



Photograph courtesy of Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Like the larger-than-life city it belongs to, Houston's arts scene has always made a big statement, touting some of the nation's most reputable arts institutions and nurturing emerging artists. But bad things sometimes happen to good people, and looking back on the last five years, one can't help but recall the biblical story of Job. Like the devil's hapless victim, arts organizations in the nation's fourth-most-populous city have been hit with a series of calamities.

First came the flood. When tropical storm Allison drenched downtown Houston in June 2001, hundreds of millions of gallons of water poured into the underground network of tunnels that connect venues in the city's theater district. The torrent destroyed the Houston Symphony's offices as well as its entire music library. "All we had left were a pencil and a piece of paper," says senior public affairs director Art Kent.

His neighbors did not fare much better. The Houston Grand Opera, considered one of the nation's top five opera companies, lost \$1.5 million worth of costumes, wigs and props. The flood destroyed the Alley Theatre's Neuhaus Stage, production shops and a rehearsal hall. Total damage came to \$6 million. The Houston

Ballet was relatively lucky, sustaining \$300,000 worth of damage when water swamped its dressing rooms.

The deluge did not stop there. Just three months later, September 11 arrived. And soon afterward, in the midst of the nation's economic downturn, Enron unexpectedly collapsed. The scandal left the city financially and emotionally devastated, and Enron's formerly sizable philanthropic contributions disappeared. Subsequent mergers between Houston's other energy companies further diminished the availability of grant money. And as financial uncertainty swept through the city, individual giving dropped and ticket sales plummeted.

The war in Iraq completed the confluence of events some Houstonians like to call "The Perfect Storm." The Symphony, with its long history of financial trouble, had the added misfortune of a prolonged musicians' strike, which interrupted its 2002-03 season. The organization ended 2003 with a \$5 million deficit and was forced to lay off 11 percent of its administrative staff. Its fellows in the arts followed suit. A new mantra prevailed in the theater district: Cut staffing, cancel shows and shave production budgets.

Arts organizations were also forced to return

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to safer programming and increase fundraising activities. Since then, cutbacks, cancellations and creative marketing have paid off to a certain degree. "People feel like the city is turning a corner," says Lindsay Heinsen, the *Houston Chronicle's* arts and entertainment editor. "We can see them loosening up, taking risks and scheduling more adventurous events." Across the board, arts groups are starting to bring back previously canceled shows.

The Alley Theatre has actually managed to turn tragedy into opportunity. When Allison hit, theater officials had already been planning to renovate the Neuhaus, so they pushed up their plans, rebuilt the 300-seat house, and reopened it in January 2002. Later that year they also unveiled the impressive \$10 million Alley Center for Theatre Production. That the theater managed to complete both projects amid Houston's economic crisis speaks not only of its clear vision but also to the fact that Houston is a city dedicated to the arts.

That's a good thing, because when it comes to state funding for the arts, Texas is dead last. In 2003 the legislature reduced the Texas Commission on the Arts' budget by 22 percent. As a result, the TCA has suspended its decentralization program, which gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to city arts councils. Without TCA funding, the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County (CACHH) has had to rely primarily on the city's hotel occupancy tax to fund the 160 groups it sponsors. Yet in 2003 the tax money it received dipped to \$7.9 million due to a decline in tourism.

As the largest art museum in town, the Museum of Fine Arts, receives some city money. But it is its strong private-funding base that allows it to pursue capital projects like the new Beck Building, which opened in 2000 and occupies an entire city block. Fund-raising efforts have also helped battle the 20 percent drop the museum's sizable endowment experienced between 2000 and 2002.

Just up the road, the Menil Collection runs entirely on private money. John and Dominique de Menil built the museum in 1987 to show their expansive collection of surrealist, tribal and ancient art. But after the death of Mrs. de Menil in 1997, the Menil started having financial and staffing problems. Museum officials hope that the appointment of new director Josef Helfenstein will help turn things around.

Also wholly funded by private entities is Houston's newest 800-pound gorilla. The 2002

unveiling of the shimmering Hobby Center for the Performing Arts was the biggest opening of the last few years. The Center added 3,150 seats to a theater district that already boasted 12,000. The Hobby has also helped fill Houston's need for an intimate downtown theater by renting its 500-seat Zilkha Hall to small and midsize groups for \$2,500 a night. Suchu Dance also opened its more affordable 120-seat venue last year.

Houston's alternative pride and joy, Infernal Bridegroom Productions (IBP), meanwhile moved into its own space in 2001 after being



HOUSTON CHRONICLE

homeless for its first eight years. The experimental theater company has become the poster child for small-group success. It may seem remarkable that the group has managed to grow so much during a difficult economy, but IBP's experience is typical of many troupes its size, which rely less on wavering corporate support and more on consistently reliable individuals and foundations.

Da Camera of Houston, which presents chamber music performances, jazz events, multi-disciplinary productions and new works, is another midsize gem that has continued to shine. In fact, Da Camera's single-ticket sales were up 15 percent last year, and the group ended 2003 with a slight surplus.

That's not to say that smaller organizations have come through Houston's Perfect Storm unscathed. Groups that did not apply for a grant before the recession may be hard-pressed to find one now. But like their larger counterparts, grassroots organizations have come up with innovative plans to bring in audiences. In 2002, 15 small and midsize entities banded together to form the Fresh Arts Coalition, which markets their work on a common Web site and through e-mail newsletters.

The contemporary arts center DiverseWorks is another vital showcase for performing, visual and literary art. It is also one of several galleries

helping to make Houston one of the nation's most significant visual-arts centers. "At a time when everything is down, the artists seem to be doing okay," says Victoria Lightman, Houston Commissioner for the Texas Commission on the Arts. "A lot of artists come to Houston from all over the world and stay because the cost of living is low and there is a lot of support here."

Houston likewise has a vibrant Latino arts community. Tejano music floods Houston's clubs, while Talento Bilingue de Houston produces bilingual theater programs and provides arts education to Latino youth. Houston's large arts groups also cater to the city's biggest minority population. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has established a center for Latin American art, and the Society of Performing Arts often brings in Latino music and dance groups.

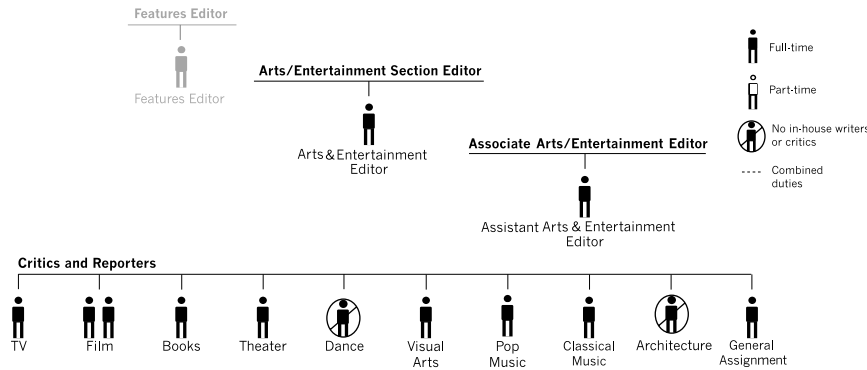
Strong players in almost every creative genre contribute to Houston's cultural life. And the arts scene continues to evolve and grow despite floods, corporate scandal and financial downturns. "My sense is that it was tough, but there is a resilience in this community, and people seem to manage," says CACHH Executive Director Maria Munoz-Blanco. "We have a very healthy artist community, and it's doing better than people think it is."

BY LILY TUNG

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Maria Munoz-Blanco
executive director
Cultural Arts Council of
Houston and Harris
County

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



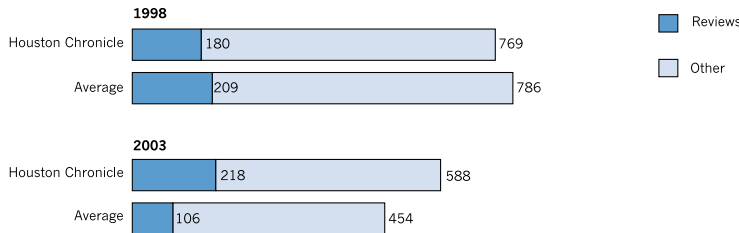
Houston Chronicle

1998-2003

- Daily circulation:
- Arts and culture newshole:
- Number of arts-and-culture articles:
- In-house arts staff:

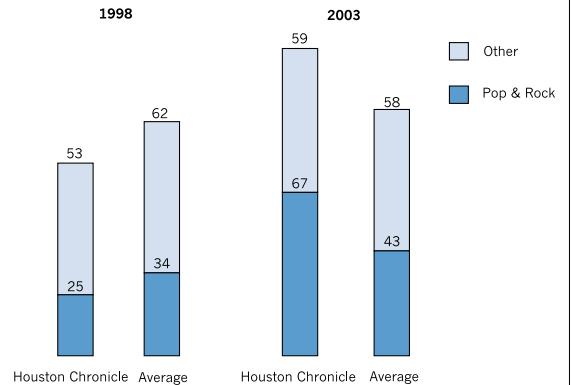
Television Journalism

space (in column inches) devoted to articles on television



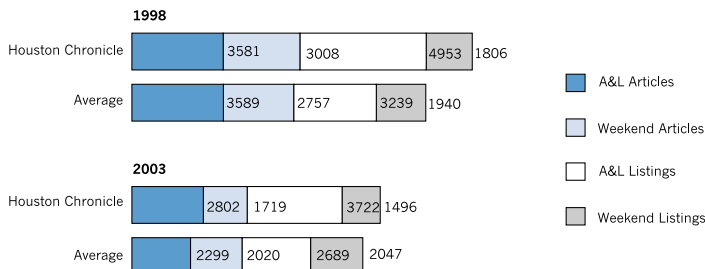
Music Journalism

number of articles on music



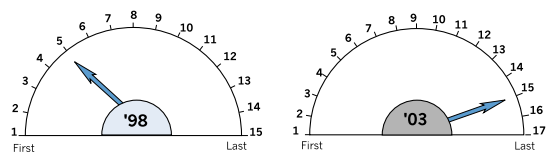
Daily and Weekend Newshole

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture in daily A&L sections and weekend arts supplements



Article Length

ranking among all newspapers studied for average length of arts-and-culture articles (listings excluded)



By DRASTICALLY CUTTING the average length of its arts and culture articles, the *Houston Chronicle* was one of those anomalous newspapers in this study that increased the total number of articles in October 2003 compared with five years earlier, while instituting major cuts to the size of its newshole.

Massive cutbacks were made in the newshole for journalism in the *Chronicle's* weekend arts supplements *Zest* and *Preview*. In its daily arts-and-lifestyles section, entitled *Houston*, listings were cut back dramatically. Back in October 1998, *Houston's* listings were larger than in every other A&L section we studied but one. So five years later they were scaled back from gargantuan to bigger than normal.

Arts and culture coverage at the *Chronicle* was still skewed heavily to television, even though both the volume of TV articles and the grid have shrunk since October 1998. The *Chronicle's* TV grid was the biggest we found in both phases of our study, and television journalism here suffered smaller cutbacks during the five-year period than at any other metropolitan newspaper we tracked save one. The

seriousness with which the *Chronicle* treated TV was demonstrated by the volume of reviews. No other newspaper we monitored considered TV to be a more review-worthy medium than music or the performing arts.

Weekend supplements are usually the prime venue for movie coverage, yet the *Chronicle* was one of only two metropolitan newspapers to assign less than 20 percent of its weekend articles-and-listings newshole to movies. It should be noted that the weekend declines at the *Chronicle* are overstated in our reporting since we were unable to obtain one of those sections. Thus, of the month's nine weekend supplements (four issues of *Zest* and five of *Preview*), this database represents only eight.

Music was unscathed by the overall cutbacks in A&C journalism. As a result, the beat received more space than movies in October 2003, a radical shift from five years earlier. The number of music articles increased, with pop and rock averaging at least two stories a day.—AT

ARTS COVERAGE IN HOUSTON: A CRITICAL VIEW

WHEN THE MUSEUM of Fine Arts, Houston opened its exhibition “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend” in 2002, it had high hopes for extensive press coverage. Its expectations were understandable; after all, the show comprised a groundbreaking collection of folk art. Created by the women of an African-American community isolated for centuries in rural Alabama, the quilts were appearing together for the first time in a comprehensive exhibition. But to the surprise of museum officials, the *Houston Chronicle* sent its home-design editor to cover the show. A lifestyle feature ran; an art review never did.

Two months later the exhibit moved to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman called it “the most ebullient exhibition of the New York season” and dubbed the quilts “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced.” The omission of such an important critique was typical of the *Chronicle*, where understaffing has often resulted in inconsistent coverage of the arts. The fact that it overlooked a major national exhibition born in its own hometown was strangely reminiscent of the big news story it had missed the previous year—Enron.

Critics contend that it was the *Chronicle’s* slow response to the Enron story that prompted the Hearst Corporation to overhaul the paper’s top editorial team. In June 2002 it installed Jeff Cohen as editor. For the most part, both staff and readers welcomed the management change, hoping it would usher in better times for Houston’s only newspaper and the nation’s seventh-largest daily.

The arts section shares some of the paper’s overall notoriety. Although it has talented writers, many arts professionals say stories are rarely incisive and mainly cover what’s new and high-profile. Some of the section’s problems stem from cutbacks prior to Cohen’s reign. Back then the department lost two writing positions and forfeited an additional staff spot when it consolidated a dual editorship into one post handling both arts and entertainment. With a smaller staff, editors were forced to give perfunctory treatment to some important stories and to use more wire copy and syndicated columns.

Cohen has so far brought about gradual changes, calling for higher journalistic standards and promising a greater commitment of resources. And while the arts page looks much as

it did when *Reporting the Arts* covered it five years ago—with writers following the typical preview/review format—the paper has actually increased the number of arts articles, although it has cut their average length by more than 30 percent. Circulation has remained fairly stable during this period, rising at the daily from 542,414 in late 1998 to 549,300 in late 2003, and on Sunday staying virtually the same at 740,134 in 1998 and 740,002 in 2003. Arts and lifestyle stories currently share a daily features section called Houston. On Thursdays the Preview section devotes itself primarily to popular arts and listings. The Sunday tabloid Zest, which is aimed at a slightly older audience, focuses on the fine arts.

In March 2004 the paper also announced it would once again divide the arts-and-entertainment editorship as well as hire another television writer. Despite the reinstatement, arts editor Lindsay Heinsen still worries about how she is going to fill the growing features page. With the Houston arts scene expanding and her staff remaining stable, Heinsen has responded by putting her efforts into cultivating more freelance writers, especially to cover the city’s thriving visual-arts community.

She will have to continue doing so. With only one full-time correspondent covering each of the art forms—except for film, which has two reporters, and architecture, which doesn’t even have one—it is virtually impossible for critics and reporters to cover their beats in any comprehensive way. Most of the writers are overwhelmed and have little time to search out smaller arts groups and lesser-known artists. Fortunately, notes Heinsen, the financial support is there to find good freelancers: “There is more money across the board.”

Although most of the *Chronicle’s* arts coverage is event-driven, there is also a mandate to increase reporting. “We want to do more breaking news,” says deputy managing editor Kyrie O’Connor. “Features *is* news. It has to have urgency, energy and excitement.” There is likewise a push to appeal to younger readers and Houston’s burgeoning Latino community, which accounts for more than 30 percent of the city’s population. A regular freelancer covers Latino music. The *Chronicle* also publishes zoned inserts in Spanish and a new Spanish-language entertainment tabloid called *La Vibra*.

Employees say they are pleased with the improvements that Cohen has brought to the paper. Yet despite small signs of change, most professionals in the arts remain unsatisfied with

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Kyrie O’Connor
deputy managing editor
Houston Chronicle

the paper's coverage. They view the *Chronicle* as a publication fed by a public relations machine, one that possesses little investigative drive. They also point to the fact that in this sports-obsessed town the paper has been known to publish two sports sections in one day while relegating the arts to second-class status. "There is an obscene, inordinate coverage of athletics," says Bud Franks, president and CEO of the Hobby Center. "If the *Houston Chronicle* did a better job stirring up interest in the performing arts, I think you would find more people coming to more events."

Apart from the *Chronicle*, the only other widely read publication in town is the feisty alternative weekly *Houston Press*. The *Press* liquidated its main competition, *Public News*, back in 1998 when its parent company, New Times, bought the paper. Some arts professionals accuse the *Press* of being "salacious" and "muckraking," while others are grateful that it does "more honest journalism compared to the *Houston Chronicle*" and covers "stories the mainstream media can't." *Press* associate editor Cathy Matusow admits the paper does not shy away from the controversial or the edgy; it has been known to run biting reviews, veering away from the politeness often found in the *Chronicle*.

Like most alternative weeklies, the *Press* does a better job than a daily paper in covering the young, alternative scene. Although it pays little attention to classical music, it covers the local club- and popular-music scene quite comprehen-

sively. In fact, music has a much more dominant presence in the publication than visual arts or theater. Last year, the *Press* expanded its calendar section by three pages, filling them with quick, pithy arts pieces.

Houston has more than 60 radio stations, but few cover the arts in a systematic fashion. University of Houston's public radio station KUHF produces a one-hour daily culture program called *The Front Row*, and also presents regular broadcasts of local classical concerts and opera performances. Pacifica station KPFT offers several specialty music shows covering everything from blues to hip-hop. Its show *24 PM* interviews local artists daily, while *LivingArt* airs once a week. Arts coverage on television is limited and sporadic. Houston's two morning news shows and ABC-13's weekly public-affairs programs offer some, as does a weekly community show on Houston PBS.

As for magazines, *Texas Monthly* includes the arts in its statewide coverage. The smaller niche publication *Arts Houston* takes a fun, light-hearted look at culture, while the more critically oriented nonprofit quarterly *ARTL!ES* chronicles Texas' visual-arts world.

Online, GlassTire.com dedicates itself to Houston's active visual-arts scene through thoughtful reviews, previews and profiles. The *Houston Chronicle* also has a Web site that runs stories, reviews and listings from the newspaper as well as material generated in-house.

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