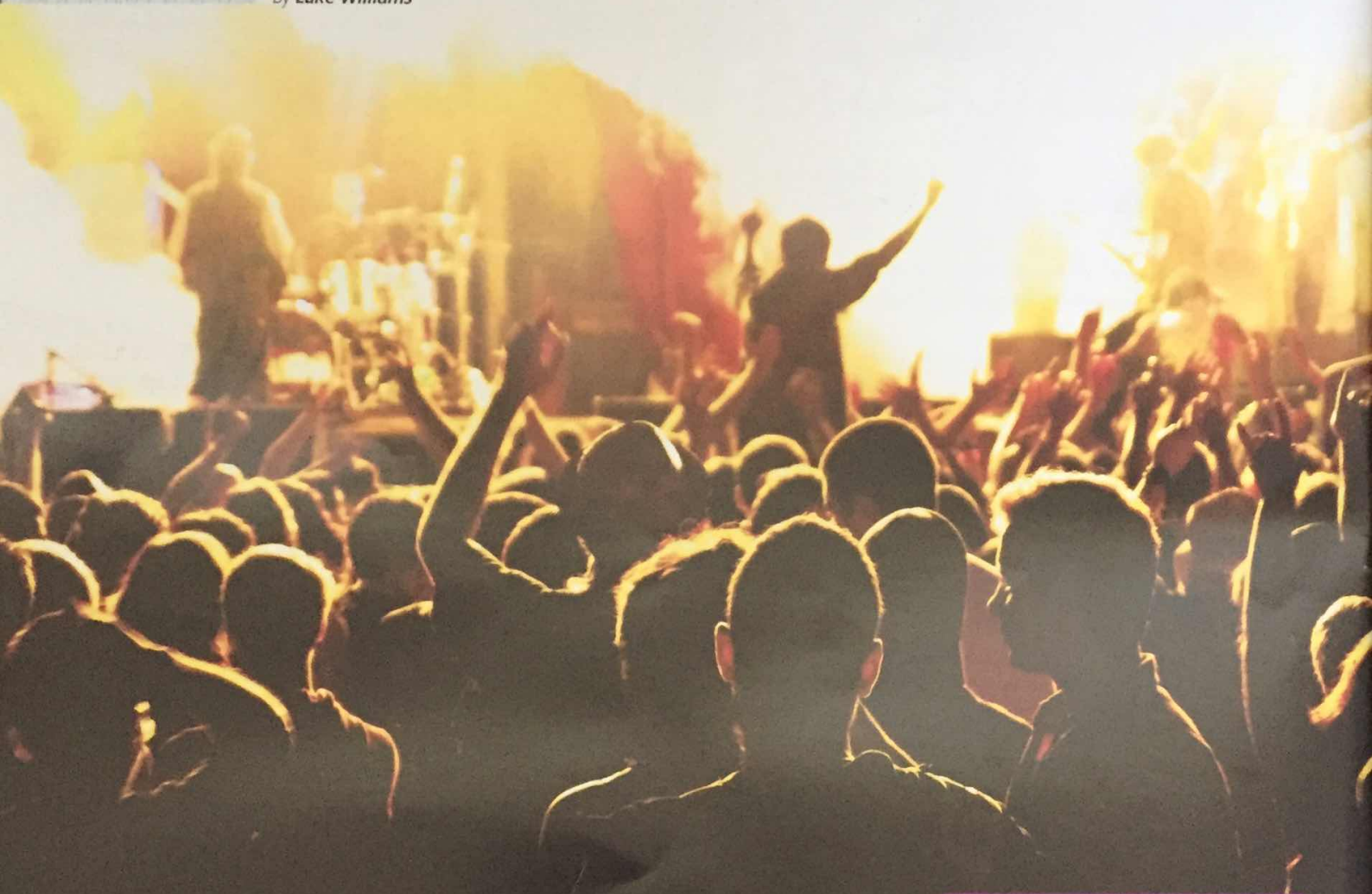




By Luke Williams

I've been a fan of music for as long as I can remember. If I had to pick a point where it became more than a casual enjoyment, it would be on a trip to Toronto in the summer of 2002. With my tenth birthday just two days away, my father introduced me to Sam the Record Man and gave me a crisp twenty-dollar bill!



Concert Accessibility



I'd seen an advertisement for Taking Back Sundays *Tell All Your Friends* in a copy of Alternative Press magazine after I'd convinced my mom to purchase a subscription from one of those Reader's Digest or Scholastic book orders. I went and picked out a copy of the New Jersey emo/alternative rock band's debut. The album hooked me on the emotive power of music and convinced me to look back into the late 90's American emo scene.

I began familiarizing myself with Sunny Day Real Estate, Nirvana, Elliot Smith, The Promise Ring, Jimmy Eat World and many of the other turn-of-the-century bands that were instrumental in the genre. My passion for music quickly grew across all genres and convinced me that I needed to play an instrument, or at least support the music scene somehow.

Ever since escaping my sleepy farming town nearly six years ago, I've done my best to immerse myself in the Toronto music scene. As the result of numerous complications at birth, I have a permanent tremor and lower muscle tone in my hands and arms. My disability has made it challenging to play the guitar with any form of precision, essentially axing that dream of playing music as a profession. Regardless, I still enjoy playing for entertainment and with friends, and my disability has never held me back from becoming a part of the music... so to speak. I've never experienced any trouble going to concerts, unless you count a few incidents stemming from mosh pits that I never should have entered in the first place.

Since Canadian Music Week, I've been wondering just how easy it has been for music fans with greater physical disabilities than me, to get into certain venues. Our cities finest venues spent that week in May serving as citadels of our strong Canadian music scene. But I am willing to bet, to many music fans with accessibility needs, some of these venues were indeed bastions of impenetrable fortresses, true to the word's meaning.

This thought occurred to me after a discussion about venue accessibility with my dear friend, Abdulahi Hassan. Regardless of using a wheelchair, Abdi, as he prefers to be called, is set to start studying radio and media at Seneca in the fall. We met a couple of years ago when he showed up at the Scope @ Ryerson's studio, intent on starting a radio show. He needed assistance with the set-up and production needed for a show. For nine months we worked together on a program called "Music with Abdi," which he continues to host bi-weekly. My current twitter handle (musicwithluke) is a nod to the time we spent working on the program together.

"Lately I've been loving Cleopatra by the Lumineers," he exclaimed to me over the phone with a passion constantly reminding me of just how powerful musical passion is. However, passion can only go so far. He continued, "I'd love to go see their show at The Molson Canadian Amphitheatre in July. I know it is sold out now so I wouldn't be able to go anyway. Even if I could still get a ticket, I'd have to think about how to get my wheelchair into the venue, and then I'd have to find out all the details regarding accessibility tickets. Finally I'd have to book Wheeltrans to the venue. By the time I got to the show I think I'd be too exhausted to enjoy it!" Hassan offers with a hint of fatigue already showing in his change of tone.

Convinced that there is a real problem with venue accessibility, I decided to reach out to someone I felt could help me tell the story, Jessica Geboers, an old acquaintance of mine from Ryerson Journalism School.

Jess is just as fanatic about music as I am. Diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, she uses canes and sometimes a wheelchair to get around. Despite her disability, she has never been afraid of showing up at a venue hoping to see the show. It hasn't always been an accommodating experience though, and I'll let her tell you about herself and some of her experiences.

She said, "The way Mom tells it my first concert was Aerosmith, while still in her womb. Not a bad start. But the first concert I can remember my Mom taking me to was in 1999, and I was nine. We saw the Backstreet Boys in the, then called, Sky Dome. I can't remember if we had accessible seating or

not, but I do remember our seats were far enough from the stage to render binoculars a helpful accessory for the evening. Regardless of the distance, I was so excited to be there; in a crowd of like-minded people, in the same room with my favourite band, listening and singing along word-for-word to my favourite songs. It was the beginning of my love for live music."

While I don't go out of my way to play the 'disability card' to get back stage, I'm not above ceasing on an opportunity if it arises. We almost ran into the Backstreet Boys after one show as we searched for a wheelchair accessible exit. If only we had been a bit quicker to think of a way in to meet the band!

Now that I've lived in Toronto for awhile, I've learned a few tricks, with my disability often being an advantage once I know who to ask, and I've seen enough shows to know which venues I prefer," she said.

Like Hassan, I've also been loving The Lumineers new album. I was lucky enough to get an accessible ticket to their upcoming show at the Molson Amphitheatre. A major score! Accessible seating at Molson is good because it places you above the row in front, allowing for an unobstructed view. And these seats rarely sell out; but my recent failed attempt to get a ticket to see Mumford and Sons on July 13, is proof it does happen. I was both disappointed and proud. I've seen numerous shows at Molson, most recently the Tragically Hip and Foo Fighters, from accessible seats, which are easier to get since Ticketmaster made it possible to request accessible seats online (look out for and click the accessibility icon), rather than just over the phone.

My dad and I have always bonded over our mutual love for Weezer's Blue Album. So when they came to Toronto again in July 2013, exclusively to play their hits and the complete Blue Album, of course we bought tickets.

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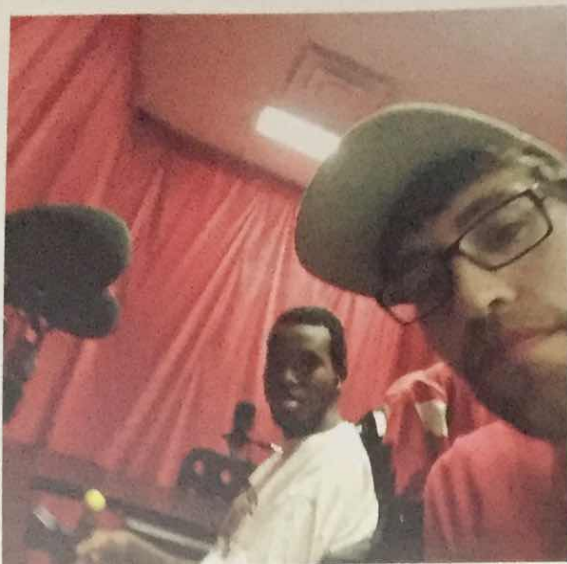
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Left: Abdi and Luke. Right: Jess pictured with her friend at a show.



This time the show was at Downsview Park. I was comfortable bringing my wheelchair and pushing our way to the front because I'd been to EdgeFest there less than a month before and knew the system. I admit I hadn't thought to inquire about accessible seating beforehand. However, when we arrived, I could see that it wasn't going to be so easy this time around. While I was considering my options, another fan pointed out the large raised platform to the right of the stage. I was a bit embarrassed to realize that I hadn't noticed it myself. Although we didn't have accessible seating tickets, the security guard let us up no problem. Sitting above the crowd, we could see perfectly.

Here in Ontario, the government passed the Access for Ontarians with a Disability Act (AODA) in the summer of 2005. The goal of the AODA is to provide the best level of accessibility for Ontarians with such needs by 2025. It focuses requirements for: businesses and nonprofit organizations; public sector organizations; municipalities; educational; producers of educational materials and library boards.

Under these regulations, businesses like concert venues must provide training to their staff on how to manage accessibility issues, provide customer service that focuses on issues with accessibility, have emergency escape plans for those with accessibility needs, and in some cases, businesses may be required to make their spaces accessible.

Larger corporate venues in the city, like Air Canada Centre and Roy Thomson Hall, now have customer service strategies that focus on providing the best service for Ontarians under the AODA. However, accessibility came into question in February 2015, after Paul Bronfman, a well-known Toronto film mogul, complained publicly about the view from the level 100 accessibility area. Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE,) who owns the venue, promised the problem would be solved by the Leaf's home opener on October 7, 2015. When Bronfman arrived at that game he found nothing had changed, and he launched a lawsuit against MLSE. The company has since dealt with the complaint and the lawsuit has been withdrawn.

In terms of smaller venues, many are in older buildings built in the late 1800's and early 1900's, or occupy basements or second floors, both of which prove challenging to accessibility needs. Thanks to our ever-improving technology and interconnectedness, music fans with accessibility needs or those interested in accessibility for everyone are coming out across the globe to express problems at music venues.

Washington, D.C.'s, Sean Gray is one of those people. Ironically, like me,

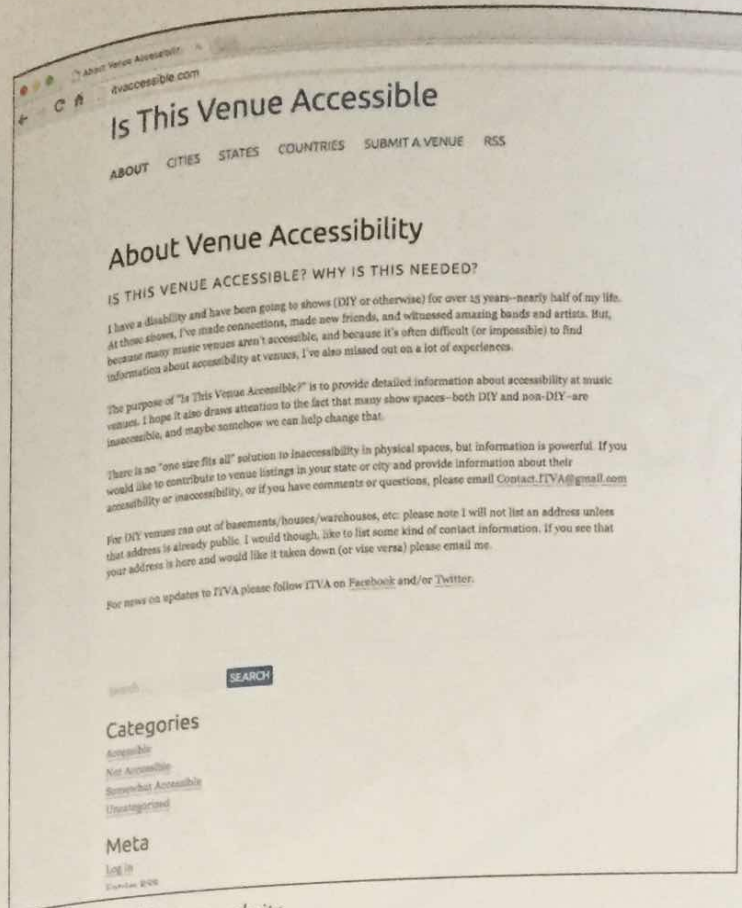
Sean was introduced to music at a young age by his father, who was an avid record collector. Sean's appreciation for music developed further as he grew older. "I was probably 10 or 11 when I discovered Nirvana, which got me into punk and the DIY culture."

Since finding his appreciation for music, Gray has run DIY record labels Fan Death Records and Accidental Guest; hosted a radio show with Accidental Guest co-creator, Ahmad Zagal; written about disability within the DIY scene and he even fronts a Maryland punk outfit. In the period of adversity that arose, Gray created *Is This Venue Accessible?* (ITVA?)

"About a year and a half ago I was laid off at my day job," Gray tells us as he sips a beer during our Skype video chat, a reward for making it through another day at the office and rush hour traffic in the U.S. Capitol. "That bummed me out pretty badly! When you have a disability like mine it is pretty easy to stay in the house. So I had stayed in my apartment for close to a week without leaving, and then decided that I was going to see some friends and hangout with them while seeing a band. There was this D.C. hardcore band I liked playing in the area. I didn't know where they were playing so I went to a Facebook events posting and instantly knew that the venue was inaccessible and that made me really angry!" Gray remembered this anger was brought on by a feeling of helplessness. He admits to feeling that even though the DIY scene in D.C. has always been a rather accepting place, it could be challenging to find the accessibility he needed.

This made him wonder if he could truly own his disability. "Within the local scene there has always been this focus on inclusiveness with tons of focus on being mindful of race, political opinion and LGBT. I felt that there was no mind or benefit paid to accessibility. In fact, it was never even really acknowledged!"

As a result of this anger and the feeling of needing to own your disability, Gray began writing a list of all of the venues in the area that he knew he couldn't go to. He decided to make the list available online in the hope that he could help others. His list would go on to become ITVA?. Through the help of crowd sourcing he has collected data on the accessibility of venues across 26 cities around the globe ranging in distance as far as Osaka, Japan. The site breaks venues down into four categories: Accessible, Not Accessible, Somewhat Accessible and Uncategorized. Clicking into a list delivers information on each venue's accessibility, bathroom accessibility, access to seating, capacity and contact information.



<http://itvaccessible.com> website

When asked about the simplicity of accessing information Gray responds, "The point of ITVA? is that I wanted the information out there without any bells or whistles; to be very direct and to the point. If I could measure how many steps a venue had, or say exactly where the handle-bars are in the restroom, I'd do it."

If Gray could leave you with any message he says that, "There needs to be disability culture within art and music. People need to tell their stories and become a part of a disability community, and I hope that this website can be a part of this community."

Torontonian, Maayan Ziv, has a similar story. Last year she started a Masters in New Media at Ryerson University. Her hope was to join in on a celebration of a new beginning. "I wanted to go out with some friends to a restaurant near our campus to celebrate the start of my masters," she said, "and I didn't really know if it was accessible or not." She arrived to discover there was in fact no way around those stairs. "I sat there and thought to myself that there has to be an app or anything out there that could give me immediate access to the correct answers I needed, and I figured that instead of waiting, I'd do it myself and provide the information to others."

Ziv contacted the Digital Media Zone, an incubator that helps Ryerson students with potential business ideas. With their help, she launched Access Now last summer. The website is a crowd sourced info map with some easy to understand features. Working much like a Google maps search, one simply has to plug in an address. If the location has been entered into the database then an info-point will display either a green thumbs up, meaning the location is fully accessible; yellow meaning partly accessible, often with notes explaining to what extent in more detail; or a red thumbs down meaning not accessible.

Ziv does not want Access Now to be a site for bashing local businesses. "If you get a red thumbs down it is not a shameful thing. We are not trying to hurt businesses but rather incentivize them to bring about

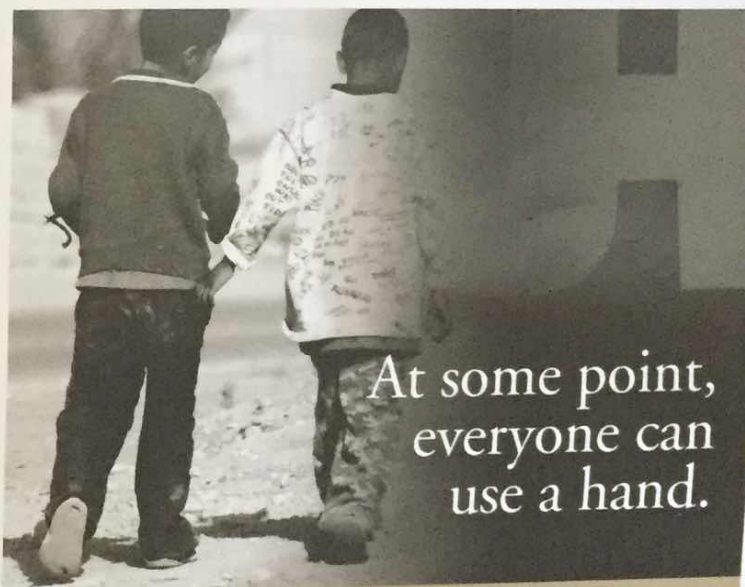
"There needs to be disability culture within art and music. People need to tell their stories and become a part of a disability community, and I hope that this website can be a part of this community."

changes for people with an accessibility need. We'll even help you get to that green thumbs up."

Ziv, who has used a wheelchair her entire life, believes that we are getting better at being accessible for all. "The AODA has been around for just over ten years and it has really been a big help providing accountability and accessibility for Ontarians. More and more people are going to need accessibility supports, as seven out of 10 people will experience a mobility disability at some point, either because of a lifelong disability or the onset of aging. "Providing accessibility for everyone just makes good business sense."

Accessibility data is available for 5387 addresses across 161 cities. While this number is amazing, there are still lots of great areas to cover. Ziv hopes to continue to change that when the mapping tool launches as a mobile application later this year.

We owe it to those with disabilities to provide accessibility so that they may enjoy equal opportunities. Also we owe it to ourselves because it is just as Ziv said, be it because of aging or even an unintended mosh pit accident, seven out of every ten of us are going to need some form of accessibility. I say we keep that in mind. ●



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