

## How To Create A Blues Society / Support Group The Answers Are Out There / Let's Get Started

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The rapid growth in the number of music support organizations has done wonders in stabilizing the market and insuring the availability of "non-mainstream" music. There are now over 150 blues societies worldwide. Some are local and some are regional, but all are working for the common good of keeping the blues alive and healthy. Blues now relies heavily on a grass roots network of societies, festivals, and associations for support. Blues support groups help keep artists going by producing festivals, booking club gigs, offering educational programs for adults and students, or just by inspiring people to come out and dig the great music. Blues fans that band together for the support of the music they love play an irreplaceable role in the international blues scene.

Folks decide to start blues societies for a variety of reasons. Some organize in order to present a festival or other major event. Some organize in order to provide a built-in and guaranteed audience and support group in order to bring Blues acts into local clubs. Some simply get together to share their love of the Blues. Starting a Blues society can be an easy proposition. So, what follows is some advice on how to get the 'blues ball' rolling in your area.

First, and I cannot stress this enough, don't try to re-invent the wheel. It's best to model your organization on pre-existing successful examples. Don't try to figure all the details out yourself from the beginning. Look to other groups who are actively doing positive things for the music. The folks who run these organizations are great people, just like you, who don't mind at all sharing their experience with others. If you are interested in creating a blues support group in your area, a good first step is to join The Blues Foundation ([www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org)) as an individual member, and they will provide you with a list of several recommended contacts who will be able to help you get started. Or, you can use the Internet to search out other such blues societies on your own in the search for advice and input.

What information are you looking for? Well, you need to have examples of organizational mission statements, charter and/or by-laws in writing to describe the organization and that contains complete job descriptions of elected officers and the board of directors, voting and election procedures, information on qualifying as a "not for profit" organization (501(c)(3) a list of the committees needed to fulfill your goals, how much and how to collect membership fees, coordination and recruitment of members and volunteers, and eventually how to put out a newsletter, build a web site, raise funds and write grants, and produce and promote events, both for entertainment and educational purposes. This may seem like a long list of needs and a daunting task, but believe me, the information is out there for the asking. Start networking and asking questions, and don't try to do it all from scratch. Build on the success and easily acquired input and advice of others who are doing what you desire to accomplish for your community. Always look to improve and streamline the models and ideas you discover to suit your particular situation.

After you have requested and received the information you need, the next step is to call an organizational meeting. Reach out to your community for membership and support. Send out an open letter of invitation to the community published more than once in the newspaper. Call together friends who you know are interested in forming a blues support group/society, or advertise the meeting in places where it is likely to be seen or heard by interested blues fans. You could hold this meeting in a living room, at community center or a "Y" conference room. At this meeting, attendees can discuss and move forward on the remaining steps to starting a blues society, but you'll need to do a bit of homework first.

Somebody is going to have to moderate the first few meetings while the group gets organized. Until you are able to elect officers and create a board of directors, one person, or a small volunteer committee can do this. Either way, it is important to start getting used to being organized in order to carry on constructive discussions, and eventually get things done. So I suggest, initially, that the moderator(s) become familiar with Robert's Rules of Order (<http://www.rulesonline.com>)(<http://www.robertsrules.com>) in regard to structuring a meeting and parliamentary procedure. By following such an outline for running a meeting, you will avoid anarchy and maintain some continuity in running the meeting and giving some order to the issues that need to be discussed.

So, your first task, as a group, is to define what you want to become; what your mission is; why do you exist. You have to determine what you want your organization's focus and goals to be. You might be frustrated with the local blues scene, particularly with the fact that only a few blues artists are presented in your area. You want to be the ones filling that void, and also increase the amount of blues activity in your area by acting as catalysts, the blues "experts" in the community.

The Articles of Incorporation, the by-laws and the application for federal tax-exempt status all require addressing, in some degree, the purpose of the society. The mission statement may be the fullest expression of this purpose. These objectives and your focus may evolve over time. What is clear is that from the outset a society must craft one or more sentences that encapsulate the goals of your organization. It sounds simplistic, but a well-crafted mission statement provides a touchstone for your organization that can provide guidance in any endeavor you undertake. It is important to remember that whatever is decided is not cast in stone. Mission statements should be reviewed and revised periodically. As a "living" document, it provides the framework for the development of your society's program. It also provides a structure against which some meaningful evaluation of your society's effectiveness could be measured. Only you can determine what mission is best for you.

Here are the major points you'll want to include in your mission statement:

- á Preserving Blues history.
- á Celebrating Blues excellence.
- á Supporting Blues education.

Mission statement example:

The \_\_\_\_\_ Blues SocietyAssoc./Club is an organization dedicated to the preservation of the blues culture. Our stated mission is to assist in the preservation of the blues as a part of our cultural heritage and tradition through public awareness and education, and through fostering an environment for the blues artist to grow and develop.

We will:

1. Provide a venue for local artists to develop and perform through sponsoring, producing and promoting the following types of events:
  - a. Regularly scheduled showcases or jam sessions where artists can perform with professional and semi-professional musicians before a live audience.
  - b. Annual talent contests to qualify for the national blues talent contest (The Blues Foundation) which are limited to acts or individual artists who are not signed to a recording contract or professional management contract.
2. Contribute to the cultural diversity of the community by sponsoring, producing and promoting a regularly scheduled, annual festival of professional

blues artists.

3. Maintain an archive of blues recordings, which is available to the public for the purposes of research and education.
4. Maintain a registry of performing blues musicians within our community, and our state.
5. Collaborate with other concerned organizations, agencies or individuals in providing educational or entertaining events that are within the scope of our stated mission/purpose/goal.
6. Publish a newsletter to communicate information on regional blues activities, releases of blues recordings, and features of historical and cultural significance, and \_\_\_\_\_ Blues Society/Assoc./Club business to the membership, and other concerned parties.

Generally, there are two types of blues societies; board/director run, and member driven. Both of these types of organizations have proven to work well. In either example, it's crucial to focus on the big picture, and not get wrapped up in personal motives for creating such a support group. "If it's good for the blues ... it's good for all of us." That's my catch phrase when considering options and making decisions. The focus should not be on your specific desires, but on what is best for all. If the organization can become effective and blues music thrives in your area, that's the payoff ... for everyone in the community, and for the blues. If you enter into this activity/organization in order to help nurture blues music in your area, and place your own agenda second, everyone wins.

You'll need to decide how often to meet. You might decide to begin meeting on a bi-weekly basis, or monthly. You'll need to come up with a name for your organization. The key to getting the legal aspects taken care of is enticing a blues lovin' attorney to join your organization. The attorney can then help you draw up our by-laws and articles of not-for-profit service organization incorporation. He will then file them with the state Attorney Generals Office. Next, filing papers with the Internal Revenue Service for tax exempt (501(c)(3)) status.

The rules for internal management of a nonprofit corporation are called by-laws. The founding members or directors, if existing, should establish the by-laws. Again, an attorney may prove helpful to the drafting of the by-laws. The first step in the establishment of by-laws is to review the by-laws of similar organizations and then adapt them to the needs of your society. By-laws will usually include provisions with respect to:

- á Its purposes, i.e., non-profit, Blues education, etc. (it is good idea to restate in the by-laws the purpose contained in the Articles of Incorporation).
- á The election and duties of directors and/or officers.
- á The role of members (if any).
- á Meetings of directors and members, including dates, notice, quorum and voting.
- á Committees (if any).
- á Maintenance of records.
- á Financial practices including fiscal year, contracting, borrowing and loans.
- á By-law amendment process.
- á Dissolution of the entity.

The by-laws should be submitted to the IRS with the application for recognition of tax-exempt status. Periodically, the society should review and amend, as necessary, the by-laws.

After you feel you have a strong basic core group of members who are willing to put in some time (and a little money), your first public program could be an introductory membership campaign concert/club party featuring the local blues

talent. A FREE blues party. Perhaps an area bar/club will cooperate by supplying a venue. Or, you could have a blues picnic in a park or on private land.

Besides doing whatever media publicity you can afford, each member should be given the responsibility of bringing in the names/addresses of ten (or more?) blues enthusiasts they know. You then compile these lists into one mailing list. Send out invitations, in letter form, that includes your new logo, news of your forming this blues music support group, your mission statement, goals, and publicity information regarding the planned free blues 'party/concert/picnic.' Have an experienced person MC the event so that the show comes off in a professional manner, and that all the musicians/bands are introduced with equanimity throughout the evening. Include as many local performers as possible to maintain and project a sense of nurturing to all of those in the blues music community and generate goodwill. You could 'reward' the bands with family memberships. And be sure to have a table set up to sell memberships and offer information, and volunteers to work at the table at all times. If all goes as planned, this event will give the blues society some much needed working capital, good publicity, and larger and more diverse membership/volunteer base.

The next step is to continue with such good works. Perhaps a concert at a local school or college, booking and promoting local and out-of-town talent in local clubs, holding blues CD 'listening sessions' to share the music with others, blues film/video showings, as well as sponsoring educational workshops for adults and children. Look into getting grants on the local, state, regional, and national levels from arts councils, charitable foundations, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in Wash. DC). The best route in your fund-raising activities would be to first explore funding opportunities at your local arts agency. Once you've established a working relationship locally, investigate and make application for funding with your state arts agency. Then seek National Endowment funds and corporate and private foundation dollars. Once you get established, you can even apply for grants to help cover the expense of renting a permanent office space, and even to help pay for the expense of hiring somebody to work in your permanent office space. Until then, you might function quite effectively out of members' homes.

The main points I'd like you to keep in mind are; to focus on the big picture of nurturing the blues in your area, to be sure to include educational opportunities that involve people in your community of all ages, and to not get hung up in trying to reinvent the wheel ... when faced with a problem, difficult issue, or need for ideas ... look to others for help, NETWORK with like-minded blues music support groups in order to become more aware of alternatives, ideas, and opportunities. You'll be glad you did.

The purpose of this article has been to give you a feel for all that is involved in starting and sustaining successful support organizations. Always remember to focus on the big picture; it's not about you or me, it's about the blues, and educating the public about the watershed of American popular music that is the blues. You will be rewarded for helping others, beyond your own personal needs or wants. Create the organization to help out the community ... keep your personal agenda second ... and you will get back much more than you expect ... and share some great music and good times along the way.

Sources:

The Blues Foundation - [www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org)

Establishing A Jazz Support Organization: A Case Study  
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With over 40 years of performing experience, Michael "Hawkeye" Herman personifies the range of possibilities in blues and folk music. His dynamic blues guitar and vocal abilities have won him a faithful following, and he leads a very active touring schedule of performances at festivals, concerts, school programs, and educational workshops throughout the US/Canada/Europe. His original music has been included in video documentaries, and in four hit theatrical productions, and his latest CDs, "Everyday Living," "Blues Alive!," and "It's All Blue To Me," have been greeted with rave reviews. Hawkeye's journalistic efforts have been printed in numerous national and regional blues and music related periodicals. In 1998 he was the recipient of the "Keeping the Blues Alive" Award for Achievement in Education from the Blues Foundation in Memphis. He served on the Board of Directors of the Blues Foundation for six years. Hawkeye was inducted into the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 2004. He is the co-founder of the Rogue Valley Blues Festival, Ashland, OR.