

Chris Devine

Do It Now

Since high school, Chris Devine has played in about a dozen different bands. For decades, music was his side-gig, his hobby; an intense hobby, but a hobby nonetheless. In the world of defense contracting, Chris climbed the ranks, ultimately ending high up at Boeing Defense in a role many would aspire to.

Still, something didn't feel quite right. Casually, he'd think about giving up his job and working on his dream of opening a music venue. But it was always theoretical, five or ten years down the road. Then, in 2015, several life-changing events happened in short order.

First, Chris attended a show at The Barns of Wolf Trap where he saw an absolutely fantastic artist and decided he wanted to try his hand at holding house concerts. House concerts are a popular, if somewhat underground, phenomenon catching on in the area. People volunteer to open up their home to bands and artists, then invite friends and neighbors to the performance, soliciting donations but not usually charging for tickets. Chris, however, was no ordinary host. A lifetime in the music industry made him sensitive to the needs of performers, and over the next two years, he transformed his entire home, ensuring the musicians that came through had top-notch sound and lighting, giving them space to relax in a green room, and taking their feedback to heart.

Around the same time Chris began getting into house concerts, his mother, with whom he was very close, passed away. "The closest person I've ever had to me died," recalls Chris. "I had some incredible conversations with her while she was in hospice. It left me asking, how much time do I have left? Am I leading a meaningful life?"

Finally, in the summer of 2017, Chris was beginning to burn out at his job and mentioned to a friend that he was looking for a change of pace.

He said that for now, he'd like to stay in the same career, but eventually, his dream was to open a music venue. His friend was blunt and said "Why not do it now?" "It really struck me," muses Chris. "Two months later I was on a flight back from a vacation with my kids in Canada, and I started sketching out what I wanted to do. It became clear on that trip that I needed to start the venue project full-time, even if it was a fairly dramatic and risky thing to do."

Chris left his high-paying job and comfortable career to found Crib Music Enterprise, of which today he serves as its CEO. At first, he doubled down on his house concert operation; in the two years he'd been doing them, he'd only done about a dozen shows, but things quickly began to ramp up. "As soon as I left my job, I went really hard into the house concerts," explains Chris. "Almost using them as a prototype—a lab environment for launching the venue. I learned about marketing, I deepened my relationships with artists, and in 2018 I did 26 concerts over a ten-month stretch. The buzz was growing, we had a great website, I even had artists in Nashville calling me, saying they'd heard of my series and could they play? At our peak we did 14 shows in 13 weeks."

Often after house concerts, the band sticks around and spends the night. Chris used this opportunity to ask the performers what worked and what didn't, what they'd like in their ideal venue. He learned that many of the venues in DC and Northern Virginia expected artists to put up with terrible conditions, having them load in through rat-infested allies and sometimes serving more as bars with background music than as musical venues. He used the house concerts to build an alternative vision of a fantastic venue in Virginia.

Chris's venue will have a green room with



amenities, like a shower and washer and dryer. He plans to spare no expense in building proper sound and lighting, and the waitstaff will be trained to stay quiet and respectful of the acts on stage. He foresees having a kitchen and bar on the opposite side of the venue from the stage, ensuring that the stage is the centerpiece of the space. Generally, the venue will have fully waited tables with craft cocktails on offer, although with bigger, louder shows, the tables can also be cleared out.

His several years working on house concerts clarified his goals and vision, but eventually, the town of Herndon came after the shows for zoning violations. What had begun as a simple house concert series was executed so well it appeared as a business to some. Chris could've continued fighting in court, but decided it was a sign that it was time to transition to focusing on the new venue full time.

The concept is developed and in Chris's words "ready to roll". The business plan is "bulletproof" after dozens of meetings with investors. The major setback in 2019, however, was the loss of a potential location Chris had identified as a perfect fit, even hiring an architect to design the floor plan for the venue before the deal fell through. "At the end of May the landlord came to me and told me the deal was off and gave no further explanation," nods Chris. "Eight months of work and lawyers and architects' fees down the drain. This was a pretty big setback, but I told myself that this is typical on the road to entrepreneurship, particularly when you're making such a hard shift out of your career and building something new. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and I feel very strongly about what I'm doing."

"There are more artists touring today than at any other time in history," Chris points out. "Because of the digital music revolution, they have to tour to survive, and a lot of venues have just fallen asleep. They don't treat the artists well, and the green rooms are awful. For the audiences, venues trade a cheap experience for a cheap ticket, and the artist doesn't make much. Consequently, they don't give the audience much; it's flat. I know I'm going to innovate in a lot of ways that haven't been done before."

Chris doesn't come from a musical family. He was born in Glen Burnie, Maryland, to a father who worked high up in the NSA, and a mother who stayed at home with her four children. Chris

was the third of the four, with two older brothers and a younger sister. His father travelled often and wasn't particularly engaged with the kids' lives; in fact, he didn't see Chris perform until he was already in college. Chris recalls that after the show, a family friend approached his father with praise, noting that Chris was very talented. Chris's father jokingly commented, "Well, I guess he must be. He's getting paid!"

The Devines were supportive enough, however, to allow Chris's older brother to set up his drumkit downstairs and to get Chris and his other brother guitars for Christmas. From a fairly young age, music was Chris's biggest interest, although as a young kid he did typical stuff like boy scouts, Little League baseball, and biking around with the other kids in the neighborhood. Chris remembers playing his first paid gig in the tenth grade, when his band was hired to play at the junior high school dance. "We were so bad," laughs Chris. "We looked scared to death! But 300 kids were there, and they wrote about us in the local newspaper, so it was a big deal to me."

He began to make more money at gigs in local bars noting that his parents probably weren't totally aware of the fact that their 16-year-old son was playing in bars around town. But he made his first dollar delivering papers for the *Maryland Gazette*. From there, he went and worked at a carpet store, installing carpets in the summer through college. Anything he made, he invested back into his band and music.

College wasn't a given for Chris. Many of his friends weren't going, and he was more interested in music anyway. But Chris was good at math and science and decided to give college a shot by attending nearby UMBC so he could still come home and play shows with his band on the weekends. He made it to the end of the semester, but just barely. After almost flunking out, he told his dad he wasn't sure college was for him. "To his credit, my dad expressed concern that if I quit, I would never go back. But he acknowledged it was my choice, and I could do whatever I wanted to do. I had to do what I had to do and took a semester off," remembers Chris. "I got a job in a department store and after a few months concluded that the path I was on 'really sucked!'" Chris went back to community college. He did well, got his confidence back, and transferred to the University of Maryland College Park. In 1988, he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Electrical

Engineering.

He quickly landed a job in Reston at a business then called Stanford Telecom. He worked on the Star Wars program and what he remembers as “fun technical work.” It was a great company, and they paid for him to go back to school for his Master’s in Electrical Engineering from George Washington University. It was tough because he worked full-time and took classes at night. In the meantime, Chris continued to perform with bands, improved his singing, became a lead singer, and took over the logistics of booking and performing shows seriously.

Over the next ten years, Chris climbed the ranks at Stanford Telecom and performed as much as possible with his band. It was during this time that he married a woman he met in one of his bands. Chris’s then-wife was also a serious musician, and they formed an acoustic duo for a while. After they had children, their two kids could often be found lugging gear for the couple at gigs.

After a decade with his first employer, Chris felt it was time to move on, and spent two years doing independent contracting in the commercial sector at Orbital Sciences. He led projects and helped them with the technical side of their commercial communications satellite network. He had a great experience but moved to a telecommunications start-up for a year before the events of 9/11 altered his career path.

He had already been planning to return to defense contracting and was vacillating between two job offers. The tragedy on September 11th made his decision for him. “Of the two companies, one was more in the fight than the other one,” explains Chris. “So the next day I called that company back and accepted the offer.”

The company was called Argon Engineering, and at the time, was only about 200 people. Chris started as a systems engineer, rose into program management, and later became a business area director. As he rose through the ranks, the company also continued to grow, and by 2010 they were around 1,000 employees. Still, Chris kept up with music, laughing that he was an executive who hung up posters for his shows in the company kitchen.

Then, in 2010, the founders of the business decided to sell to Boeing. Chris wasn’t sure he’d like to work with such a huge company. As expected, going from a business with 1,000

employees to being one among 170,000 was a culture shock. But, to his surprise, he found the corporation to be well-run, well-managed, and had fantastic leadership development programs. At the peak of his career at Boeing, he had become the Director of the Maritime Portfolio for Signals Intelligence, a role that challenged him daily. He had 200 people working under him, his business unit was doing \$250-\$300 million annually, and he was given full autonomy to run his department. He was basically the CEO of the unit.

“We built very specialized equipment,” explains Chris. “We had a multitude of customers in different parts of the government. The business unit was complex given the geographic locations for which you’re responsible, the number of technologies with which you must be knowledgeable, and the number of customers whose organization and people you have to know well to be effective. And then we were also doing international sales. I had customers in seven countries and would make frequent business trips to those locations. In looking back, I was surprised by how much I took to it and how good I was at doing it. I would love a day where I worked on six different things that ranged from a tough Human Resources issue to addressing the needs of an international customer to reviewing a proposal.”

During his time at Boeing, Chris also went through a divorce, something that again changed the course of his life. “I had to relearn how to be a parent,” nods Chris. “I did a lot of work on self-awareness and emotional intelligence. That whole process made me focus more on the person I wanted to be.”

Recently, Chris moved from his house in Herndon to a rental in Reston. During the move, he found a small golden cross that he’d put away years ago. He started to wear it consistently and considers it now to be one of his most prized possessions. “I like to think of myself as more spiritual than religious,” reflects Chris, who was raised Catholic. “But one thing that’s always deeply resonated with me is the way Jesus lived his life. Wearing the cross again reminds me of the person I want to be and that I strive to be. I believe in ‘what would Jesus do’-- it’s just an incredible guide, a moral way of living that can be sought by reflecting on that.”

Although Chris learned and grew tremendously at Boeing, the combination of his mother’s death, the house concerts, and burnout

with his role led Chris to leave Boeing in 2017. He specifically remembers an irrational customer screaming at him one evening over the phone while he was trying to take his daughter out for some quality time. He decided he needed a change, and from there, Crib Music Enterprise was born. He did leave Boeing the right way, however. He hired a deputy and fully trained him to be his successor upon his departure.

In his free time, Chris has engaged with many charitable projects, but the closest to his heart is his work with a group called Laundry Love. He and his friend Ivan, who worked with him at Argon Engineering and is also an ordained minister, launched the program in Herndon after hearing of its success in other parts of the country. The concept is simple; you bring money and detergent to a laundry facility to pay to do the laundry of anyone that needs it one Monday a month. As the project grew, it began to become a bit unmanageable. They recently moved to Chantilly and are now partnered with Western Fairfax Christian Ministries, which provides a list of families to them ahead of time. They've launched a non-profit to fund the project so they can expand it beyond what they were able to do with self-funding. They've just raised enough money to begin introducing a second Monday every month.

Chris attributes this loving attitude to the influence of his mother. "My mom was the most loving person I've ever known," Chris affirms. "One of the things I said to her when she was in hospice was, 'Mom, if they're lucky most people wake up in the morning and say, I want to be a good person today. I want to treat others with kindness. But you never had to do that, it was just who you are.' I don't know whether I learned it all the way, but she taught me how to love. I like to think if I'm being optimistic, that I got her kindness, her softness, her heart, her innate sense of loving people and trying to be kind."

As a leader, Chris considers his style to be

"evolving". Early on, he was more of the hard-charging, demanding type of manager, expecting high-achievement from everyone, all the time. But over time he softened, reading leadership books and going through leadership development programs to learn how to better engage with people productively. One important trick, he says, is to slow down. He recommends the book *Thinking Fast and Slow* as a fantastic guide to learning how to manage interactions healthily and fairly.

To young people, Chris advises, "Don't get stuck inside the box! The longer you wait, the more entrenched you become and the harder it is to pull up your roots. Find your passion. If you don't know what it is, then experiment! Experiment like crazy and don't be afraid to try things. One thing I say to my kids is to be safe, be smart, and have fun, in that order. It's more for adolescents, but I remind myself of that too! You don't have as much time as you think. You can wait and wait until just the right thing comes along or you can get off your butt and go do something now."

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