

For this episode of “Great Minds Think a Lot.” We interviewed **Rick Coughlin**, owner of **Grove Studios**, a rehearsal studio and creative space for artists and aspiring musicians. During this interview, we spoke on the origins of and plans for Grove studios, Coughlin’s artistry roots, and his appreciation for the local Ypsilanti area community.

Below is the full transcript of our 30-minute conversation.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** All right, so we are here with Rick Coughlin for the great minds think a lot series, the owner of Grove Studios, first of all, how's it going?

**Rick:** Going well man, thanks for the opportunity to talk with you guys. Appreciate it.

**Destination Ann arbor:** Absolutely. So we're here to talk about your business, what all that you contribute to the Ypsilanti and Arbor area scene. My first question is, when did you get into music? What inspired you?

**Rick:** Wow, that's a good question. I was fortunate to be raised around a lot of music. My grandfather probably played like four or five different instruments. I spent a lot of time in their house growing up. My mom was young, single mother at the time, and working a lot trying to put herself through school. So I spent a lot of time there. I was always kind of exposed to music at an early age.

My mom was also a pianist. Music was always playing growing up, anything from traditional, like German and Austrian music that my OMA and Opa listen to, and classical music. But then later, my mom was into rock and disco, and always records playing. When my father came into the mix, he introduced me to Motown, and my uncle introduced me to Southern rock, like ZZ Top. So I like all these threads of being exposed to music at an early age, but I never really showed interest in playing an instrument. I really didn't pick up guitar until I was probably 15, or 16 years old, when I started, really get into the idea of playing guitar. Piano didn't really interest me, some of the traditional instruments that my grandparents played didn't really interest me, but I liked strings.

That got me into music, and all along the while I was in choir, a lot of people don't know that about me. I was in choirs from the time I was in sixth grade. Actually even going back to probably fourth or fifth grade, I was doing musicals, singing and church plays. And then I did show choir in high school show and competition choir, actually tried out for Eastern Michigan University's choir, made it, but I couldn't commit to the time because I had to work and get through school. And I also wanted to play in rock bands. So that's all of it in a nutshell. Lots of different influences all over the place.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** That is really cool. So we're going to jump back to that in just a moment. So first, let's talk about Grove Studios. What was the initial thought process behind the

creation of Grove?

**Rick:** Yeah, that's a great question. Honestly. Grove was partially born out of personal frustration. As a musician, it was always hard to find a place to practice and be loud. When I think back to Ypsi in the late 90s, when I was really starting to do the band thing. None of us own houses. Most of us lived in apartments or efficiencies. We just didn't have space...

But there was a little space behind what used to be where Spark is downtown. I think it was called Mr. Mugs. It was an all ages venue, a lot of rock shows and punk shows at the time. But in the back, they had a handful of really kind of ramshackle-rehearsal-rooms, where you felt kind of nervous to leave your stuff there. Doors with flimsy doors and padlocks and stuff. Somebody could just kick it over and get in there. At least that's how we felt sometimes. Although nothing ever got stolen.

**Rick (Cont.):** But over the years, there were various spaces. When that went away, then we were lost, again. We're trying to, "hey, whose basement, or who's grandma's basement or whatever we could find." It was always that, we could never find a place. We knew lots of other people that had the same problem. And you were lucky if you had a basement or garage, because that was the only place that you could rehearse.

Some other spaces came and went, there's a place called "555." over on Michigan Ave, there was Spur Studios, that was exciting at the time, it was huge, there were 15 spaces for bands down below. And then up above, they had like 15 spaces, so graphic artists, visual artists, other mixed media kinds of artists up there. So it was a cool building.

But eventually, that kind of fell into some disrepair and the owners lost the lease, then that space went away, and all of the artists had to scramble to find a place. That was probably eight years ago, maybe or so, that space went away. ...A friend of mine, who's now business partner, Eric Friebel, at the time, we all scrambled to find space. And we've been talking for years about how "We could really do this well, we could do this better, we could do a better for artists." We imagined a space that was a little bit different than what had been done before.

Usually, it was just like a room that you rent out by the month or long term, and you could just leave all your stuff there. And that was about it. It wasn't sound treated. It wasn't sound isolated. It wasn't anything, it was just a space. And it wasn't necessarily cheap, either. So you'd have to cram three or four bands in there to make the money make sense. And then, everybody's dancing around each other's stuff.

...And we're like, Well, what if we did it differently? What if we did it like this? And that we wanted to build something better, not just for ourselves, but something that would work for everybody, for many people. And that's kind of where the idea sprouted. Once the idea sprouted, there's a lot of stuff in between. But that might be a different question. (Laughs)

**Destination Ann Arbor:** So you touched on it a little bit with that question without an answer. But how do you feel, since the creation of Grove, your spaces has helped the culture of the Ann

Arbor and Ypsilanti area?

**Rick:** That's an interesting question, because I feel like the culture of the music scene has always been here. It's one of the reasons that drew me to the area in the first place. I knew I wasn't U of M material, I liked the area, and I was good enough to get into Eastern. There were other choices. I could have gone to Central or Ferris or another one of these smaller state schools, but I was really just drawn to the area. I'd been here before, because I had friends whose older brothers, or sisters, went to school out here. And so we'd come out and hang out. And I really felt drawn to like the diversity of the area, and in the music that I saw happening. There was cool stuff going on here that I didn't see in other places.

**Rick (Cont.):** So I think the culture has always been here. It's an area with two universities, a couple of colleges. There's just always an influx of youth, vibrancy and artistic thinking around here. Like I saw that there wasn't support, direct, like infrastructure kind of support for the scene that already is here. So when I think about Grove, I don't necessarily think of us as creating culture or even adding to it, other than we just want to support what's here. To some degree, maybe we've become part of it. Because we're just supportive of what we see people already doing. That was always a big goal. We didn't want to make it about us. We didn't want to be the arbiters of taste and culture. That's just not the way I think of it in my mind, right? People have said, "Well, you should become a record label or you should do this or do that." And I really feel strongly about supporting artists and their business that they're trying to create, because ultimately, people that want to make it as artists are building their own business.

**Rick (Cont.):** I see it as more of a business-to-business kind of relationship, where the art is in the hands of the artists, and we don't want to get into that transaction. And so my theory is that we build a space, that's quality, that's safe, where people feel welcome. All genres of music. We've got anywhere from classical, jazz, hip hop, rock and country. We didn't want it to become this space, where it's like, "Oh, yeah, that's where the metal dudes rehearse or whatever." So we were thoughtful about that. And so I think hopefully that's our place. That we were a part of the scene, but we're also just supporting the scene. And the art is going to do what the art does, the people are going to do what the people do. And as long as we can provide that support, then I think we're in the right place.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** Just going back a little bit, you talked about, when you first began Grove, you just wanted to have a space where you can be loud, and where you can perform how you want to perform. And on the same note, one aspect of Grove that's really appreciated is your guys' ability to put on live performances. So talk to me about the live music aspect of things. How does live music and performances add to the Ypsi art music community?

**Rick:** When we first started over on Michigan Ave, which is now like Olympia skateboarding company, in that space. We had a space, in that space, that was large enough to have events. We thought, "Hey, let's throw some shows, let's make this a space where people can even do

DIY shows.” Shows don't always have to happen in bars. And that's not always the best place for shows. A lot of people don't drink, people are under 21.

We carved out a space to put on live shows, and at the time, we worked with some different folks to just throw shows there. And be supportive of the community, and that was cool. There's a little art gallery space there. So we got to have some art shows there in conjunction with music. And, we tried to do the same thing in our new space, over on Railroad Street, except we don't have an indoor space, we only have an outdoor space. So weather obviously is always an issue there.

But we did continue that tradition by having a yearly Equinox party, where we'd throw a show, welcome everybody over to come check out the studio, and enjoy the music.

**Rick (Cont.):** We'll bring in a food truck, some vendors and just have a good time. It's really more of an Invitational for the community to come by and check out what we do. During the pandemic, when there were no shows happening, and we were closed for three months, and really slow during that first summer and 2020, we were like, “Well, we need to do something to support the community.” And what we came up with, was throwing shows limited to capacity, we could only have like 25 people back there legally.

So we're like, Okay, let's stream some stuff so people can enjoy music from home and let's do it in a quality way. We kind of built on that throughout the first couple summers of the pandemic, and it was a lot of work, throwing shows is no joke. Having events is no joke. Live streaming with quality audio is tough. It's really time consuming. We learned a lot through that phase.

I think we played a good part in giving people an opportunity to perform when there wasn't a lot of opportunity to do that. Like still keep up your chops, play your songs, stream it. I think everybody that was involved had a lot of fun and came out with some great content, and some stuff to look back on. But as we kind of came to the tail end of that, and live shows came back and more people started rehearsing again.

**Rick (Cont.) -** Even like DJs. There were no DJs practicing at the time, because you couldn't have big events. Now we're seeing a ton of DJs come in and getting ready for live shows. We started to look around and see all of these other people and organizations putting on events. And we came to the idea that, how can we be more supportive of that, instead of just throwing our own thing here at Grove, where inclement weather can be a problem.

So really, what we've leaned into is, how can we use our time, and our dollars to support the events and the people that are passionate about throwing events? Because we're really not events people. I think that's a special skill set. And there's people that are doing it already. You've got Taylor Greenshields doing Fun Fest, like that's an event we want to get behind. So how can we support that?

...That's kind of where we are now. We're looking for opportunities to support people. In sponsor stages, sponsor events, and be part of it still. Even physically show up, volunteer help, support those events, put dollars behind it, where we can, so that those events can happen. We think that's a better place for us, at least currently.

It's not to say we won't be hosting shows or throwing shows, I'd love to put together a showcase show at the blind pig, or Ziggys, those are things that are like in the works. So we'll still be involved. It's just that our space is challenging. Especially because it's outside, we won't be able to do it all year round.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** (Laughs) completely understandable. That's so cool, man. I look forward to seeing what happens next. Let's move back just a little bit before that question, where you spoke about the diversity of Ypsilanti. You spoke about the reason why you chose this location. My question is, what is it about the city that makes you want to live and work here? What makes this area, the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area special?

**Rick:** At the risk of dating myself, I moved out here, I'm originally from Denver. My family moved here, when I was probably 10, we lived in a small town up in the thumb of Michigan. I spent, from the time I was 10 to 18, in a very small town. 4,500 people to be exact. Being an adolescent in a small town, having seen and lived in a big city that was diverse, and coming to, what I was more of a monoculture. It wasn't for me. It just wasn't a place that I wanted to spend an extended amount of time. I had seen other things, I had experienced other types of music, other cultures, and not to mention the food.

There aren't a lot of options for food in a small town like that. So it was a lot of things, and obviously, the opportunity to go to college was a big thing. One of the first in my family to achieve an advanced degree. It was a gut instinct for me, it was just like this is the stuff that I want to be around. ...I saw a wide range of types of music being performed. I was just drawn to that, from my musical background, you could tell I've been exposed to a lot of stuff at an early age, from a music standpoint.

**Rick (Cont.):** I just find that exciting because I see this cross pollination of musical styles and people that are open. That's where some of the best stuff comes from. Where would rock and roll be without blues or jazz? or where would metal be without rock and roll and blues and so on. It comes from a special place. And, I just felt like that was happening here.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** That's so cool! And speaking on the diversity aspect of it, and you inheriting all of these different influences of music. Let's talk about your musicianship, and how many bands and groups that you are a part of, or how did you get involved with the current group that you are a part of?

**Rick:** I've played in a lot of different projects over the years. It's funny because when I look back at the projects, there's definitely a running theme. I hop back and forth between, either doing something that's more funky or sort of like blues, funk, jazz based. Then sometimes I veer off into more rock-Americana. It seems to be like those two genres that I enjoy playing the most.

But truthfully, I've always wanted to be in a band, like The Roots, or playing guitar in a band, like The Roots. I don't know, I gravitate towards what's fun, and what I like listening to myself. I can't play in a project that I don't enjoy listening to myself. So it's a little bit of a selfish exercise. I follow the Rick Rubin school of thought. You create first for yourself, and for the musicians that you're working with. You put it out there and you hope other people like it. Hopefully, if you're doing it in good spirit, then people will like it. Maybe not millions of people, but if some people listen, that's a good thing.

**Rick (Cont.):** I love working in challenging environments, I like working with people that are better musicians than me, I learn a lot, I'm constantly learning. Being in a diverse community, with lots of different influences, that's one of my favorite parts. I get the opportunity to work with so many different kinds of artists. If you follow me on Instagram, and you hit my link tree, I've got a list of my musical projects, and you can see how I'm all over the map, when it comes to the kind of stuff that I've done. But that's what keeps it interesting.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** Just for the viewer, what groups or bands are you a part of?

**Rick:** Currently I'm playing guitar with a band called Cracked and Hooked. I'd characterize them as more Americana, in rock than anything. It's super fun, because I probably haven't done that in close to a decade. I'm having a ton of fun with that. Currently. The DayNites have been on a little bit of a hiatus. We've got some personnel changes happening. Things always change. We're still working on that project.

Prior to that, I played in the group called Abe Maybe, that was one of the most eclectic projects I've ever worked on. Super fun to listen to, I love the songs. I've played in a power pop, sort of Americana band called The Afternoon Round. And a funk blues r&b outfit called Jameson. If you want to listen to any of that stuff, just follow me on Instagram, @IamRickCoughlin. Hit my link tree and listen up. It's a fun ride.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** Absolutely, man. Let's just move back to Grove just for a little bit. What is the current goal for Grove at this point?

**Rick:** First and foremost, it's making sure that the Ypsilanti location is sustainable and present for as long as it's needed. I think it will be needed for a long time. A lot of our efforts are focused around making sure that we can keep those doors open. That was one of our biggest frustrations, as these spaces would start and, and they wouldn't last. It left a lot of people trying to figure out where they were going to go and what they were going to do next. That's really frustrating. So that's the first goal.

The second big goal is to open up a second location, Detroit is in the works. It could take some time, if all goes well, by q3 or q4, of next year, we can have a Detroit location to support the Detroit community. Because we've learned over time that most people won't drive more than 25

miles to be in a space like ours. So we know that the service is needed in other areas. Beyond that, our thesis is that cities typically of 500,000 or more in population, really could use support from a Grove Studios location. That's longer term. But we're passionate about that goal, and we do believe it'll happen. There's a lot of moving parts to getting there.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** All right. Just two more questions. First, is there anything else you would like the people to know? That you want to put out here to the world?

**Rick:** That's super open ended (Laughs) I kind of liked the challenge. I think the thing I hope we can all remember as everybody moves forward, in their business and in their art, in all business in general, whether it's the music business, or anything else, it's about people. I just have a people first mentality, doing the right thing, Isn't isn't difficult to do. It's just what we should do. Doing the right thing leads to other great things, and treating people with respect and whatever business you're in, is super important. Build each other up.

There's a lot of people that I see out on the scene that do that. I think Ypsi, and even Ann Arbor, are what I like about this area, not just the diversity, but the support that I see people give each other. The shout outs that I see, the people that really are doing the work out there. Artists supporting each other, people supporting each other. It's a small scene, Southeast Michigan isn't Austin. It's not LA, it's not New York, it's not any of those places. I'm glad it's not. It's a smaller scene, and sometimes that makes it more challenging. But I think the more that we lift each other up and collaborate, rather than trying to compete. I think that's the ultimate stuff right there.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** And my last question, which is less open ended, what's the best way people should reach out or find out more about Grove?

**Rick:** You can go right to our website, which is just [GroveStudios.space](http://GroveStudios.space). We're on Instagram and Facebook. You can check out stuff there. We're always posting, sharing what artists are doing, sharing what the community's doing. Just generally doing what we do. If you want to get in touch with me personally, it's [IamRickCoughlin](https://www.instagram.com/IamRickCoughlin) on all social media platforms. So feel free to hit me up there. If you want to collaborate, if your business wants to partner with us on promoting something or you want to put a show together. We're very open to collaborations and supporting our local businesses and obviously, local artists.

**Destination Ann Arbor:** Absolutely. And once again, thank you very much, Mr. Rick Coughlin for the Great Minds Think a Lot series, we greatly appreciate you.

**Rick:** Thanks for the opportunity so it was good chatting with you brother.