services, Spotify), Erika Spielfoch (VP of Touring & Special Events, Interscope/UMG), Janette Berrios (Head of Corporate Marketing, Symphonic), Jimmy Jam (Songwriter/Producer), Killer Mike (Artist, Run The Jewels), Lawrence Peryer (CSO, Lyte), Lyor Cohen (Global Head of Music, YouTube & Google), Michele Suzanne Ballantyne (COO, RIAA), Noelle Scaggs (Artist, Fitz and the Tantrums & Founder of Diversify The Stage), Dr. Portia Sabin (President, Music Biz Association), Quincy Jones (Artist/Producer), Rich Medina (Independent Artist/DJ), Richard Burgess (CEO, A2IM), Tiffany Kerns (Executive Director, CMA Foundation & Vice President of Community Outreach, CMA), Travis Janovich (CEO, eTix), and Wendy Ong (President, Tap Management - North America).

#### Looking Ahead:

Today NIVA is on the front lines of activism and policy, fighting for an industry decimated by COVID to get the relief they need to survive while envisioning, expanding, and ensuring a brighter, more equitable, and fully sustainable future for its members beyond COVID-19.

As the organization neared its one year anniversary, NIVA's continued advocacy efforts continued to bear fruit.

On March 11, 2021, President Biden signed into law the [American Rescue Plan](#), which Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's Amendment to the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG) provisions. The previous law forbade eligible entities to apply for both Payroll Protection Plan (PPP2) after Dec. 27, 2020 and the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG, also known as the Save Our Stages Act). The revised provision enables eligible entities to apply for PPP2 and also seek SVOG when the applications are made available by the Small Business Administration.

This change can save countless venues from bankruptcy, as the immediate PPP2 money will help them hold on until the SVOG funds are made available.

Next on the horizon, NIVA is focused on the implementation of the SVOG, reopening, evolution into a sustaining association representing and bolstering independent venues and promoters.