



## How Houlihan's Gives Emerging Artists a Voice

May, 21, 2012

Brands are the new DJs. Amid the demise of the music industry, companies ranging from American Express to Coca-Cola now provide exposure for musicians just like music impresarios Murray the K and Alan Freed once did. For indie artists, Houlihan's Restaurants has a longstanding tradition of providing exposure through the music playlists in its 83 U.S. establishments.



Recently, Houlihan's put its marketing muscle behind lesser-known artists by launching H-Listed. Each month, Houlihan's showcases an H-Listed artist by featuring the artist's music in each Houlihan's restaurant and providing 1 million impressions via the Houlihan's website, email outreach, and social media presence. Houlihan's has already created buzz for its first three H-Listed artists, Big Harp, Feathers, and the Parlotones, starting with a kick-off event at the South by Southwest Music Conference and Festival and continuing with online/offline promotions that include free song downloads.

**H HOULIHAN'S**

Meatloaf belongs on your plate. Not on your stereo.

Here is a selection of a few of the artists you're likely to hear in our restaurants this month. We draw from indie pop, modern soul, adult alternative, plus light electronica and underground hip hop to bring you a contemporary sound that radio tends to overlook in favor of formulaic and worn out top 40 mainstream hits.

Adele I'll Be Waiting	Cee Lo Green It's OK
Aloe Blacc If I	Guster This Could All Be Yours
Avalanche City Love Love Love	Hooray for Earth Surrounded by Your Friends
Beachwood Sparks Tarnished Gold	Imaginary Cities Hummingbird
Blitzen Trapper Might Find It Cheap	Nikki Jean What's A Girl Supposed To Do
Bombay Bicycle Club Your Eyes	Ben Kweller Full Circle
The Clientele As The World Rises And Falls	Lykke Li I Follow Rivers (Original)
Colplay Charlie Brown	Of Monsters and Men Slow And Steady
The Decemberists January Hymn	Rachel Platten Nothing Ever Happens
Brett Dennen Sydney (I'll Come Running)	Telokinesis Palm Of Your Hand
Dr. Dog That Old Black Hole	Tennis Origins
Dum Dum Girls Caught In One	Walk the Moon Anna Sun
Plumie Give Me Your Love	Wilco Damned On Me
Foster the People Noudini	Yee Yee Precious Stone
Geige Eyes Wide Open	Young Empires Rain Of Gold



To learn more about H-Listed, I interviewed Jen Gulvik, vice president of marketing and creative director for Houlihan's. During our conversation, she explained how music flourishes in the Houlihan's culture through efforts like H-Listed and the company's involvement in VH1 Save the Music. As Gulvik's experience shows, music is more than a means to build a brand for Houlihan's — it's a way of life.

*Let's talk about your role at Houlihan's and how you helped H-Listed get launched.*

I am responsible for all of marketing in the traditional sense, but also the customer experience. Ultimately, I am responsible for anything that happens in the restaurant, ranging from the uniforms we wear to the music we play.

And obviously music is part of the customer experience. Houlihan's has chosen to make the music you hear in our restaurants a point of differentiation, similar to the way some hotels make music part of the experience they offer.

H-Listed is our program to offer guests musical discovery while Houlihan's helps emerging artists. Our intent is to make people in our restaurants feel like they are enjoying a sense of discovery in a stylish surrounding. We deliberately choose unfamiliar musicians such as Big Harp, who we are featuring for the month of May, and the Parlotones, who were H-Listed in April.

**H-LISTED**  
HOULIHAN'S ORIGINAL MUSIC SERIES - 05/12

**BIG HARP**

DOWNLOAD EXCLUSIVE TRACK

PREVIOUSLY H-LISTED EP April 2012



Their music is promoted and used in our restaurant playlists, which include many other lesser-known artists through a selection put together each month by **PlayNetwork**, our outside partner that handles all of our music licensing, artist and label relations, and production in conjunction with H-Listed.

Starbucks has been curating music for years in its stores, and I have always wanted to do something like that. Music often falls under Operations in the dining industry, but fortunately music is the responsibility of Marketing at Houlihan's. When I ran the idea for H-Listed past PlayNetwork, they had all the resources and relationships to make it happen.

*Parlotones*



**What are you looking for in an artist to be affiliated with the Houlihan's brand?**

We are a progressive brand. We want our guests to be in a stylish, fun, and playful surrounding that might be a bit surprising for a typical dining chain. So we look for music that is stylish, fun, and playful. We tend to favor indie pop, modern soul, adult alternative, and light electronica. The moodiness of electronica captures the stylish element of our brand, and indie pop often expresses the fun and playful attributes of our brand.

Our choice of music is especially important for the line of restaurants we are building now that are more progressive-looking than some of our older locations.

When you are in a Houlihan's restaurant, we want you to have that feeling you get when you discover someone before your friends do – that "in-the-know" experience of finding out about someone before they are famous.

**How do you raise awareness for H-Listed?**

We launched H-Listed through a Houlihan's showcase at the South by Southwest Music Festival, which was the first time we've had a presence at SXSW. It was a great way to kick off the program. We featured performances from our first three H-Listed artists: Big Harp, the Parlotones, and Feathers. We recorded some great content at SXSW, such as interviews with our H-Listed bands, and used it to raise awareness for H-Listed.



Of course, exposure for H-Listed starts in each Houlihan's restaurant, through the music you hear and the H-Listed content appearing on signage and menus. We also make sure our employees are educated on how to answer questions about H-Listed while serving tables. H-Listed artists get exposure on our own website and our email data base. We inform our 850,000 subscribers of new artists and tracks. We promote H-Listed on all our social spaces, ranging from Facebook to Twitter.



*In many ways, you're acting like a DJ for all the artists who are featured in your in-store play, including the H-Listed musicians.*

That's right. Houlihan's curates music for you, ranging from the monthly rotation of songs you hear in a restaurant to the selections we share in our website. We also have a music player on Houlihan's to play about 30 songs you can enjoy while at work or at home.

*When you launched H-Listed, you said in a press release, "Music plays such an important role in our lives, and sharing music has become a way to connect with others in a meaningful way." How and why is music important to you and Houlihan's?*

Music has been a huge part of my life since when I was a three-year-old girl playing a Yamaha recorder. I was also in band for many years when I was growing up. I really got into music as a listener in college. I am a Gen Xer. I attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin, when the grunge scene was exploding. Discovering new and emerging artists like Nirvana – and Nirvana was certainly new and emerging when I was in college — became a personal passion of mine.



And that's what H-Listed is all about: discovering artists who don't have the financial backing of a major label – the artists who are touring around in mini-vans. We offer the artists exposure, and we make our brand look cool.

Music is a cultural passion at Houlihan's that starts at the top. Obviously I am passionate about music. My boss, our CEO, is also passionate about music. Our executives share music with each other all the time, and music is important to our employees. We also work with the **VH1 Save the Music Foundation**, which restores music programs in schools that have lost their funding.

**Houlihan's + VH1 Save the Music = ♥**

Houlihan's is proud to support VH1 Save the Music Foundation, whose mission is to restore instrumental music education programs in our nation's schools, a cause near and dear to our music-lovin' hearts.

To save one school music program, it takes \$30,000. Houlihan's has already saved several school music programs including one on behalf of all our Facebook fans. **And we're not done yet!**

We hit the road to spread awareness of this great cause as part of our Hou Gives a Flute Tour. Visit YouTube to see the footage and stops on the tour.

Learn more about VH1 Save the Music Foundation including the grant process, how you can get involved and to make a donation.

**We love giving instruments**

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The elimination of music from schools is a growing problem. When schools struggle and budgets tighten, music and arts are the first to go. I'm really surprised at the lack of awareness about the problem. If people knew how many kids were growing up without music training, they'd be shocked. It's a real travesty that schools lack funding for music. What's going to fuel our generation of emerging artists?

In conjunction with VH1 Save the Music, we recently held a contest to give Houlihan's employee musicians a chance to open for Robin Thicke at a recent Chicago concert. Employees simply had to provide a link to their music for us to evaluate. An employee band [named **Black on Black Rhyme**] from one of our Chicago restaurants won the opening slot as Robin played for the VH1 Songwriters Music Series, which benefits VH1 Save the Music.



*Black on Black Rhyme*

### ***How is H-Listed working out so far?***

Based on the volume of traffic on our social spaces, H-Listed is taking off. H-Listed is getting tweeted and talked about on Facebook and pinned on Pinterest. Our customers are giving us feedback on what they like and what we can do better. Artists are winning.

### ***Anything else you'd like to share?***

The clarinet needs to make a comeback [Jen laughs]. That was my instrument for 12 years when I was growing up. Seriously: music needs all our support. That's what we're doing at Houlihan's.

<http://superhypeblog.com/marketing/how-houlihans-gives-emerging-artists-a-voice>