

Playing the Music Market

Intro: Chattanooga musician Nick Lutsko has broken into the music scene by starting small and standing out.

There are a lot of 20-something musicians trying to make it. With dreams and guitars in tow, they bid farewell to homes and families and college degrees. They flock to the biggest cities and play the smallest gigs. They know the odds are against them — or maybe they don't — but they hustle and hope that hard work and good luck will make them a legend, or at the very least, a living.

Nick Lutsko has worked a different strategy.

"I'm all about nurturing my home base," Nick says. "You have to do that before you can grow."

Musically inclined from every angle — singer, songwriter, guitar player, band manager, record producer — Nick has taken a business-minded approach to achieving success in an industry where success is notoriously elusive. Choosing to start in a city like Chattanooga, with less noise and easy networking, has worked well so far. He's certainly established a following, and now has his sights set on surrounding markets, like Nashville, Knoxville and Atlanta.

But for Nick, growth isn't only about place: it's also about differentiation. Which is, at least in part, why the members of his band dress up as life-sized puppets for every performance.

"I loved the Muppets growing up, and there's a great nostalgia around it," he says. "I'd been trying to figure out how to incorporate puppets into my music for a while. It started with a music video concept -- we were going to do an absurd, dark version of Pee Wee's Playhouse -- but instead, we ended up working them into the show."

The band is called Nick Lutsko and the Gimmix, and beneath the costumes are highly talented musicians. Their sound could broadly be described as "indie," but it's really an amalgam of genres — funk and pop and folk and blues. While the music stands on its own, there's something about puppets onstage that amplifies the vibe. It's more than grabbing the attention of show-goers; the look creates a happy weirdness that's truly unique to their performances.

This isn't Nick's first band, and — for lack of a better term — it isn't his first novelty act: as a teenager, the combination of his young age and strong talent became an effective if unintentional shtick, and it drew ample attention.

"In high school, we started a band called Infinite Orange," Nick says. "We played Riverbend and Nightfall, and we actually had great momentum. But a few years passed, and the crowds got smaller. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that we weren't the young kids on stage anymore, which is why we'd stood out in the first place."

When Nick's high school graduation rolled around, he wasn't ready to leave the band and head to college. But ultimately, he chose to pursue his bachelor's in music at Middle Tennessee State University.

"I studied songwriting and the recording industry, I took internships in New York City, I learned how to treat music as a business," Nick says. "But my success with Infinite Orange messed my head up, in a way. It happened really easily, so I had this idea that music could be something I just show up to."

While he earned his degree, his band disassembled and his fanbase diminished. Instead of scrambling to pull together a new act, he decided to go it alone. Without the camaraderie of a band, and with no manager but himself, Nick struck out as a solo artist.

"I stopped making excuses and I recorded my first album, Heart of Mold. It was stripped down Americana," Nick says. "I'm proud of it. That record was a representation of where I was and how I could push through limitations."

Nick made copies of Heart of Mold and decided go on tour. He had no idea what he was doing, but he Googled, and he winged it. He reached out to venues across the Southeast to book gigs, and when he had gaps, he walked into bars and coffee shops to play for tips and sell a few albums. He crashed with old friends and new friends, and some nights, he slept in his car. It was hard, and it was lonely -- and while a big break was a possibility, it wasn't Nick's mission.

"I got great experience, and I made enough money to invest in recording software," Nick says. "But I was always coming back to Chattanooga."

He established the Puppet People in the two years since his tour, and they're full-steam ahead, but Nick is constantly seeking out new ways to define and support himself as an artist.

The evolving music industry is a double-edged sword, he says: it's easier than ever for people like Nick, but also for everyone else, to record and market their work. So the playing field has leveled, but it's incredibly crowded. In a time when everyone is an artist, positioning is important, and puppet costumes can only help -- but so can an open mind. Because, as Nick knows, "making it" is really what you make it.

"When you're a musician who's my age, you're either doing really well, or it's time to grow up. I'm close to seeing which direction things will go," Nick says. "But being a musician can mean a lot of things. I'd love to be playing for massive crowds, and I'd also be happy simply supporting a family doing what I love. Whatever's next, I'm ready for it."