We at the Memphis Music Initiative (MMI) were thrilled to be trusted with several large investments in our work over the last year. As our finances were reinvigorated, our aspirations were renewed and our tools were replenished. Conventional wisdom tells nonprofits that receive an unexpected gift to invest the money in traditional banks or investment portfolios to sustain the organization for as long as possible.

But at MMI, we constantly ask ourselves if that conventional wisdom has worked for Black and brown people (usually not), so we flipped convention to ask, “How can we invest the money IN people and organizations doing the work?” — as well as the question we always ask ourselves: “What is the Blackest thing we can do in this situation?” We concluded that this money is not to be hoarded, but must be set in the earth as the foundation for a new day in solidifying, sustaining, and growing the Black arts ecosystem in Memphis.

What we will do is strengthen and expand our programs, based on what young people tell and show us they need most. We will walk in the path of Ida B., Isaac, and the Invaders. We will pour into Black and brown creative youth development leaders in Memphis, because they deserve respect, reparations, and rest. We will actively speak out against harmful philanthropic practice, no matter how powerful or well intentioned, and we will usher in a new day of healing and accountability. Please let us be clear: by harmful practice, we mean the inconsistent, low-dollar gifts that come at the price of our time, value mountains of paperwork, devalue our sanity, demand constant proof of worth, and erode trust and our ability to thrive.

We will use all of our influence, voice, and dollars to seed power and institution building, creative liberation, and organizing and mobilizing through advocacy. We will be twice as dogged as the vestiges of white supremacy operating in systems of oppression in this, Memphis, our city. We remain serious about our mission, but we will operate with love and joy as our guide. And we will be a mirror, a milepost, and a microphone for our young people, highlighting who they really are, showing them the history that has informed the conditions that brought them here, and preparing and encouraging them to fight with vigor for the lives and city they want to see.

“I’m going to tell it like it is. I hope you can take it like it is.”

—El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz/Malcolm X
MMI has been providing unrestricted grants and capacity building to mostly Black- and brown-led/serving creative youth development organizations for six years. We have provided wraparound services including executive coaching, consultants, training, and intensive staff support. But our investments have only scratched the surface of the repair needed after decades of undercapitalization and philanthropic redlining that has undermined the stability of our peers in this work. So, we will do even more to support the work of these extraordinary organizations and leaders.

“Liberation requires more than appeals to the “angels within or amongst us.” We have to choose the radical and revolutionary over and above the ridiculous. We must remove the shackles of this plantation prosperity.”

—Rev. Dr. Earle Fisher, Abyssinian Baptist Church, Memphis
First, we will address and fund proper salaries for our Black and brown creative youth development leaders. Our analysis has shown that our local Black and brown youth arts leaders trail their white counterparts across every budget size, but in fact many of them are paying themselves a pittance or not paying themselves at all, while continuing to work because they simply love our young people. This is unacceptable. There is nothing tolerable about “scarcity magic”; that is, the idea that Black and brown leaders must make exceptional community change using only the crumbs from the philanthropic table. As funders, we owe it to these leaders to understand how much they are actually paying themselves and provide the supplemental resources needed to bring them up to a baseline level salary. Further, this inequity is a clear indication of the racism that continues to exist in nonprofits and funding.

Therefore, MMI will be creating a Black Pay Matters funding pool, supporting 13 leaders with restricted grants (that they can only use to pay themselves) to meet a baseline salary of $41,128 (the median Memphis metro area income for a single adult, per the U.S. Census Bureau), for a total investment from MMI of over $400,000. Even our efforts do not address the full scale of the problem; that baseline still falls well below the median salary in Memphis for executive directors in the nonprofit sector.

MMI intends to grow our resources in this area, to both provide this critical gap funding, and to continue to assist executive directors and boards in identifying and gaining resources to fully cover the costs of their operations, including equitable salaries for staff. If Black Lives Matter, then we in the philanthropic community need to be committed to paying Black leaders appropriately.
Second, MMI will be making large investments in capital campaigns and infrastructure building for Black- and brown-led arts organizations. Philanthropic systems continue to overlook these organizations for large investments (including designated “operating grants,” because when an organization is insufficiently capitalized, those operating grants inevitably get used on programs). We will contribute grants from $40,000 to over $100,000 from our Black Legacy Matters fund for capital campaigns, because we know that these are the hardest dollars for grassroots organizations to raise. Additionally, we will help identify new funding at the city, state, and national level to help these organizations build the kind of stability they deserve. And we will make these investments on top of our regular funding, because we understand that the organizations we target need both.

Last, but importantly, we will be organizing a retreat for Black and brown creative youth development leaders, to thank them for their extraordinary hard work and ensure they feel seen and valued. When asked what they need from philanthropy, our leaders don’t typically say, “I’m exhausted by trying to chase down funding and I need a break from your applications, reports, requirements, and rejections.” But we hear that, and we feel that. So, we are going to take these leaders for respite and emphasize that Black Rest Matters. We won’t insist that participants follow any set learning agenda; this is not professional development time. This is respite and self-care time. This is time to be in beloved community with those who know your struggles. This is time to retreat into your artistic practice. This is space to vent, laugh, cry, and dream. Our leaders deserve space to heal from the ongoing trauma of a funding system that doesn’t always recognize or fully value their contributions.
MMI PROGRAMS:
AFFIRMING AND AMPLIFYING YOUTH VOICE AND POWER

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid, so it is better to speak...”
—Audre Lorde

As a direct service provider, MMI has been focused on providing high quality music instruction and music engagement, using a curriculum centering creative expression and creative liberation. Using our In-Schools and weekend/summer MMI Works programs, we have sought to catalyze new ways of connecting the inherent creativity of our young people to their hopes and aspirations for themselves and for their city. We will use new investments in our work to sustain and expand our programming.

For our In-Schools program, we will deepen our work around creative liberation using anti-adultism practices by expanding our music fellowship program to include graduate music education students from local universities. This will not only allow us to scale the program, but we will also be giving these graduate students real world training as teaching artists using a youth-centered curriculum.

For our MMI Works program, we have acknowledged that our young adults need support and resources beyond our core programming years of ages 16-18. Now that we have major additional investment in our work, we will expand our offerings to include an MMI Works Alumni program. We’ll be able to continue the creative liberation and journey mapping work, but go further into nurturing, persisting, and pivoting alongside young people in the 18-24 range. Memphis is sorely lacking in supports for young adults, and this program gives us a window to create supportive community and supplement their experiences with mentors and apprenticing to ensure their successful transition from high school to further education, training, creation, enlistment, or employment.
“Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”
—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We have so much work to do, and we will continue to seek the best and highest use of investments in our work. We absolutely still need financial investments in our work; we are not seeking charity, but solidarity.

We intend to use 2022 and beyond to demonstrate all of the positive outcomes and results that are seeded when you make major investments and endow Black- and brown-led work and use effective intermediary funders to strengthen direct service providers. We openly share our work and strategies, and hope that others across the field are inspired to revolutionize pay, rest, legacy, and youth voice towards justice.

“No matter where I go, I’m still Memphis.”
—Young Dolph, Real Life

Access additional media like playlists and videos at callandresponse.org
Learn more about MMI at memphismusicinitiative.org