

# CONTEXT

## What is the story of the Battle Creek artist?

“You want to go work at a factory or go make art?”. Artist Jaziel Pugh responds as his fellow community of artists vigorously snap their fingers and nod their heads as they reflect on their stories of struggle to become artists in Battle Creek. For most artists of Battle Creek, they grew up knowing their hometown to be an uninspiring place with limited economies leading to even more limiting destinies. None of them dreamed of the quality of life that came with the conventional Battle Creek story of working at a local factory. Instead, they found glimmerings of hope that could convert their talents into tangible ambitions. The first time Brandon Fitzpatrick, lead band member of jazz fusion group Minor Element, played the piano outside of Church was inside of the grocery store Horrocks. He was hooked. Confirmed in his own talent, he pursued any and all opportunities to enhance his craft, knowing full well those opportunities were limited in Battle Creek. Brandon became a self-taught musician and co-founder of local record label, Blvcksheep, because like most artists here, you had to create platforms in order to have somewhere to showcase your art. However, leading his own band from Battle Creek proved to be difficult with having no connections to opportunities and stages that could provide them a new and larger audience, and so, he moved out of Battle Creek to further enhance his artistry. Since, he has gained several gigs, will probably gain more, and will soon see his dreams come true.

Brandon’s story is not an isolated one. There are countless stories of Battle Creek artists whose realities take different shapes with similar roots. Stories of immense talent with no pathways to pursue it. Stories of severe poverty met with hefty sacrifices to make space for art. Stories of constant disunity of race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class because community members are forced to be competitors before they are collaborators. Stories of artists becoming entrepreneurs because it is a necessary by-product of sharing their art publicly. Stories of defeated desperation forcing artists to leave Battle Creek to finally get the chance to express their talents and see new parts of the world. These narratives have consumed so much of the creative discourse in Battle Creek that it has muddled public perception to see the true value that underlies these experiences: a city with tremendous amounts of talent that has the potential to transform a small town into a thriving artistic hub by diverse community members working together and investing in what artists want.

## How did Battle Creek get here?

Battle Creek is a one-of-a-kind city. It is a small town in the midwest that breeds unique individuals, garners unforgettable community interactions, and houses some of the most powerful institutions in the world. The relationships between these diverse stakeholders have created certain patterns that stem from a lack of bridge building and power transfer among these groups, and as a result of these patterns, trauma has been cultivated within a community looking to grow. There are several artists in Battle Creek’s creative ecosystem that have taken it upon themselves to build teams & businesses, initiate community-wide ideas, and create art that intentionally benefits the members of the community. However, it is the individuals who are inspired enough to turn to their local systems of power for support

that are typically burned by inconsistent decision-making as a result of shifting funding priorities, changes in leadership, and personal preferences representing institutional objectives. In addition to this constant phenomenon, young artists are contracted for short-term opportunities or asked to serve in volunteer positions for local organizations that allow them to utilize their artistic genius in minimally impactful ways that leave them with little to no financial stability for their contributions and no pathways for their artistry to be further developed. Many local creative organizations are also seeing a declining rate of engagement between their offerings and diverse youth demographics because of generational gaps. Young artists in this community are necessary to revitalize community activities to reach untapped audiences, however, they often innovate out of their own volition without payment or are simply not given opportunities to engage with larger organizations.

Artists in Battle Creek have lost trust in their community to actually support their projects, ideas, enterprises and most importantly, their growth as artists. This justified lack of trust in their city power holders has created a culture of scarcity among many Battle Creek artists that not only prevents true collaboration, but an underlying pursuit to compete with one another. This culture of competition has shown up in the forms of jealousy and slander, backbiting and secrecy, individualism and exceptionalism, and serves as unnecessary distractions to each individual's ability to create and share successful art. Ultimately, the roots of this culture stem from capitalist processes of power, control, and scarcity that have impacted Battle Creek's culture of artistry, despite good intentions. The only way to address a culture of competition and scarcity is by countering its root cause with an entity that will provide resources and opportunities that will breed a new culture of collaboration and abundance.

## **Shaping an Ecosystem that Centers Artists' Prosperity**

For many artists and creatives of Battle Creek, especially BIPOC & Queer youth, there is an absence of support, resources, and pathways to help them sustain and achieve success in their craft as well as contributing their talents to the growth of community. By creating an Arts & Culture Collective, the Battle Creek community will have a central vehicle where various stakeholders engaged in the arts, whether they are institutions, small businesses, or independent artists, can come together to collaborate on building their community. Simultaneously, this entity will serve as a resource hub offering educational programs, access to services and space, and funds that will make their initiatives and personal goals far reaching. The Arts & Culture collective will serve as the platform where the beauty and culture of Battle Creek revitalizes the community to believe in their own potential for greatness. Over the next several years, our hope is to create an intentional ecosystem where artists' are prosperous and the Battle Creek community culture is enriched by their creations.