



**Ben Folds**  
Americans for the Arts  
Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives  
Interior, Environment & Related Agencies Approps. Subcommittee  
February 6, 2020

Chair McCullum and Ranking Member Joyce, thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of Americans for the Arts for the NEA.

I was here speaking to your subcommittee a year ago. I wish more people could see this side of DC. You, working together on such important things, gave me fuel to go out and do this work.

I've submitted written testimony for the record that presents arguments we know are effective in making the case for the National Endowment For The Arts. I state that I'm asking for at least \$170M for the NEA for the 2021 Fiscal Year. You all know this, but it's worth noting for the public watching that this request just brings us to 1994 levels of investment in the NEA. It's not a big ask for something so important.

I began my career as a rock and roll recording artist 30 years ago, making albums and touring every corner of the US.

For the past 15 years, a big part of my career has been performing with symphony orchestras in cities big and small.

I just got back from performing 2 nights with the Minnesota Symphony. I perform with the Utah Symphony in Salt Lake in April. And with the Tacoma Symphony in November.

One of my greatest experiences was with Cleveland's Contemporary Youth Orchestra – an NEA success story.

I did 5 seasons of primetime NBC music television.

And I'm about to embark on a tv series for Fred Rogers Productions composing songs with children.

I'm also the Artistic Advisor to the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center. Our mission there is to bring in younger audiences to experience an important part of our culture.

At my own gigs, I tell each audience that the symphony is the artistic symbol of civilization. It's where you see large groups of people working together. In harmony. In concert.

*When you see the symphony deteriorate you can worry about the state of civilization.*

I'm a cold, hard capitalist, who is grateful for the competitive environment in which I succeeded.  
It pushed me personally and creatively.

I come to you as an artist and arts advocate, but also as a small business owner.

*My band started our business by living in a van which ran on fumes. Personally loading a beat up baby grand into punk rock clubs back in the day, one city at a time. I know how to balance a checkbook and I never asked for a handout. I'm no big spender.*

A small business owner knows the difference between spending and investing.

You spend too much you fail.  
But in order to succeed, you must invest.

And I think this rings true of the NEA.

The NEA is an INVESTMENT, and is felt most profoundly in rural areas where an NEA dollar results in 9 dollars in matching funds from the private sector. It's the kind of investment that satisfies a cold hard capitalist like me.

But the invaluable, irreplaceable service the NEA offers most has to do with ACCESS to the arts. ACCESS for everyone.

It's not as much about supporting the arts, which is important.

It's about finding ways for the ARTS to SUPPORT US.

*Putting arts to work to educate, revitalize rural and urban centers alike, and to generally inspire and make us greater.*

*To give us that old fashioned fabric of society stuff we all need more of.*

For profound examples of this, I don't even have to draw from my professional career.

I live in a small, Hudson Valley river town.

Small as a postage stamp, just a few blocks deep and wide.

We have as diverse population as you'll ever see.

*What feels like Kentucky countryside sits next to what feels like Brooklyn.*

*And all walks of life pass each other.*

Sadly, despite the proximity, there's not a lot of mingling.

Different blocks, different stores, different churches. Despite all the best intentions.

But just last December, I attended a fun little concert at the local Opera House.

It involved children.

It involved local professional performers - musicians and dancers.

It was inventive and participatory.

Kids from the various neighborhoods sung together, parents mingled, talent was on display, and some not so talented as well.

It was inspiring and fun.

Most importantly, it brought some unity to our town.

I glanced at the program. MADE POSSIBLE BY A GRANT FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS.

The NEA nailed it as they so often do.

There's plenty of art in the Hudson Valley and money going to support it. But the NEA is what cracks the code when it comes to ACCESS, and bringing people together. Supporting our symphonies and access to them. Symphonies who in turn do outreach and education as part of their basic function.

Helping turn withering sections of cities and rural centers into thriving districts with the arts and entertainment leading the way to economic recovery.  
*That's something you see if you tour 30 years.*

\$170M is not even 50 cents per person a year. I hope that in my lifetime I see it increase where I believe it should be at a dollar per capita.  
*It's the right investment at a time when we need it most.*