

## CMA launches Third Thursdays: a conversation with Gabe Pollack

by Max Newman



If you are looking for musical experiences in Cleveland that are both thoroughly enjoyable and wholly unique, look no further than the programming put on by the Cleveland Museum of Art. Whether it be the eclectic concerts that grace Gartner Auditorium, the danceable, outdoor fun of City Stages, or any of CMA's other wonderful offerings, there is truly something for everyone within the

Museum's programming.

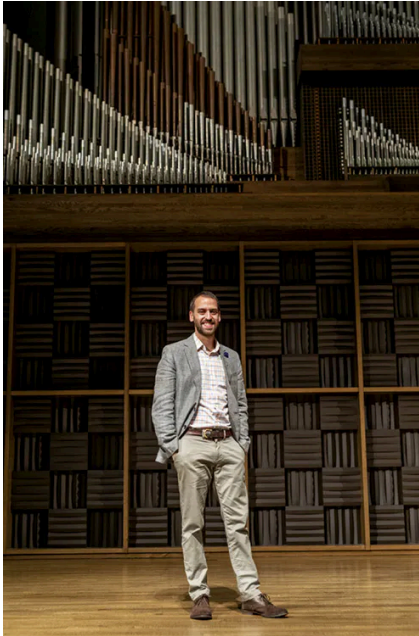
Now, CMA is kickstarting another event series — Third Thursdays at Transformer Station — which will have its first show on June 20 at 7:00 pm. (*Note that the concert is now sold out.*) Admission is free, but tickets are required.

Curated and hosted by Ideastream Public Media radio personalities, the series is set to run throughout the summer, featuring live music and conversation with local artists. I recently spoke with Gabe Pollack, the Director of Performing Arts at CMA and the brainchild of Third Thursdays, to learn more about the upcoming series.

Pollack was keen to emphasize the musical history of the Transformer Station space, despite the fact that the building only came under CMA ownership last summer. “Fred and Laura Bidwell opened the Transformer Station a little over ten years ago. Their plan very early on was that at some point, they would give it to CMA. So while the Bidwells owned Transformer Station, the Museum did produce concerts there. In fact, between 2013 and February of 2020 there were 32 concerts. So the Museum does have a history of producing events in that space.”

When Transformer Station was finally passed on to CMA, Pollack and those at the Museum had to decide what they wanted the space to be. “Because of its size, it really allows for programs that are better suited to a small intimate space. Gartner Auditorium

seats 683, and the Ames Atrium is also quite large. I can do some smaller productions in the galleries, but those events are free and those are public spaces that remain open even while a concert is going on. So Transformer allows us to do a small ticketed performance. And we have an opportunity to start platforming local acts who maybe aren't the best suited for the 700-seat hall but are still very worthy of presenting."



According to Pollack, experimentation is still being done with the layout. "In May, we rented furniture, tables, pipe and drape, and bookshelves. Without all that, it is a pretty boomy gallery space with tall ceilings. The feedback from the shows we've put on since then is that people love that set up. We are trying to create what I'm calling CMA's living room, with a vibe that mixes the intimacy of a candlelight concert with an NPR Tiny Desk."

Another exciting development for Transformer Station has been CMA's acquisition of a liquor permit for the space. "We have the smaller Crane Gallery operating as a kind of a lounge and bar, while performances are occurring in the main space."

The development of the venue is by no means complete. In the future, Pollack plans to work to better the acoustics in the space, and to hold regular hours when visitors can come to look at art. For now though, the building will continue to be event based.

One unique aspect of the Third Thursdays series is the curatorial process: the host for each event is also responsible for choosing the guest. And who are those hosts? When developing the series, Pollack reached out to Amanda Rabinowitz of Cleveland's Ideastream Public Media. Rabinowitz hosts *Shuffle*, a podcast that keeps a pulse on the music scene in Northeast Ohio.

"I approached her with this idea for a show. And when I talked further with Ideastream, they said, 'Well, does it have to be limited to just one show? We have so many different shows on air, why don't we use this as a way to invite multiple Ideastream hosts to produce an event?' And I thought that was a great idea."

Pollack is relishing his role in the Third Thursdays project, removed from the artist selection process. He shared particularly glowing reviews of his programming partners. "I like working with Ideastream because I'm a fan of what they produce — they have a great track record of digging into local music stories and amplifying local talent."

The program for Third Thursdays this summer features a wide range of artists. First up, on June 20, is **Talons**, a band notable for their combination of acoustic instrumentation and field recordings, for an evening of performance and conversation with Amanda Rabinowitz. On July 18, Bill O’Connell will lead an interview with Cleveland-based ensemble **Opus 216** followed by a performance. On August 15, Dan Polletta will speak with bassist **Aidan Plank**, also followed by a performance.

The conversational aspect of these events is vital, according to Pollack. Not only do the hosts book the musicians, but they also have the chance to discuss their music. “It’s certainly a different sort of program than anything that I’ve done at the Museum.”

This series is the latest exciting step in Pollack’s tenure with CMA, which began in 2022. “I had been curious about this role of Director of Performing Arts for quite a while. When I first moved to Cleveland, I met Tom Walsh, who was my predecessor at the Museum, and he gave me his business card. I think I still have it to this day. I had never really thought of music at a museum before. It really interested me.”

After working as Director of the Bop Stop for over eight years, an opportunity arose. “I was getting to a point where I was ready for my next step. The Museum announced that Tom was taking a new gig, and other venue operators as well as CMA encouraged me to apply. It was kind of an opportunity that I didn’t think I’d ever get, so I’m super happy that I landed it.”

And it is a job that Pollack has thoroughly enjoyed. “Speaking about CMA, it has the longest-running performing arts program in the country out of any visual arts institution. I think that’s oftentimes overlooked, but there have been curators of music here for over 100 years, and that’s a special thing. And I think that the performing arts are a great way for people to find out about the Museum. So, I think it’s a cool gig for that reason.”

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