

12-13-2007

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## Recommended Citation

Wiltsee, Chris, "Unjuried. Uncensored. Always All Ages" (2007). *Broad Street Studio*. 37.  
<https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/bss/37>

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# WIRETAP

Ideas and action for a new generation

## Unjuried. Uncensored. Always All Ages

By Chris Wiltsee, WireTap

Posted on December 13, 2007, Printed on January 13, 2009

<http://www.wiretapmag.org/movement/43344/>

*(Editor's note: This is the fifth of a ten-part series produced by the All Ages Movement Project, in which the leaders of community-based youth organizations share tips and tricks of their trade. All stories are researched and written by members of organizations using indie music -- punk, hip-hop, rock, noise, electronic and more -- as a vehicle for social change.)*

It's a long journey from Oakland to Providence, but that was an adventure that Jhamel (17-year-old-artist from Youth Movement Records) and I were eager to make in order to witness the much-heralded arts organization AS220. Over the next two days, we would have the chance to meet their founder and staff, enjoy their summer street fair, the Foo Fest, and tour their numerous facilities. We both considered this a great opportunity to learn and "soak game" from a veteran institution.

Neither of us knew what to expect from Providence, but there's nothing like blowing out low expectations. The Providence that we discovered was thoroughly charming. We counted at least four free music and arts events going on downtown that weekend, and the architecture was beautiful and historic. Jhamel kept saying, "I've gotta bring my girlfriend here someday. This is a romantic-ass town!"



Soon after we met the generous and upbeat Rhode Show coordinator, David Gonzalez, who would serve as our tour guide and host. The Rhode Show is the youth music performance troupe associated with Broad Street Studios, AS220's youth arts program. They were scheduled to perform at the Foo Fest later that afternoon. The Foo Fest is essentially a big block party and street fair that goes down each summer in front of AS220's main space. It boasts a stage with live music,

an outdoor record and arts store, a theater and their café. It's a relaxed and funky community scene.

The Broad Street Studio, founded in 2001, is AS220's youngest program. The program has three core areas: music and performing arts, visual arts and literary arts. The Studio draws almost all of their youth from the local "training school," which is essentially juvenile hall. Youth are paid a stipend to get involved in the program as visual artists, musicians, poets and performers. The most celebrated project of the Broad Street Studio is the Rhode Show, a hip-hop performance troupe that produces inspiring, high-energy hip hop and pushes positive and progressive social themes. The production quality is high, and everybody takes a great deal of pride in their process and finished product.

Broad Street Studio took its name from its former location on the other side of the tracks, in one of Providence's lower-income neighborhoods, where most of the youth in the program live. For a time, AS220 ran their youth program at a facility in that neighborhood because of its proximity to youth living on Broad Street. There were problems, however, with the original Broad Street Studio facility, and ultimately they brought the program downtown into the main AS220 facility.

Umberto, or "Bert" Crenca, the founder of AS220, reflected that the existence of a youth program within AS220 was a very "healthy and challenging thing" for their community and constituents. Like all American cities, there's a great disparity between the haves and have nots that falls heavily along lines of color and geography. The presence of low-income youth of color, in Crenca's words, helps to keep the organization "in touch and from becoming too artsy-fartsy."

We were shown around AS220's impressive main facilities. The historic downtown building boasts the AS220 club, with another theater being opened next door, a fully functioning café and upstairs studios, including a silkscreen industry, a recording

### AS220 Vitals:

**Located:** Providence, R.I.

**Founded:** 1985

**Org Type:** Nonprofit  
community arts center

**Music Genre of Focus:**  
Everything.

**Goings On:** A nightclub with music almost every night of the week, a recording studio, silk-screen studio, a performance space, a community darkroom, 19 artist live/work studios, four galleries, the Broad Street Studio (youth program) and a recently renovated bar and café.

**Where the money comes from:** More than 90 percent of its \$1.3 million budget is earned revenue from AS220's five commercial/residential properties. Broad Street Studio is grant-supported (\$400,000 per year).

**Founding Story:** AS220 founder Umberto, or "Bert," Crenca is one in a million. He started this artist collective 22 years ago with a ramshackle space, the Hells Angels for security, \$800 and a commitment to artistic freedom when he was leaving a marriage and recommitting himself to

lab and several multipurpose spaces. We caught up with the Rhode Show youth, who were about 10 deep and basically lounging before rehearsal. They were in their late teens, mostly African-American and very welcoming. Jhamel later commented, "When you look at their building, you might expect that they are going to be a bunch of stuck-up rich kids, but actually they come from the same neighborhood that I come from."

The crowd outside had swollen into the hundreds in the early afternoon summer sun, and a rockabilly band was strumming on the main stage when we were introduced to Crenca. We sat at the corner restaurant with Providence's charismatic king of the underground while he gave us his founding story over a choice piece of filet mignon. There is no way to miss Crenca's sharp intelligence, stubborn insistence on artistic integrity and freedom, and devoted leadership. He is true East Coast and deeply local. Twenty-two years ago, he set out to create some space for himself and other underground artists in Providence. The success of AS220 is simply staggering.

### **It's in the Brick**

Talking to Crenca, you quickly understand that AS220's philosophy hasn't changed much, if at all, since its inception. The program has successfully maintained its commitment to "outside" art and artists, keeping all shows and events uncensored, unjuried and accessible. What has changed is revealed in the rags-to-riches story of going from renegade underground collective to major downtown arts institution. The early AS220 ran exclusively on elbow grease and do-it-yourself ingenuity. That hasn't changed much either, but it is clear that when Crenca got a former Providence mayor to help broker a deal for AS220 on their first building, it was a sea-change moment.

live life as an artist.

**Claims to Fame:** AS220 anchors the underground and emerging arts community in downtown Providence. It ensures that artists won't be the first to suffer from Providence's economic revival but instead get to help shape it.

**The Philosophy:** To provide a space for all artists who need a place to exhibit, perform or create their original artwork, especially those who cannot obtain space to exhibit or perform from traditional sources because of financial or other limitations.



Fifteen years later, AS220 owns five buildings in downtown Providence, allowing the organization space for its venues, exhibitions, artists and offices, and creating a self-sustaining revenue stream for its programs and projects. AS220 rents its storefront property to a high-end restaurant, a convenience store, a barber shop (that is rumored to be a mob meeting place) and other downtown establishments.

The cornerstone of AS220's offerings these days is its ability to offer deeply subsidized housing for artists in their beautifully restored downtown buildings. Ownership means that they can offer this service forever, keeping the arts alive and vibrant despite massive overall investment and gentrification in the area. For those of us who have seen great arts districts "get discovered" and then become former arts districts, we know how critical this point is.

The only program not fully sustained through the organization's property management is AS220's Broad Street Studios youth program, which is funded almost exclusively through foundation grants. AS220's youth programs were initially fully funded through the federal tobacco settlement. Crenca and Gonzalez are currently looking for ways to make the youth program more self-sustaining, primarily at revenue through performances and touring, as well as in media development such as record sales. Currently, the Rhode Show performs regularly at local cultural events and is often paid to perform in schools and community events in Providence and across the East Coast.

One of the most striking features of AS220 is that it has a flat wage structure,



meaning that every full-time employee receives the same salary and benefit package. This is true for the 20-plus employees, ranging from its founder to the club booker and the café manager. This principle and practice speaks volumes to the organization's collective past and its maverick approach to developing workable alternatives to the corporate model. It is easy to pick up on the sense of pride, morale and sense of ownership that exists within the organization.



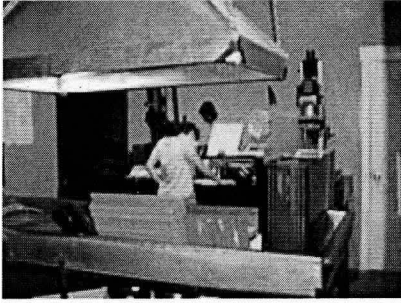
### **Start With Your Ideals, You'll Grow With It**

When I asked Crenca if he could have forseen the tremendous growth and success of his organization when its radical manifesto was penned, back in the '80s, he said, "I knew we had a good idea. This was something that had to grow. When you're reaching out to people to participate and take advantage of what you're offering, and you're sincere about that, you build community. In some ways, back then I didn't have the knowledge or skills or even the vocabulary to understand where we are today. It was all a learning process. Start with the ideals. You'll grow with it," said Crenca proudly. Little did his band of outsider artists know what a critical role they would play in reviving downtown Providence.

AS200's success was forged through a willingness to roll up their sleeves and bootstrap for years on pure vision, take deep risks based on their goals and to grow along with the organization, while never compromising their original vision. It was also about having a good team. Crenca confided that his real estate acumen is really to be credited to Lucy Searle, who helped AS220 broker its first building acquisition on spec, as well as every other property on its roster.

### **Critical Questions**

AS220 should serve as a compelling model for cultural organizing and production for other cities around the country. AS220 has charted a course that, while unique and independent, could be studied and emulated. Ownership is at the heart of the organization's sustainability and growth. While any organization could strive for this approach, it might be more achievable for some. Groups in high-rent cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York City will struggle exponentially to get into the property ownership game compared to their friends in the rust belt.



In truth, AS220 bought its first building when it had only one paid staff member, earning minimum wage with a total organizational budget of \$100,000. The building it sought was in horrific condition, having suffered decades of deferred maintenance. The paint was peeling. The roof was leaking. The floors buckling. The main activity on the block was drugs and prostitution. The bulk of "legitimate" businesses in the area were pornography stores.

That was the context that got the mayor to say, "OK, you want a building? Here's a building." Organizers and artists working in cities and neighborhoods with similar contextual realities might also find a willingness from civic leaders to work with them on a development campaign.

Another question that comes up is the long-term sustainability of AS220's flat (and modest) wage structure. It is clear that as long as Crenca and other founding managers are involved, this system can work brilliantly. The rub may come when it's time to fill Crenca's big shoes. If AS220 is able to recruit from within (which seems likely), the transition, though significant, could work very seamlessly. If the organization needs to recruit from the outside, it may be difficult to find someone with the experience, knowledge and responsibility required to manage this multimillion-dollar operation for the same wage as the café manager or silkscreen artist.

At the end of our journey, Jhamel and I talked into the night about what an amazing town Providence is, and how much richer with AS220 as its authentic arts anchor. If the mayors of America's cities could see what hosting the arts and artists could do for their downtowns, I think they might be willing to roll up their sleeves and grant other inspired collectives their underutilized buildings.

*Chris Wiltsee is the founder and director of Youth Movement Records.*

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