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Original live music venues in hyper-commercialised nightlife precincts: exploring how venue owners and managers navigate cultural, commercial and regulatory forces

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Abstract

Nightlife precincts are constituted by intersecting cultural, market and regulatory forces. They are a vibrant part of the experience economy of the city and important sites for the performance of live music and arts. This article examines original live music venues in Fortitude Valley, an inner-city neighbourhood in Brisbane, Australia. The Valley is both a culturally significant site for original live music venues and a dense hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct. Policy interventions in the area have sought to protect its live music venues, liberalise its nightlife economy, and curtail the harms generated by alcohol consumption. Drawing on interviews with live music venue owners and managers we argue that over time venues have adapted their ethos to the cultural and market logic of the nightlife precinct, rather than the music scene. Their

accounts illustrate that venues are an important site where cultural values and market imperatives are negotiated.

Keywords

Nightlife precincts, music scenes, live music venues, bookers, promoters, cultural intermediaries, cultural labour, alcohol

Introduction

Nightlife precincts, with their dense collection of cultural venues, bars, restaurants, clubs and pubs, are constituted by intersecting cultural and market forces. Their live music and cultural scenes are a unique and crucial part of the late-night ‘rhythms’ of the city (Rochow and Stahl 2017, Rogers 2008). At the same time, the growth of nightlife markets has generated excessive and harmful forms of alcohol consumption (Author). Nightlife precincts are marked by simultaneous efforts to stimulate and contain excessive consumption. Policymakers’ attempts to respond to the commercial opportunities, public health harms and cultural value of nightlife economies can produce contradictory effects (Rowe and Bavinton 2011). State and commercial actors collaborate to liberalise after-dark trade as part of generating economic activity, responding to changing patterns of cultural consumption, and seeking to reinvigorate post-industrial city areas (Brown, O’Connor and Cohen 2000; Hudson 2006). Yet, as nightlife markets become more dense, and business models more attuned to the mass sale of alcohol, a myriad of devices for controlling excess come into play: restrictions on trading hours and the sale of alcohol, police, chaplains, taxi rank wardens, physical barriers to control the flow of

pedestrians and traffic, late night public transport, and increasingly, digital technologies like CCTV and ID and face scanners.

This article examines live music venues in Fortitude Valley (referred to by its colloquial name, ‘the Valley’), an important inner-city neighbourhood in Brisbane’s live music culture for several decades (Author, Rogers 2008, Stafford 2004). Brisbane is the state capital of Queensland and Australia’s third most populous city, with around 2.5 million people. In industrial-era Brisbane, the Valley was a key retail district in the city. However, from the 1970s, retail exited the inner-city for suburban malls, and musicians and artists found disused commercial space in the Valley relatively cheap to rent. During the 1990s the neighbourhood became home to a critical mass of live music venues, rehearsal spaces, recording studios, community radio, and street press. The area became an incubator for original live music. During the past two decades the Valley has become a dense nightlife precinct featuring the city’s largest concentration of nightclubs, bars, pubs and live music venues.

In this article, we argue that as the Valley nightlife precinct has become denser and more consolidated around late-night trade, many original live music venues have shifted their orientation toward the commercial and regulatory imperatives of the hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct. We use the term hyper-commercialised, instead of just commercialised, to denote four interrelated qualities of the Valley’s nightlife economy and culture. We propose that paying attention to hyper-commercialisation could be useful in examining other nightlife precincts in further research, especially in articulating shared interests between public health and cultural policy.

Firstly, hyper in the sense of sped up. The Valley is hyper-commercial in the sense that the creation of a dedicated nightlife precinct dramatically accelerated the commercialisation of the area over the past two decades. The Valley was transformed from a post-industrial inner-city area with a diverse mix of pubs, clubs and performance spaces into a dense late-trading nightlife economy dominated by large venues oriented toward high volume or premium alcohol consumption.

Secondly, hyper in the sense of excessive. The nightlife economy that has emerged in the Valley stimulates, and then attempts to channel and contain, excessive consumption, intoxication and violence. The lure of the Valley as a nightlife destination revolves around fantasies of excessive enjoyment of alcohol, drugs, bodies, music, sex and violence.

Thirdly, hyper in the sense of data-driven and digital technologies of control. To manage excessive consumption in the Valley a range of 'smart' technologies like CCTV cameras and ID and face-scanning devices are used to monitor and control the flow of intoxicated bodies in and through the precinct.

Fourthly, hyper in the sense of a commanding or cascading logic that preemptively sets the coordinates for how the precinct develops. All venues must adapt themselves to the cultural, commercial and regulatory settings of a late-trading precinct organised around excessive consumption. The colonisation of this city space by high-volume or premium high-margin nightlife trade generates harm and reduces the diversity of cultural uses of urban space. While the history and mythology of the Valley's live music culture is invoked as a useful alibi for legitimising the late-trading nightlife economy, whether there is actually a music scene is

increasingly immaterial. Cultural performances like live music in the Valley increasingly take place within the commercial and cultural setting of the high-volume, late-trading nightlife venue.

We argue that the owners and managers of original live music venues are important actors in these hyper-commercialised cultural spaces because they mediate between music scenes, market dynamics and regulatory frameworks. The work that venue owners and operators do in balancing commercial, regulatory and cultural concerns is critically important to understanding hyper-commercialised cultural precincts (Stahl 2019, Johnson and Homan 2003, Feldman-Barratt 2017). We demonstrate how venue owners and managers navigate between the imperatives of the nightlife market and the ethos of the music scene. In Brisbane, the accounts of venue owners and managers are crucial to accounting for the history, and arguing for the future, of the Valley as a vibrant and culturally significant site for the performance of live music.

Original live music venues in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley

The Valley is unique in Australia, and a significant model internationally, for its 'place-based approach' (Burke and Schmidt 2013: 73) to regulating and promoting the development of live music performance (Burke and Schmidt 2013, Flew 2008). The area was designated a Special Entertainment Precinct (SEP) in 2006. The precinct was created to ensure the viability of live music in the Valley by setting regulations that allowed for amplified music (Brisbane City Council 2019). For the first time, the onus was placed on residential developers to mitigate noise pollution, rather than music venues. While the SEP gave certainty to venues that staged live original music, it also laid the foundation for the commercialisation of the area as a nightlife district. The policy and licenses gave all nightlife venues within the precinct confidence that their

trading conditions would not be curtailed. Furthermore, the precinct became a focus for government investment in amenities, support services, promotion, arts programs and public transport. This made the Valley the city's primary nightlife destination, which in turn encouraged a concentration of nightlife trade in the area (Burke and Schmidt 2013). This brought competing interests into the area, with commercially-motivated operators creating strong competition for tightly-held premises. Large nightclubs, bars and pubs – that at one time traded one suburb over in the city centre – now dominate the nightlife trade in the area. In precinct audits we conducted between 2016 and 2018, we observed between 76 and 98 businesses trading after 10pm on a Saturday night in the Valley (Author). On a typical Saturday night audit in July 2018 we observed 5 live music venues open after 10pm, while there were 20 bars, 18 nightclubs, 10 bar and dining establishments, and 8 pubs also trading in the area. Most of these venues are concentrated in a 150 metre radius around the Brunswick Street Mall (Author).

The purpose of this article is to examine how venue owners and managers navigate the cultural, commercial, political and regulatory forces that affect the viability of their venues. The research was conducted as part of a larger evaluation of the impact of Queensland's *Tackling Alcohol Fuelled Violence* (2016) legislation. This legislation introduced changes to late-night trade in precincts like the Valley. These included 'last drinks' at 3am, the prohibition of 'rapid intoxication' drinks (like shots) after midnight, and the introduction of mandatory ID scanners at venues licensed to trade after midnight (Author). The Valley is 'symptomatic of a broader phenomenon whereby the most important policies for music are *not* about music' (Cloonan 2011: 408-409). Restrictions on late-night trading have been the subject of heated debate in Australia over the past several decades. The state capitals of Melbourne and Sydney have seen substantial activism, emerging from alternative nightlife and live music scenes, against

restrictions on trade (Homan 2017), while public health advocates have argued for the introduction of measures that reduce alcohol-related harms in nightlife precincts. Although refuted by public health researchers, live music and nightlife advocates claim that restrictions on trading hours and conditions, together with gentrification, have made many live music venues unviable. They claim that this has both diminished opportunities for emerging artists to perform and led to the dissolution of important alternative cultural networks and scenes that depended on the venues (Homan 2011, 2017).

Live music venues are crucial sites for the inscription of cultural memory and the formation of identity (Bennett and Rogers 2016; Strong and Whiting 2018; van der Hoeven and Hitters 2019). Cultural researchers have typically focused on the ‘scenes’ within venues, and the networks of musicians and below-the-line labourers like bookers and promoters as key agents in producing gigs and performances (Straw 1991; Shank 1994; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Rogers 2008; Gallan 2012; Cluley 2009, Feldman-Barrett 2017). In addition to these music scene-oriented perspectives, we argue that venues themselves are critical, yet often under-examined sites where music scenes are materialised and sustained. While we can, and should, focus on the affective experiences and social networks venues produce, we also need to pay attention to the work of keeping venues open amidst continuous cultural, commercial and regulatory change. Music scenes do not exist outside the market, they are produced within venues that mediate between the scene and market.

By focusing our attention on venues, rather than scenes or subcultures, we can understand how live music is stimulated, altered and thwarted in nightlife precincts. Accounts of venues as disinterested commercial entities without ties to the local music scene (Homan and Gibson 2008), or as informal artist-spaces without commercial aspirations (Bennett and Rogers 2016,

Rogers 2008), do not translate well to the Valley given its simultaneous development as both a culturally-significant music scene and a hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct—these venues could not exist without a commercial imperative. Most of the Valley’s venues are owned or operated by people who identify with the local music scene. Many depend entirely on live music for their sustainability and livelihoods, and several stage performances even when it is not commercially viable to do so. Original live music venues arguably produced much of the cultural capital that helped make the Valley a nightlife destination and are now caught up in the loop of commercial development and regulatory intervention unfolding around them. This story is echoed in many post-industrial inner-city areas (Gibson and Homan 2007).

The labour of running live music venues: bookers, promoters, owners, managers

Bookers, promoters, owners and managers each do the often-hidden below-the-line labour of coordinating the production of live music events. This involves the affective labour of building social relationships and frameworks of cultural judgment in relation to commercial and regulatory realities (Stahl 2019, Johnson and Homan 2003, Feldman-Barratt 2017). They are cultural intermediaries, situated between audiences, venues, musicians and the state (Negus 2002). Bookers and promoters appear to be given more attention than venue owners and managers in cultural studies of music scenes, arguably because they are more often direct participants in music scenes (Cluley 2009, Gallan 2012).

Booking agents are employed by venues to recruit acts to perform at the venue. They are accountable to the venue for the financial success of the shows they book. In contrast, a promoter enters a contract with a venue to stage particular events or ‘nights’. They often take the financial risk of that particular show by paying the venue a ‘guarantee’ for use of the space that covers

production costs. While the promoter carries the financial risk for that particular show, the venue carries the longer-term risk of keeping the venue viable. A symbiotic relationship develops between promoters and venues, especially where a regular night staged by a promoter creates a dependable clientele and bar sales for the venue. Booking agents and promoters mediate between commercially-motivated venues and a music scene by attempting to book live original music performances that succeed commercially through attracting an audience of other scene members (Gallan 2012: 39). They might be motivated by the desire to accumulate cultural capital in the form of recognition and status in the scene, and they might be leveraging their cultural capital for profit (Cluley 2009).

Venue owners and managers differ from bookers and promoters because they are directly responsible for the commercial viability of their venues. Bookers and promoters are interested in building up the 'scene' and popularity of shows or themed nights they book or promote, whereas venue owners are also interested in developing the brand and commercial viability of the venue. For the booker and promoter, both cultural and economic capital is accumulated by putting on shows. Whereas, for venue owners and managers the staging of live music is interdependent with the enduring financial viability of the venue. Stahl (2019: 7) argues, for instance, that venue owners make both 'ethical' and 'strategic' moves to adjust to licensing conditions and continue to support music scenes.

In many accounts of live music scenes, the tacit assumption is that venue owners and managers outsource the cultural labour of putting on profitable shows to a booker or promoter. We argue that this obscures the significant cultural, logistical and entrepreneurial work that venue owners and managers in precincts like the Valley undertake. They make judgments of taste and keep their venues current with changing music scenes. They comply with regulatory licensing

requirements, manage venue staff and turnover, and organise shows. They open up space for cultural performance in the city and combine it with other forms of entertainment and service. And, they often stake their livelihoods in opening and running venues. Venue owners are the nexus between the bookers (who they hire to put on shows), promoters (who they partner with to put on shows), the music scene (who are performers and patrons in the venue), licensing and regulatory requirements, and the economic viability of a venue. Venues are a site where an interlocking set of ‘actors, affects, materialities and social relations’ combine to shape live music culture (Rochow and Stahl 2017: np). This confluence of factors is sometimes viewed as an ecology (see Behr, Brennan, Cloonan et al. 2016; Van der Hoeven and Hitters 2020). An ecological perspective gives attention to social actors (musicians, bookers, promoters, policy-makers, audiences), material factors (venue sizes and qualities and the wider urban setting), and intangible qualities like the history of cities and scenes. In this article we examine how venues adapt to an ecology marked by interrelated changes in policy frameworks, market conditions and consumer cultures. To exist in the ecology of a hyper-commercialised nightlife economy, venues need to develop a profitable business model and an adaptable brand that adjusts to changing market dynamics. While an ecological framework considers both cultural and economic networks of the entire live music sector, in this research we choose to focus on the role venues play as ‘auteurs’ adapting the ethos of their venue to urban settings being remade by interlocking legislative and market changes.

Studying live music venues in the Valley (2003-2020)

We began by using a precinct mapping approach to document all the street front businesses trading in the Valley in 2016 and 2018 (Author). In 2016, we observed 10 original live music venues trading in the precinct. We then used a combination of street press gig guides, venue

websites and social media to develop a list of original live music venues operating in the Valley between 2003 and 2020 (see Table 1). We identified 24 venues that regularly staged original live music in the Valley between 2003 and 2020. We found that while the overall number of original live music venues trading in the Valley has been stable over the past decade, the majority of venues that currently support original live music are less than ten years old. As old venues go, new venues replace them. As this turnover unfolds, the business model of new live music venues appears to adapt to the hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct. Most of the venues which have opened since 2010 double as clubs, putting on DJs to attract a second audience after staging live original music shows earlier in the evening. These venues also replace original live music performances with themed club nights and DJs where it is more commercially viable to do so. This adaptation is also evident in venues that have remained open but changed ownership or management. Live original music has become a more marginal part of the business model of venues like Ric's, a key venue in the music scene during the 1990s and 2000s (Author).

To explore this shift we approached managers or owners of live original music venues in the Valley and asked them to participate in an interview about the history of their venue and its business model, their perceptions of its role in the music scene, and their perceptions of legislative changes in the time they had operated their venue. We conducted 11 interviews with current and former venue owners and managers, and a representative of the peak music industry body, QMusic. Some of these informants had managed venues since the 1990s. Between them, the informants owned or managed seven (of the nine) original live music venues that were operating in or around the Valley in 2018. Our analysis of the interviews is guided by a production studies approach (Caldwell 2008, Mayer 2011). This approach treats interviews as texts where participants offer a vernacular theory of how they account for their actions within a

cultural market and scene. Like other accounts of cultural work, we examine how venue owners and managers navigate tensions and contradictions between cultural, commercial and regulatory forces that shape their choices (Caldwell 2008, Stahl 2019, Cluley 2009, Bradshaw, Author). Following Behr, Brennan and Cloonan (2014: 408) we should also pay attention to how venue owners, musicians and audiences ‘go about valuing the musical experience’. Informants’ accounts are useful as situated explanations of their lived experience, but are not intended to be generalizable to a wider range of venues or nightlife precincts. Arising from these interviews, we identify a range of ways that informants account for the effects of the changing commercial, cultural and regulatory conditions of the nightlife precinct on how they manage original live music venues. The interviews help to develop a nuanced account of how we account for the qualities of live music in nightlife precincts, and why the number of venues being relatively steady might conceal cultural changes that are consequential for both public health and cultural studies perspectives on nightlife and music scenes. For public health, it has implications for how we understand the interdependence of live music with alcohol consumption. For cultural studies of popular music, it has implications for how we understand the role of venues in the reproduction of music scenes. All informant names are changed to gender-neutral pseudonyms in the article.

Figure 1: Number of live music venues in the Valley (2003-2020)

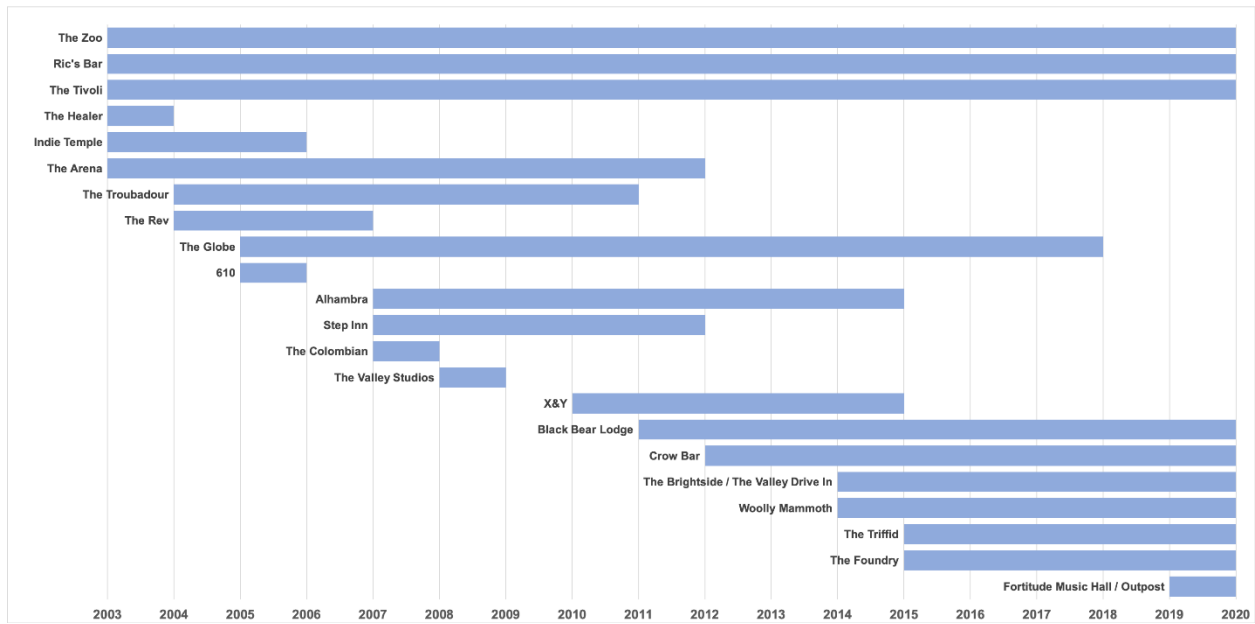


Table 1: Description of changes to live music venues in Fortitude Valley 2003 to 2020

Year	Number of live music venues	Description of change
2003	6	There are 6 live music venues in the precinct, including the following venues that are still trading in 2020: The Zoo, Ric's, and The Tivoli.
2004	7	The Healer closes (it is now The Brightside, but for several years was not a music venue). The Troubadour and The Rev open.

2005	9	The Globe and 610 open. 610 was an unlicensed and semi-legal artist space that featured underground and emerging bands. The venue ran for only a short time but was well-attended by members of the music scene.
2006	7	610 and Indie Temple cease trade. Indie Temple featured emerging indie and hard rock bands. The venue had traded for several years in the city before moving to the Valley.
2007	9	The Rev closes. Alhambra, Step Inn and The Colombian all open. Each of these are smaller venues that support independent and local bands.
2008	9	The Colombian closes. The Valley Studios (formerly 610) opens. Each of these were small venues that supported independent and local bands.
2009	8	The Valley Studios closes.
2010	9	X&Y opens and features local and independent bands in one of its rooms.
2011	9	The Troubadour closes and changes to Black Bear Lodge.
2012	8	The Arena and The Step Inn close. Oh Hello and Crow Bar open. While Oh Hello is a club it is included here because it put on live shows in its early years of trade.

2013	8	No closures, no new venues.
2014	10	The Brightside and The Woolly Mammoth open. No closures.
2015	10	Alhambra closes. X&Y remains open but no longer features live music performances. The Triffid and The Foundry open. The Triffid is a mid-size music venue outside the formal precinct, but immediately becomes one of the key live music venues in the city. The Foundry is a smaller venue featuring mostly independent local and touring artists.
2016	10	No change.
2017	10	No change.
2018	9	The Globe closes down. The Brightside has been staging gigs in an adjacent outdoor carpark, and starts promoting this as a separate venue called The Valley Drive In, it hosts performances by touring artists.
2019	10	The Fortitude Music Hall opens, it includes two venues – a larger music hall and a smaller venue called The Outpost.
2020	9	The Brightside and Crow Bar merge.

Shifting orientations: from the scene to the nightlife precinct

Owners and managers in the Valley offer ‘scene’ and ‘nightlife’ oriented accounts of their venue and their labour. Below we define and examine each of these accounts in turn, analysing how they change over time, and are reflexively employed by venue owners and managers. Both ‘scene’ and ‘nightlife’ orientations are grounded in the commercial realities of keeping a live music venue trading. All live music venues reported an arrangement where the artist or band take the majority of proceeds from ‘the door’ (ticket sales) and the venue takes the proceeds from ‘the bar’ (alcohol sales). At most, the income from ‘the door’ is used cover the venue’s direct production costs (such as door staff and sound engineer), while the venue relies on bar sales to cover all other costs (such as rent, insurance, licencing fees, wages) and to make a profit. For venues that only trade on live performances this means they have a limited window to make money (Ballico and Carter 2018).

Both ‘scene’ and ‘nightlife’ orientations are ‘commercial’ in the sense that they aim to stage live music performances within for-profit venues in a hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct, and they are both ‘authentic’ in the sense that venue owners and managers, bookers and promoters, and presumably audiences, experience the performances as meaningful and affecting. We argue that each position can be understood as different attempts to stage live music that is both commercially viable and culturally meaningful within the nightlife market. We suggest that we should address the current configuration of live music in the hyper-commercialised precinct on its own terms, rather than seeking to judge it against the mythological values of an imagined former ‘scene’. This means considering how these nightlife-oriented venues support the emergence of new and diverse performance, offer opportunities for artists to work and find audiences, and create dependencies (or not) between the performance of live music and excessive and harmful forms of consumption.

Scene-oriented accounts

In scene-oriented accounts the venue owner or manager narrates their work managing the venue as part of the local music scene. They see themselves as a participant in the scene, contributing to its aesthetic qualities, and sometimes political value. This political value is often framed in terms of live music's role in the city during several decades of corrupt and authoritarian government, and in the city's cosmopolitan modernisation since the early 1990s, but it can also be expressed in relation to the importance of music in the fostering diverse forms of expression and performance. Scene-oriented accounts emphasise the cultural significance of the venue in discovering and nurturing emerging artists. Commercial imperatives are muted, and the value derived from owning and running the venue extends beyond making an economic livelihood. Importantly, this commitment to more-than-commercial values is constantly in tension with the commercial reality of needing to keep the venue financially viable.

The orientation to the 'scene' addresses both bands and audiences. Charlie, the owner of a live music venue, opens their venue to give emerging local bands an opportunity to perform, even when they will make no profit from the night because 'they feel it's incredibly important to support the local music scene'. Similarly, Robin describes their venue as being for 'music lovers':

That's always been its primary ethos. Other venues where you go in to have a dance, you go in to do whatever you want to do. You're going to catch up with people. It's never had that reputation.

In-keeping with this orientation to live music, several scene-oriented informants expressed resentment about being compared to nightclubs or being designated a nightclub on their liquor license (Charlie, Harley, Quinn).

Scene-oriented owners and managers see the development of the scene and the market of their venue as a mutual process. This is evident in Harley's account of the emergence of a scene around their venue:

...bands formed out of that room and hanging out with each other in that room. It did create something. It was an entity that wasn't being controlled by anybody, it was just the public, and the musicians in it were shaping it to what was going to work for them.

The venue doesn't see itself as defining a market and promoting itself, but rather cultivating relationships with musicians and patrons who jointly shape the venue's reputation and cultural capital, which in turn builds a dependable market for the venue. Several scene-oriented venues reported that they often made a loss opening on weeknights, or at best broke even. They continued opening on these loss-making weeknights for a mixture of reasons. These included their personal investment in supporting the local live music scene and their need to offer regular shifts to retain bar staff. Some venues reported using profits from weekend nights to offer 'guarantees' (a set performance fee paid regardless of attendance) to bands on loss-making shows on weeknights, effectively using profits on weekends to subsidise local performances mid-week. Charlie, Robin and Blake each told us they put on loss-making local shows out of a principled effort to support the local scene. Blake explained that 'Friday and Saturday subsidise mid-week stuff', even though the venue was finding this harder to do – with Tuesday and

Wednesdays ‘pretty much completely gone’. Scene-oriented venue owners and managers express the pressure of market realities, and ambivalence about giving into them. Charlie explained that ‘...it’s quite scary at times. I don’t have that network of financial backing... we’re not doing it for the money. With that, as an offshoot to that passion, we care. I genuinely care about the bands that come through.’

Scene-oriented venue owners and managers distinguish themselves from nightclubs and the more overt commercial concerns of the nightlife precinct. Charlie and Quinn both expressed irritation about being designated a ‘nightclub’ on their liquor license because it suggested connections with intoxication, violence and obscured the cultural focus and ‘destination’ nature of their venue – that it existed to put on live music shows. They argued that their entertainment – live music – actually moderated alcohol consumption, which they thought was a crucial difference between their venue and nightclubs.

These owners and managers also described how their scene-oriented venues preceded, and laid the groundwork for, the development of a commercialised nightlife precinct. The founders of key venues in the Valley in the 1990s described their DIY ethos in moving into an area without a nightlife market and negotiating with landlords and liquor licensing in order to create spaces for live music performance. These venue owners saw themselves as part of the music industry, playing a role in artist discovery and development by both making performance space available and curating the selection of artists. These early venues were ‘seen as the first stage that emerging bands would play on’ (Taylor). Participants in the music scene supported these venues, helping to raise money and support legal challenges when they had challenges with funding or licensing.

Early scene-oriented venue operators saw the initial introduction of a Special Entertainment Precinct as a ‘good thing’ (Taylor) because it formally acknowledged live music as a legitimate part of the area, particularly through legislative measures that protected music venues within the precinct from noise complaints. But this regulatory certainty also encouraged investment in the area and many already-existing pubs and nightclubs began to expand, and new nightclubs, bars and pubs opened around them. Harley, describing cultural changes at their venue in the years after the precinct was created, explained that the distinction between live music venues and clubs began to dissolve, especially for younger musicians and their audiences. Reflecting on this situation Harley explained that:

One of the things that I noticed that made owning a music venue hard was that kids, for some reason, decided that they wanted to play in nightclubs. And it had become 'club scenes' for bands... They just turned their back on that and supported 'the monster' that was the Valley. I think that's where night clubs started putting on bands and it's kind of ruined... it blurred the lines between why we were there. I couldn't understand why they were doing it, because it wasn't conducive to music.

They were concerned not just with the commercial effect this had on the venue, but more how it changed the ethos. It is clear the venue could have adapted commercially – given its location, size and how the venue has been run since it was reopened – to a late-night live music-nightclub model. This venue owner though didn't want to make this adaptation because they saw the venue as intrinsically part of the music scene.

Quinn also explained various ways their venue had to adapt to changing cultural practices and patterns of consumption as the area became a late-trading commercial nightlife precinct. They explained that they put on late-night shows to try and keep the crowd in the venue after the headline show because:

Sometimes we'd just put on bands and then just watch everybody leave. We were like oh no, because you've got to – that's the thing about a venue. You've got to sell alcohol to stay alive and usually people get one or two, then they go and watch the band. Then there's a break and they'll come to the bar, then they go watch a band again.

They tried to extend this pattern by having live performances on weekend nights extend past midnight, to stop people having only one or two drinks and then leaving straight after the headline show for nearby nightclubs. In Quinn's view live music 'controls the consumption of alcohol right, compared to just smashing'. For them, having live music until late meant that people tended to drink at a slower pace right through the evening.

Harley, Quinn and Charlie each distinguished their venues from the late-trading pubs, bars and nightclubs that emerged in the precinct. They saw their venues not only as an expression of their cultural ethos and a part of a larger cultural scene, but also as having a business model not as oriented toward high-volume alcohol consumption and profit. Quinn articulated the importance of this distinction between live music venues and late-trading nightlife venues when they told us how strongly they felt about the shift in the designation of their venue's liquor license. When they began, they had a special license for businesses whose predominant purpose was providing live entertainment, but after the precinct was created, they were shifted to a 'nightclub' license:

I remember when we got changed to a nightclub and we're like we're not a nightclub. I don't want to be a nightclub. I don't want to own a nightclub. I really felt strongly against owning a nightclub because we never really wanted to do that... I remember thinking well what's the purpose of a nightclub? A nightclub is just to provide drinks and people go out and we're not doing that. We're providing live music. There's a different purpose you know? I really feel that venues should have a separate license than just a general nightclub license, because it could separate them from everybody else and have different rules and regulations and then huge nightclubs...

They expressed strong ambivalence about operating the venue as the nightlife precinct became denser and more violent:

Quinn: I had to go to these liquor licensing meetings and I really felt like I didn't belong there. ... I just didn't want to own a nightclub. I wanted to own a music venue.

Researcher: And it was like if you're in the Valley you were part of that...

Quinn: You're part of that, yeah.

Researcher: ...club scene now, there's no...

Quinn: You're part of the kids that get punched and die in the Valley. I didn't want to be a venue...

Venue owners like Quinn felt that they noticed increasing intoxication on the street as the precinct became more dominated by large clubs. This distinction between live music venues and clubs is associated only with individuals running venues prior to the area becoming a designated nightlife precinct. As we discuss next, the newer nightlife-oriented live music venues actively embrace a mix of live music and clubbing because it enables them to expand the number of hours they can generate revenue from their venue.

Nightlife-oriented accounts

In nightlife-oriented accounts the venue owner or manager presents an entrepreneurial story of the venue as a savvy operator in the late-trading nightlife precinct. While the venue owner and manager still see themselves as intrinsically interested in the music scene the venue is a part of, and they derive and leverage cultural capital from their involvement in the scene and its history and politics, they see themselves as sustaining the venue's viability by orienting it toward the commercial realities of a hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct. To nightlife-oriented venues, staging live original music is one of many services provided in a nightlife economy, rather than an intrinsic part of a venue or a scene. Nightlife-oriented venues offer a mixture of live music and clubbing. Their venue business models are more diversified, with live music audiences providing only one of several revenue streams.

The majority of the live music venues in the Valley precinct now run a mixed live music and clubbing business model where live music shows tend to happen earlier in the evening and then the venue transitions into a club. In most cases, the choice of live music and DJ is curated to create a seamless cultural look and feel for the venue. This means that choices about live music are made partly with a view to the overall brand of the venue within the nightlife precinct and its

target market. For instance, one nightlife-oriented informant explained that after they purchased one of the Valley's older scene-oriented venues they developed the clubbing aspect of the venue around music appreciation like themed-nights where DJs play music by a seminal artist, or a collection of related seminal records, or artists from a particular label. Much like Cluley's (2009) promoters, nightlife-oriented venues will attract specific, like-minded audiences and musicians to their venue through curating performances of a particular music style. Within their business models, live music enables them to brand their venue by aligning it with particular music styles and audiences and extend their trading hours by opening earlier and generating revenue.

Nightlife-oriented venues explained that if they did not have a club night that followed the live show, they would not break even or make a profit from the night. Other venues reported that the live show helped to bring in a different audience to the venue earlier in the evening. It was a way of having patrons engaged with the venue, and generating revenue, for a longer period of the evening. In some cases, patrons from the live show stayed on for the club night, in other cases the venue had 'two waves' of patrons – one that arrived for the live show and then left, and another that arrived for the club night later in the evening. Unlike scene-oriented venues, nightlife-oriented venue owners and managers choose to stage club nights over original live music performances if there is more opportunity for profit. Bailey, for example, describes that in deciding whether to host a large club night run by an independent promoter or a local band, '...it's gotten to the point now where a band will come along and be like well, we really need that Saturday and it's like well, we're going to make more money off [the themed club night].'

Sam explained that the venue they managed had worked to cultivate a clubbing crowd that came to the venue on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. While the live music crowd came earlier

in the evening and bought a ticket to the show, the clubbing crowd were allowed in for free once the live music show was over.

Sam: I mean, our strength I think as a - if the ticket sales aren't as strong certain nights, our free entry crowd - we've worked pretty hard to establish that. We really kind of - we sometimes bank on that to really make the venue tick over in the way of bar sales.

Researcher: So, you might have like, as a scenario, a Thursday night where a local band and they're not bringing in as big a crowd in early, but you can bank on your club crowd coming in later.

Sam: Essentially yeah, yeah.

While these venues didn't necessarily view live music as making a loss, they wouldn't open the venue just for a live music show. Bailey described a similar scenario in multiple venues that they ran. The venues 'would not survive as just purely a live music venue, there's no way' but they did not necessarily view the clubbing part of the venue as subsidising the live music. As they put it, 'I did love live music until I got into the music business'. Instead, they staged live music earlier in the evening as a way of attracting, and potentially retaining, a larger range of patrons to the venue. The direct costs of the live music shows—such as wages for door staff and sound engineers—were covered by a venue hire fee paid by the bands. In this arrangement bands then took the risk, needing to sell tickets to cover the venue hire fee. This meant that the venue never makes a direct loss on live music. Bailey explained:

What we've found in our model is that music like, live bands in general, from our modelling is a great way to utilise early hours in the night, but then it creates a base of people that then mill about and then people come in for the DJ afterwards and everybody's having a good party. For [VENUE], we do it on a Wednesday because nobody comes - we'll have four customers on a Wednesday if we don't do it. We'll have 40 customers on a Wednesday if we do do it.

Live music both generates bar sales earlier and helps to make the venue appear alive and happening when the first wave of clubbers begin to arrive in the precinct. Bailey didn't imagine their venue as a live music space, but rather as a nightlife business of which live music was a part. Importantly, the venues that Bailey and Sam ran only opened on nights when they could profitably trade as a club. Bailey explained 'our business is built around live music, but the reality is it's a bad business'. Bailey contrasts with the scene-oriented venue operators who described running live shows that made a loss and did not trade as a club, or deliberately opened mid-week when there was no clubbing trade. In nightlife-oriented venues live music is intrinsic to the cultural status of the venue but not a core element of the business model. Where scene-oriented venues derive their cultural status, and organise their business model, around music scenes, nightlife-oriented venue owners and managers incorporate live music into a business model oriented toward the late-trading nightlife precinct.

Live music in the hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct

Venue owners and managers reflexively navigate between nightlife and scene orientations. This movement represents both different ways of valuing the qualities of live music and accounting

for change in the Valley, and live music culture more generally, over time. Scene-oriented accounts are more typically associated with owners and managers who ran venues before 2010. Nightlife-oriented owners and managers tend to pay deference to the authenticity of scene-oriented accounts, producing a shared narrative that all venues in the Valley generate their cultural and policy status from the legacy of scene-oriented venues. The ethos of scene-oriented venues endures in the regulation and promotion of the Valley by government, music and nightlife industries. At the same time, it is nightlife-oriented venues that appear to be thriving within the Valley's hyper-commercialised nightlife economy. This deference toward the ethos of scene-oriented venues within a market formation that privileges the business model of nightlife-oriented venues is significant. While the ethos of scene-oriented venues has been mobilised for several decades to foster the development of a late-trading nightlife precinct, the commercial dynamics and policy frameworks of that precinct have led to the gradual disappearance of scene-oriented venues.

Scene-oriented venue owners and managers who had operated venues for over a decade described observing patterns of consumption change once the Valley was formalised as a nightlife precinct. In their view, where patrons would have once 'hung out' in a venue all evening, they now tended to arrive just-in-time for a scheduled performance. The 'set' by the headline band was one moment within the flow of a night out in the precinct. Patrons appeared to be oriented to the experience of the precinct, rather than an enduring connection with a particular venue and its scene. Venue owners felt that they invested in live music, but patrons didn't pay it back to the venue by drinking there. Quinn observed that bands would often generate more revenue from the show than the venue would, even though the venue was taking the risk of putting on the show. Patrons would pay a relatively large amount for a ticket to the show, come

in to see the band, but drink somewhere else before and after. Charlie felt this was partly because patrons didn't understand how venues made money, and the investments and risks they took to stage live music. In their view, patrons are often concerned about supporting musicians but don't recognise the need to support venues.

In popular and scholarly debate about live music attention is given to the experience of musicians and fans and the formation of scenes, often obscuring how scenes depend on financially-viable venues. Venues only become visible in moments where they are threatened and come to stand in for larger concerns about the qualities and importance of live music scenes. In Australia, we observed this play out around the closure of scene-oriented venues like The Tote in Melbourne and the protest movement in response to Sydney's 'lock out' laws (Homan 2011, 2017). The Valley is distinctive and significant because the precinct legislation protected scene-oriented venues from immediate closure, but what has unfolded instead is a gradual shift from scene to nightlife-oriented venues that has gone largely unobserved in debates about the value and qualities of after-dark cultural spaces and the state of the live music industry.

This shift raises culturally significant questions about how live music is valued. The emergence of a nightlife precinct where live music venues were surrounded by late-trading pubs and clubs meant that the venue was no longer a stand-alone destination with its own distinctive scene, but rather one possible entertainment option within a dense precinct. As the Valley commercialised, the competition for patrons and space increased, along with the cost of complying with precinct regulations. Scene-oriented venue owners that operated a business model premised on cost-recovery in order to open a space to put on shows, found themselves needing to sell larger volumes of alcohol over the bar to cover increasing costs like rent, licensing, insurance, security, fire safety, and so on. Scene-oriented venues either had to adapt or give way to venues that

traded late and integrated live music into a larger nightlife model that maximised the sale of alcohol.

The development of the nightlife precinct was also accompanied by larger cultural shifts in the experiential consumption of nightlife and music. The performance of music became less embedded in the sociality of a scene and more in the consumption of a nightlife experience.

Nightlife-oriented venues are more adapted to these shifts: their business models are organised around high-volume or premium alcohol consumption, they suit music fans whose experience is shaped by the constantly flowing playlist rather than the genre or album, they seamlessly mix live music with clubbing, they present more multimedia experiences, and they are attuned to the flow of patrons through a precinct rather than attempting to trade as a standalone destination venue. In general, the proprietors of nightlife-oriented live music venues cannily adapt to these emerging market dynamics, while scene-oriented venue owners lament or feel impeded by them.

Conclusion

Live music venue owners and managers are motivated by a mixture of commitments to music scenes, their need to make a livelihood, their sense of commercial opportunity and their political and cultural stances toward alcohol consumption and government regulation. Regardless of their mix of motivations, venue owners and managers cannily imagine, open up, and maintain places for live performance in cities where space is increasingly produced and governed by market dynamics (Gallan 2012, Baird and Scott 2018, Rowe and Bavinton 2011). The Valley is one example of an urban space where artists and musicians provide the cultural alibi for the development of the area as a precinct, only to then be displaced as it becomes hyper-commercialised (Ballico and Carter 2018, Homan 2017). The nightlife-oriented venue is a

creative response to this problem by imagining how live music might continue to thrive within, rather than in spite of, the market dynamics of a precinct which appropriate culture as an engine of economic activity.

The paradox of the Valley is that policy frameworks designed to protect the music scene, have led to the performance of live music becoming deeply integrated with a dense, late-trading nightlife precinct whose economy is premised on high-volume and harmful alcohol consumption. This means the performance of live music is not just culturally embedded within the flow of commercial nightlife, but also increasingly implicated in the harms generated from excessive alcohol consumption. Live music venues that want to open for only part of a night to put on a live performance need a low-cost model. But, dense and mature nightlife markets like the Valley generate both a high demand for space and a high compliance cost with regulations. This makes it increasingly difficult, over time, for live music venues to operate in low-cost or cost-recovery modes that might foster diverse, local, speculative and emerging artists and performers. All forms of after-dark culture become subject to the business case of high-volume or premium consumption late-trading clubs.

Venues matter as more than spaces that provide economic or developmental opportunities for musicians or as sites where harms are produced or curtailed. Scene-oriented and nightlife-oriented venues alike give expression to our cultural identities, they are sites where we feel and experience our selfhood and our bonds with one another. In the experience of a live performance we feel shared euphoria and inexplicable intimacy. Venues alert us to the fact that nightlife precincts are more than spaces of economic activity and harm, they are important, open-ended urban spaces of cultural exploration and expression.

The number of venues in the Valley is at an historic high. But, the qualities of those venues, the kinds of performances they offer, their interdependence with alcohol consumption, and the kinds of consumers who are able to access them and ‘hang out’ in them has changed and could be different. As Behr, Brennan and Cloonan (2014: 414) put it ‘the instrumental value of live music may be easier to measure than its intrinsic value, but instrumental value always derives *from* intrinsic value and is not a measure of it’. We are concerned about the fate of scene-oriented venues not out of an essentialist nostalgia for yesteryear, but because they were one kind of venue that is now less likely to appear in the hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct. With their disappearance goes some of the diverse texture of our music culture.

Nightlife-oriented venue owners are not ‘bad’ actors, while scene-oriented ones are ‘good’. Likewise, nightlife-oriented venues are not ‘inauthentic’, while scene-oriented ones are ‘authentic’. They are each symptomatic of what’s possible in a given market formation when you want to stage live music. Hesmondhalgh (2008: 329) argues that live music can offer a particularly intense and ‘remarkable meeting point of the private and public realms, providing encounters of self-identity (this is who I am; this is who I’m not) with collective identity (this is who we are; this is who we’re not)’. Hesmondhalgh (2008: 330) makes this point about music and identity formation in order to draw out an important paradox, that music ‘with its strong links to the emotions and to values of personal authenticity, may well have become bound up with the incorporation of emotional self-realisation, authenticity and creativity into capitalism, and with intensified consumption habits’. This paradox is evident in the shift from scene-oriented to nightlife-oriented venues.

The hyper-commercialised nightlife precinct emerged in part from policy settings that aimed to create a special zone for live music in the city. In this precinct live music becomes an alibi and a

promotional device for excessive and harmful forms of alcohol consumption, and more generally for the reformatting of after-dark culture as a series of interlinked commercial experiences. Live music is an alibi in the sense that the wider precinct presents itself as culturally significant, and any changes that might curtail late-trade or alcohol consumption as a threat to that shared cultural value. Venues are also a promotional device in the sense that live music generates the cultural capital that gives nightlife venues their appeal to hip consumers moving through the precinct's many entertainment offerings.

Our examination of scene and nightlife orientations helps us to frame an opportunity to see the politics of the nightlife precinct in a different way. Musicians and public health advocates have been pitted against each other in Australian debates about the regulation of nightlife precincts. Public health advocates have arguably been dismissive of the importance and fate of cultural spaces like live music venues, while live music advocates have been insufficiently reflective about their role in markets that stimulate the excessive and harmful consumption of alcohol. Common ground could be forged by jointly exploring the fundamental values they share in common. They are each attempting to imagine uses of urban space beyond the hyper-commercial nightlife precinct, uses of urban space that are attentive to a diverse array of qualities, experiences and expressions beyond the logics of affluent and privileged intoxication. The task is to get beyond the binary of stimulating and controlling excessive alcohol consumption (Rowe and Bavinton 2011), to imagine urban after-dark spaces fundamentally as sites where cultural performances give expression to our collective experience.

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