

Kilby Court

Continued from D1

has always been a small place, with a whopping capacity of just 200 people.

For those 25 years, music lovers have followed the sandwich-board sign that reads "Welcome to Kilby Court," after walking down the long alley that leads to the venue. At the end, they find a dark, intimate, glorious garage shack with chipped and peeling red paint, where every inch of free space on its walls is plastered with stickers and colorful graffiti.

Because of the venue's size, Saunders was able to walk up and talk with the band at that first show.

"It's nice to break down the whole artist on stage, and then the person afterward, and have a conversation with them. There's no veil that was drawn, and it was really inspiring," Saunders said. "It made me want to come back multiple times."

Saunders did come back — so much so that he and his business partner, Will Sartin, bought the venue in 2008 from its original owner, Phil Sherburne, and his wife, Leia. This was just a year after they started S&S Presents, booking shows at The Urban Lounge (one of the other Salt Lake City venues they own, along with the Metro Music Hall).

"We wanted it to be a home base for a lot of these shows that we were booking," Saunders said. "The biggest thing, truthfully, was maintaining it and making sure that it's safe for future generations to enjoy. We wanted to take care of it."

Over the years, Kilby Court has seen many artists grace its well-lit stage near the beginning of their careers — like Doja Cat, Diplo, MGMT, Mac Miller and My Chemical Romance.

The venue also has spawned one of the state's bigger music festivals, the Kilby Court Block Party, which started as a celebration of the venue and has become a three-day event. The 2024 edition happens May 10-12 at the Utah State Fairpark — with headliners Vampire Weekend, The Postal Service, Death Cab for Cutie and LCD Soundsystem.

Nic Smith, managing director of S&S, said last year's block party sold tickets to fans in all 50 states as well as a few foreign countries.

Smith's first Kilby show was in 2011, to see the pop group Givers. The memory of that first show, he said, was "inspiring." It showed that anyone can do this. Everybody starts somewhere. There isn't this big barrier between making stuff and performing. You can just start it in your own backyard, which is kind of how Kilby Court got started.

He estimated that he went to at least 30 shows at Kilby that summer.

Kilby Court, Smith said, is "a formative venue. It's kind of like the first time people see a band that they really love, or see their friends play for the first time."

'We never really made money'

Phil Sherburne said he used to own a wood shop in what is now the bathroom building for Kilby. He said the people renting Kilby at the time would only show up every once in a while at night. When they left, he offered the building up for rent.

"It was super cheap and only had one outlet. That was the summer of 1999," Sherburne wrote to The Tribune. "I started letting bands play there because I liked music and had the space. I was young, it was fun."

Along the way, Sherburne said, the city nudged him to get a business license and Rick Zeigler from Salt Lake City's helped acquire Kilby's first sound system. "It just kind of took off, and we were booked all the time," Sherburne said. "It wasn't planned. It just happened."

Phil met the artist Leia Bell at Kilby, and they started dating soon after. "We never really made money doing the music stuff," he said. "The most I ever made was \$9,000 in a full year, but Leia's posters for the shows were a hot commodity, so that's pretty much what we lived off of," he said.

When the Sherburnes found out they were having their third child, Phil said, the couple moved toward getting day jobs. They opened a frame shop, Signs & More, and sold the venue to Sartin, who had started working at Kilby at age 16.

"He was really the only person I would've considered handing it off to. So, after 5.5 years or so, he and Lance took over," Sherburne said.



Leon Pfeiffer — from the band Unprocessed — sets up his drum kit before the night's gig at Kilby Court on April 24.

25 iconic shows from 25 years at Kilby Court (+ Block Party)

Kilby Court is the longest-running all-ages venue in Utah. In 2024, it is celebrating 25 years. Here are 25 shows from local and national artists that have happened in the past 25 years — either at the garage venue or as part of the Kilby Block Party.

- 1999: Three days of shows for "Gamandala." (Aug. 18-20)
- 2000: Death Cab For Cutie (May 26)
- 2001: Poison the Well (Jan 20)
- 2002: The Velvet Teen (May 11)
- 2003: My Chemical Romance (Oct 13)
- 2004: The Fray (Feb 11)
- 2005: Me Without You (June 15)
- 2006: Neon Trees (March 17)
- 2007: Matt & Kim (April 3)
- 2008: MGMT (Feb 3)
- 2009: Imagine Dragons (April 23)
- 2010: Phantogram (May 10)
- 2011: Grouplove (Mar. 29)
- 2012: SchoolboyQ (May 14)
- 2013: A Great Big World (Nov. 19)
- 2014: Glass Animals (Sept. 26)
- 2015: LANY (Aug. 7)
- 2016: The Aces (May 25)
- 2017: MUNA (Feb. 13)
- 2018: The Backseat Lovers (July 6)
- 2019: Conan Gray (April 13)
- 2020: Sunsleeper (Jan. 22)
- 2021: Dad Bod (May 15)
- 2022: Phoebe Bridgers (May 14)
- 2023: The Strokes (May 13)
- 2024: Vampire Weekend (May 10)

Listen to readers' favorite Kilby Court shows

The Tribune asked readers to tell us about their favorite shows at Kilby Court over the years, and their favorite songs from those shows. We've compiled a playlist of those songs on Spotify of those songs, along with songs from Utah acts that have played Kilby.



"Those guys deserve the credit for keeping it going, and taking it to this big new level that they are at."

The 'secret sauce'

Saunders said he and Sartin never expected Kilby — or the block party — to get as big as it has. There's not a lot of revenue generated from all-ages venues, Saunders said. "We sell sodas and water. So it's hard to make money in a venue like this."

But Kilby has survived, even through a shaky point for many Utah venues during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, one study estimated that 90% of independent venues nationwide wouldn't survive.

The "secret sauce" for Kilby Court's survival, Saunders said, is that S&S also books acts for larger venues, such as The Complex and The Depot, as well as the Twilight concerts in Salt Lake City and Ogden.

"We do the bigger events and shows where we can subsidize everything that we do at Kilby," he said, adding that "it's not about revenue, [but] a labor of love... whether it's the sound engineer or the box office, or the people in the booking department or collaborating with local musicians to bring in their own bill and play with their friends and have a fun night."

Smith said another thing that keeps Kilby afloat is that they haven't made many cosmetic changes to the place. "Everybody gets to experience Kilby Court very similarly."

That experience carries well beyond Utah. Saunders said he remembers seeing the Seattle rapper Macklemore at South by

Southwest in Austin, wearing a Kilby Court T-shirt. The Utah band The Backseat Lovers recorded a song, "Kilby Girl," inspired by the venue — and the song was featured in the Netflix series "Outer Banks."

"What's cool about Kilby Court is it's not just a venue, it's a community of people," Saunders said. "It's cool to see how far the reach has actually gone, and [that] inspires us to keep going."

Where Utah acts get started

Neon Trees first played Kilby Court in 2006, four years before their first hit single, "Everybody Talks" — while Imagine Dragons, another band from Provo's music scene, first played Kilby in 2009, three years before their first album produced the singles "It's Time" and "Radioactive."

The Aces, from Ogden, had just changed their name (they were the Blue Aces) when they first performed at Kilby in 2016, before they went national. Utah pop artist and singer-songwriter Britt Monney estimated that he's performed at least 15 shows at Kilby Court. Last year, he also performed at the Kilby Court Block Party.

"There was a period of the band when we kind of just told Kilby, 'Give us as many shows as you possibly can,'" Monney said.

Monney said that every time he goes on a headline tour, he tries to make it a point to play at least one show at Kilby Court. He kicked off one recent tour with an acoustic show, bringing his upright piano from home — for a night he described as "special."

One thing people don't recognize about Kilby, he said, is how good the sound is. "A huge part of that is just the sound people that S&S hires," he said, adding that it has a "huge impact on an artist's set, and it can really be the difference."

Kilby, Monney said, represents "the music scene's willingness to bring in new people and names... It's so cool, how it's actively cultivating a cool music scene in Salt Lake, and bringing young artists. To me, it kind of represents the constant rebirthing of the Salt Lake music scene."

Another Utah band that has love for Kilby Court is The Plastic Cherries. The indie band — made up of Shelby and Joe Maddock, Wayne Burdick, Stephen Cox and Natalie Hamilton — is booked this summer to perform at the block party, the Utah Arts Festival and Salt Lake City's Twilight series.

Shelby Maddock said the Plastic Cherries have never headlined a show at Kilby, but they've opened for bands a few times (as recently as April 20, supporting Shiver Me Ma). Their second show was at Kilby, as Joe Maddock said, was at Kilby as part of a local show in 2021.

Joe Maddock said he loves Kilby because "you get the younger crowd, and it's just very accessible, and there's always a special energy to that because rather than playing at a bar or some kind of late-night type venue, it's just all about the music."

There's something about a small, all-ages venue that's just in a little garage tucked away on the outskirts of the city. It's a very romantic setting," he said. "The counter-culture here has built this place and this energy that's really appreciative of art and music. Kilby Court has been a really important part of that over the years."

It gives our city character."

Music lovers and neighbors

Emerson Oligschlaeger remembers going with a friend to see the rock band Beach Bunny at Kilby Court. The significance of the show was the date: March 12, 2020.

The night before, two Utah Jazz players tested positive for COVID-19. The NBA then suspended the rest of the season.

"Everyone's canceling everything, and we kept looking over at each other like, 'Our show, our show — are they going to cancel our show? Should we even be going?'" Oligschlaeger said.

At the time, she said, she didn't think anyone expected what was coming — but she had a feeling a standstill would last weeks, maybe months. So at the show, she said, she gave it her all, knowing it could be the last one for a while.

"The show itself, I really remember sort of, like, throwing myself at it as hard as I could, dancing and singing and smiling, kind of with every reserve," she said. "[It] really sort of felt like, 'I use it or lose it, but spend it if you have it for a moment.'"

Aside from arena tours, Oligschlaeger said, the first concert she ever saw was at Kilby, when she was 14. She said she loves the venue, "the indoor-outdoor nature of it... It really gives that sort of, like, endless summer night feeling."

Oligschlaeger, who has moved away from Salt Lake City, said Kilby "plays such a big part in so many Utah music enthusiasts' conception of the city."

Places like Kilby and The Beehive, she said, "When I think about Salt Lake City, they are one of the touchstones for my city, and its culture, in my head. When people come from out of town, that's where I want to take them."

Mallory White lived at 327 W. Kilby Court, near the entrance to the alley that leads to the venue, for around nine months. From there, she said, they never heard the music down the street.

"One of the things that I loved about living there is [that] everybody had to walk past our house, to get to Kilby Court, because it's at the end of the alleyway," she said. "Almost every night, you're looking out and you're kind of seeing what sort of crowd was being drawn to Kilby Court that night."

It was fun, she said, trying to figure out — just from looking at the audience — whether it was a punk show or a rock show or an indie show.

"It almost was, like, an extension of my living room," she said.

White also attended shows at Kilby in the time. One she remembered in particular was Dan Deacon, an electronic musician and composer. Deacon's shows, White said, always were interactive — and one such show was perfect for that space.

"Deacon made everybody, like, go against the walls," she said. "And he picked one person, and they had to start running in a circle. Everybody had their hands out, and that one person had to grab one person and she's running in a circle, and then each of those one person grab two more people, right. Everybody's running the same direction in the circle."

At one point, White said, the audience left the venue while doing a game of "London Bridge," and then went up the alleyway and back.

"It was one of the most interactive, exciting shows I think I had ever gone to," White said, adding that she saw Deacon at Ogden Twilight some time later, and it wasn't the same. "It could only be successful in an intimate venue like Kilby Court," she said.

Another 25 years?

Smith, the S&S managing director, said the neighborhood around Kilby Court is "probably going to change a lot, and they're bracing for that." Near the venue, sounds of construction fill the air, as retail and residential developments continue to pop up.

Still, Smith said he has hopes that Kilby will endure.

"As the city grows, there'll be even more local bands, and we'll still be a staple for local students and touring bands to have shows here and have good experiences," Smith said.

As for dreams for the next 25 years, Saunders hopes the venue remains as it is.

"I would like it to stay the same," Saunders said, "and continue being what it is to touring bands and local artists and kids wanting a side place to show off their talents — and build relationships with other people in the community."