

# THE LEARNING SERIES: CASE STUDY

## CALGARY FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL

The Fall 2016, ArtsBuild Ontario (ABO) launched The Learning Series - a collection of workshops, webinars and resources that support our core programs, including SpaceFinder. Through The Learning Series, ABO aimed to deliver accessible and relevant information around best practices to support our creative spaces. Over the last two years, many of the areas covered in The Learning Series focused on the topic of creative space rentals.

We interviewed three webinar attendees to showcase their creative space, learn more about their projects and share what they gained from the program. This case study highlights the Calgary Folk Music Festival.

### CALGARY FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL AND FESTIVAL HALL

Founded in 1980, the Calgary Folk Music Festival (CFMF) gears up every year in late July for a four-day event, featuring over 100 performances to a 52,000+ audience. In 2013, the Folk Festival Society of Calgary – the charitable organization that manages CFMF – completed construction on their purpose-built concert space and permanent home: Festival Hall.



Their new space at Festival Hall allowed the CFMF to expand their year-round programming. It provides them with office space for administrative staff and meeting space for their 1900+ volunteer base. Festival Hall is also available for rental for local arts groups and community events. It was quickly realized that their new space was in high-demand, not just by creatives, but also weddings and corporate/private events. “There is a real demand in Calgary for useable creative space and black box theatre space, especially in the size that we operate. We fit this really great niche,” shares Liam Prost who is the Hall Rentals Manager with CFMF.

The Festival’s rentals program has evolved since opening the doors of Festival Hall to the community five years ago. Over the last few years, the Festival has built up a consistent renter base of artists and other creatives. But their space has also become a popular wedding venue, with 12 weekends of weddings booked this summer. This can be a challenging for a non-profit managing a venue with a mission to provide space for the community, creatives and themselves. Liam has attended many

Learning Series webinars offered by ABO to learn more about how other arts organizations are tackling rentals in their creative space.

### WEBINAR HIGHLIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES APPLIED

Two webinars that stood out to Liam were “Marketing Your Rental Spaces” presented by Rob Zeilder of The Cotton Factory in Hamilton, Ontario and “Using Data to Find Your Renter Audience.”

While these webinars focused on marketing, the Festival’s main area of interest was not to increase a renter audience; rather it was to learn ways to communicate more effectively about their space. “I have gone back to the webinar and it’s informed some of the ways in which we have laid out our website and how we are adjusting our rental packages moving forward,” shares Liam. “After the webinar, we made more of a visual, condensed rental package that also lives on our website.” The Festival Hall is in the process of implementing different rental packages for weddings, private events and public performances; all of which will be posted clearly on their website. Liam also mentions that he has plan to create a video of the space and people from The Festival Society to demonstrate what the space can do for renters.



Another Learning Series webinar, “Using Data to Find Your Renter Audience,” has also informed how the Festival communicates with their renter audience. “We’re implementing some of those strategies to get more patron data from rental events,” notes Liam. They have added a tool called [Zenreach](#), which collects demographical data from email addresses associated with their WiFi network. Liam mentioned that he anticipates that Zenreach will be useful to the Festival for educating patrons of rental events about CFMF. Additionally, the Festival is also using data segmentation from surveys to identify different types of audience groups coming through the venue and craft their message around respective needs and expectations.

The webinars in the Learning Series helped Liam realize new visions and goals for the Festival Hall rentals program. The “Staffing Strategies for Creative Space Rentals” webinar featured guest presenter Angie Stillitano of the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre/Al Green Theatre, a large community and theatre in downtown Toronto. While Festival Hall is perhaps smaller in size and staff, Liam could see what their end goal as a venue could be. “It was interesting to envision if we were a fully staffed, full service hotel, with all of the resources to offer everything. We could not only do tech, but we could bring ushers and do front of house for every rental. What would that look like?” Even if this vision for Festival Hall is not immediately on the horizon, Liam noted that it was useful to consider as they continual to reevaluate their rentals program.

## WHAT'S NEXT

The Festival has a goal of making Festival Hall even more available to arts and cultural uses over the next year. “Part of the conversation we are having right now is vibrancy – what is going to add vibrancy to the space,” shares Liam. While weddings have been lucrative for CFMF, they are now in a position where they are making money back on the space. They can put themselves out there, build more community partnerships and take more risk with what happens in the space.

The Festival Society is looking to engage more community arts organizations to rent and animate their venue. One of the groups they are hoping to attract are more media arts organizations, having recently programmed their own movie. “We want to say ‘we’ve got this space and we want you to be in here’ and start these conversations to see what they would need in order to be able to do that,” notes Liam. The Festival plans to engage groups like the Calgary Underground Film Festival, Calgary Cinematheque and the Fifth Reel. They are also looking to promote their space to performing arts and theatre groups in the community.

In addition to bringing more local arts and culture into the space, the Festival plans to build capacity and improve the offerings of Festival Hall – all while maintaining flexibility with renters. Liam mentions that “flexibility with renters is a finicky part of what has made us attracted this far.” To make their space more fully featured, they currently implementing more services to their rentals, which includes a fully stocked bar for performances, a full PA system, cinema projector and screen, front of house support and ticketing resources. “We’re pretty unique for what we do here, and I am excited about what we will do in the up and coming year,” shares Liam.