

# music man

*Mississippi's Arden Barnett is a revolutionary in the state's music scene.*

by amy reid felder



RON BLAYLOCK

Looking around his office, it is clear that longtime Jackson concert promotor Arden Barnett is in the music business. Located upstairs in the iconic Fondren Corner building in Jackson, his modest space has a cool, relaxed vibe. Wilco's "One Sunday Morning (Song For Jane Smiley's Boyfriend)" is playing on what appears to be some sort of high-quality sound system (a lost art to a generation raised on internet radio and iPhones). The walls are adorned with posters of bands and from music festivals spanning across the years—real memorabilia that says "I was there." What is indeed a sound system—including a turntable and some really fancy speakers—is quite impressive. Equally impressive is Barnett's record collection that lines the wall of the sitting room. Arden Barnett is clearly in the music business. But what becomes equally clear after only a few minutes of conversation is that the music business is in Arden Barnett.





OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Barnett poses with members from Moon Taxi during their stop in Starkville. Contemporary Christian group Jars of Clay also made a stop at Duling this year. Robert Earl Keen played to a packed crowd at Duling Hall. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Barnett brought Robert Plant, best known as the lead singer of Led Zeppelin, to Thalia Mara Hall in March. Barnett celebrates with St. Paul and the Broken Bones following their show. Ardenland also books talent for many festivals and outdoor concerts. Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips entertained a sold out crowd. Country-punk rock band Lucero played Duling this past December.

Music has always been a part of his life. Born in Forest, he lived in Clinton until his family moved to Boise, Idaho, when he was in high school. And Boise was the perfect environment to foster Barnett's love of music. While there, he worked in a local music store, ran sound for bands, and sold high-end home audio. He also began booking bands and continued on this path when his family moved to Birmingham, Alabama, where Barnett attended the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Soon after joining the concert committee at UAB, Barnett became committee chair, eventually booking bands full time.

As his family moved from city to city, Barnett developed quality relationships in the music industry which became the heart of his business. It may sound cliché, but he explains that the music industry is "about who you know." Describing himself as "incredibly blessed," he attributes his current success to the relationships he built over the years. Indeed, Barnett has continued doing business with the same group of five to six agents he met in his early days.

Upon returning to Mississippi in the 1980s, Barnett developed another key relationship with a well-known Jacksonian active in the music industry, Malcom White. Barnett started out waiting tables at Hal & Mal's, and it was while working as a server that he partnered in booking blues singer Taj Mahal. The show sold out, he began booking

more shows, and a successful partnership was born. Barnett booked shows for White for eight years before taking a six-year hiatus from the music business. The two remain connected, working together on the St. Paddy's Day Parade and on shows at Duling Hall and Hal & Mal's.

Barnett returned to the music industry in a manner similar to how he started. Around 4:30 a.m. on January 3, 2011, he turned on his computer, began emailing his old agent friends, and ardenland was born. The self-described "entertainment company specializing in concert promotion, festival management, corporate events, private parties, fund-raising, school dances, and university concerts," while focused in Mississippi, has grown to produce hundreds of events throughout the Southeast and across the country. One of his most popular venues is Duling Hall, which Barnett calls the company's "baby." Duling is a performing arts venue housed in the auditorium of Fondren's old Duling School in Jackson. With its unique atmosphere and state-of-the-art acoustics, Duling has hosted its share of quality musicians, including Chris Robinson Brotherhood, Wilco, Jason Isbell, Sun Volt, Galactic, Keb Mo Band, the Indigo Girls, JJ Grey & MOFRO, and George Winston, to name a few.

Now in its fifth year, ardenland has greatly revitalized the Mississippi music scene, bringing in numerous

well-known musicians from a variety of genres, including blues, rock, indie, and country. Notable acts among this long list are Robert Plant, Widespread Panic, Tedeschi Trucks Band, Boston, Band of Horses, Steve Earl, Jamey Johnson, and, in October 2016, music legend Bob Dylan.

Barnett's most recent accolade is a speaking engagement at one of the most prestigious events in the industry. Tune in Tel Aviv—Israel's International Live Music Conference and Showcase, to be held November 9-12, 2016, is the most important industry event in the Middle East. Barnett is among panelists from other booking agencies as well as major festivals (think Coachella), labels (Warner Music, Sire Records), media outlets (Billboard Magazine, Celebrity Access), and more. Joining Barnett from the United States are Drew Young from the Mississippi Tourism Department and musician Grady Champion. Barnett is incredibly humbled by this opportunity, as he muses, "I have no business being there." But Barnett's experience and track record have more than proven him worthy of the honor.

So, how has one man with only a few employees managed to achieve such success in an industry that can at times be cutthroat and thankless? It goes back to who Barnett knows and, more importantly, what he's about. For Barnett, it's not about money, recognition, or any platform other than a desire to experience good music and share it

with others. Barnett is quick to point out that it is a balancing act. "Seven out of ten shows don't turn a profit," he explains, "but they are an investment in the music." According to Barnett, the shows are an educational process—an opportunity to introduce something new and different to the fans, and hopefully help a talented but fledgling act gain momentum. The approach worked with Widespread Panic, a band Barnett recalls booking years ago for around \$125. The now wildly popular band and its agent remain loyal to Barnett and have returned to Jackson, including a two-night spree this past spring.

Ardenland produced upward of 200 shows last year, and Barnett expects that number to be closer to 300 by the end of 2016. Barnett is enthusiastic about the future and greatly appreciative of the support he receives from the community. "Jackson has the greatest fans," he explains. While it is impossible to see 300 shows a year, Barnett encourages area residents to come out as often as they can. "Even if you don't know who the artist is, give it a shot," Barnett says. If Barnett's track record for spotting talent is any indication, you likely won't be disappointed. **M**

Visit [Ardenland.com](http://Ardenland.com) for more information.