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Introduction

Small and local music venues have always been the foundation in which new artists and bands start and grow. They are a driving force for new scenes and culture to emerge from. The UK has had many famous venues like the Cavern Club where the Beatles first played, also staging Elton John, Queen, The Who and Black Sabbath in the decade following. Since then small venues continue to be a part

of social change, new music and culture. These places help bring together people of similar interests and goals. Just last year, the Concorde 2 in Brighton hosted an event for Extinction Rebellion. As well as having music, the event hosted speakers throughout the day to share ideas about climate change. Many of these places are struggling to make ends meet all around the UK. As a young musician, I've heard more about the local venues that have closed than the ones still open. In this proposal I plan to explore the challenges of small venues using the keywords *Culture*, *Gentrification* and *Space and Place*.

Culture



Figure 1 – The Point

This section will be looking at culture through the works of Simon Frith. Frith is a British socio-musicologist and a former music critic, who specialises in popular music culture. Music has been tied to an individual's sense of self, used to express who they are. Live music is also an important part of identity because it's an event in which our understanding of ourselves is explored and socially recognised. Live music and venues play an important role in how musicians build audiences and recognition through what is known as the toilet circuit.

The toilet circuit refers to the network of small music venues across the United Kingdom that bands and artists perform to gain support and promote themselves (Grant, 2012). Many famous artists have come out in support of the toilet circuit, like singer songwriter Frank Turner who said:

The toilet circuit is vital, it gave groups like Buffy Clyro and Arctic Monkeys space to develop, hone their craft and build audiences. Without these clubs the only people able to play the O2 Arena will be X Factor Christmas tours. (Sherwin, 2014).

Without the toilet circuit, it will be significantly harder for new artists to build the audiences they need and will leave the UK worse off culturally, socially and economically (University of York, 2017). In an interview with The List Nambucca events manager Zachery Stephenson said, “Grassroots venues play a crucial part in their development and on that basis, they are places of cultural interest which should be given more protection.” (Henderson, 2017).

Live music is often neglected by policymakers who underestimate the economic and cultural value of grass-root venues. “Many of the policies that most affect music making are not music policies, but concern planning, transport, education, social welfare, alcohol licensing, health and safety, noise and crowd control” (Frith, 2013). Since 2010 government cuts and policies have put pressure on the arts, because of this, musicians and venues are often frustrated by the policies that don’t take live music into account (Brennan, 2014).

If more small venues continue to close there will not be a toilet circuit left for new bands and artists to grow. The toilet circuit has been a part of British culture and history for decades, policy makers need to recognise the cultural contribution of small venues in order to keep the circuit alive. (Brennan, 2014). With the proper recognition venues like The Point in Cardiff could still be open. John Rostron a Point employee said “Cardiff prides itself on a vibrant music scene but absolutely nothing is done to support small venues in the city” (WalesOnline. 2009).

The Point has hosted some of Wales most high-profile bands which includes Stereophonics, Super Furry Animals and Manic Street Preacher. The venue opened in 2003 but had closed in 2009 due to debt the owners had, after they had to soundproof the church after a noise complaint from a nearby neighbour (WalesOnline. 2009). Similar outcomes have happened to many other venues around the UK that hold national and cultural significance.

Gentrification



Figure 2 – Save Guildford Cresnet

Gentrification is the process of changing an area's character to bring in more affluent residences and businesses. Gentrification will often increase the economic value of the area but usually results in a demographic change. This is due to the original lower income residents of the area being priced out by middle and upper-income people. This keyword was chosen as many problems for venues are down to reasons that relate to gentrification; this comes from issues like property development forcing venues to close and other issues such as rising rent prices.

Gwdihw was an independent music venue in Cardiff, situated in Guildford Crescent. In 2018, plans were published to demolish the street that had hosted many artists over the years like Catfish and the Bottlemen and Gruff Rhys. Soon after the news came out, a campaign and a petition started, called Save Gwdihw. Over 20,000 people signed the petition and more than 1,000 people went on to march to save the venue and street. Cardiff Central MP Jo Stevens said "Gwdihw is part of the DNA of our city's brilliant live music scene" (Owens, 2018).

Throughout Cardiff's history, the terraces found on Guildford Crescent made up most of the southern city centre until it was redeveloped in the 1960s. Because of this, many were calling for the street to be made into a conservation area. Negotiations between Cardiff Council and the Guildford Crescent owners (Marcol Estate) resulted in only the curved frontages of the original late 19th century structures remain and be kept as a part of the redevelopment area (Lewis, 2019).

Many venues across the UK have suffered similar fates. The UK Live music census found that 29% of small venues are struggling (Snapes, 2018). Over the last 10 years London has seen an estimated 40% of its venues close (Garvan, 2015). There isn't just one problem; there are many from new restrictions, soaring rent prices, and urban property development. For venues like Gwdihw the problem was urban developments, however for many now closed venues the problem had been noise complaints.

Over the last few years progress has been made to help music venues. After 4 years of campaigning led by UK Music in 2018, the agent of change principle has been implemented into the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF). The principle helps safeguard venues making the housing developers responsible for addressing noise issues, whereas previously it was down to the venue (IQ, 2018). As a result of this many have had to close, such as Bristol's Surrey Vaults which closed in 2017 following noise complaints from residents of nearby, new-build flats (Murray, 2017).

Space and Place



Figure 3 – Monkey Bar

This section will use ideas discussed by Yi-Fu Tuan in the book *Space and Place*. This keyword was chosen as a result of the continuous battle live music has faced, regarding the space it occupies and where it can be located without causing offence, as discussed in gentrification. The space a venue occupies can define and create the nature of the business and arguably its success. Monkey Bar was an independent music venue in Swansea from 1998 – 2017. While it was running it was viewed as the only place to go that was alternative and different from the usual clubs found in cities, with regular Gethin Woolcock saying “There was something fresh and different about the place” (Williams, 2020).

Monkey Bar was a lot of things during its run, it was a restaurant, bar and a nightclub. The venue started out small with only having a single unit on the street but over the years it expanded across two more units, three floors and a balcony. Owner of the venue Mandy Davey speaking about the early years of the venue saying:

A lot of people talk about the early years of Monkey as being very special, and they truly were. I think it was the fact that very little separation existed between customer, staff and owners. The bar staff, who were all longtime friends would take breaks and hit the dance floor, the punters would chip in to help out when needed, and everybody kept an eye on the venue, as if it was theirs” (Williams, 2020).

The venue started with an open policy for anyone who had creative aspiration or input, as the space grew so did the character of the venue. Its open-door policy led to “dozens of bands, promoters, artists and creatives adding their flare to Monkey” which in turn led to a wide range of musical shows and acts like guest speakers, dance competitions, folk nights and rap battles, as well as normal club nights. Monkey was a place in which creativity was explored, a space that evolved and grew because of the community it became home to. Although now closed, Monkey Bar had a large impact on the live music scene in Swansea. Like many other independent venues, it offered a sense of belonging and helped contribute to the cultural environment of the city (Hudson, 2006; Martin, 2017; Wynn, 2015).

Intimate personal human experiences can be difficult to express in a public or group setting. Sometimes they can when there is sufficient overlap between the experiences. Live music can offer this shared experience in a similar way many communal traditions do. "Human places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life." (Tuan, 2001, p. 147). A music venue stripped of all meaning is just a space, but space becomes a place through the meaning imposed on it (Tuan, 2001, p. 54).

Music venues can take on an identity and a personality known in its community. Certain pub and clubs around a given city are known to cater to different personalities and taste in music. In similar ways venues often embody the zeitgeist of genre or era, like the Cavern Club, that was made famous from the Beatles' early performances (Visit Liverpool, 2019).

The recent increase in live music raves provides a social commentary on issues with space and place; excessive control measures on live music venues within cities have created a need for musical expression. "unlicensed underground raves have flourished across the UK as legitimate night clubs have foundered in the face of tighter licensing requirements and a population of young people with less disposable income" (Crisp, W. 2020). Most illegal raves take place in remote locations, often out of site in spaces that were not intended for live music. For one night a previously empty forest clearing can turn into a place for people to express themselves without restrictions that are tied to music venues, in the company of others who have similar ideals. For the night, the location has meaning it previously didn't have "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value." (Tuan, 2001, p 6). Any space can therefore become a place through the meaning placed on it; live music raves bring culture and personal expression which in turn provides the space with meaning and even just for one night it becomes a special place for those who attend. "Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning" (Tuan, 2001). The revellers who attend the raves each have a different experience and understanding of the event. The space becomes a place through individual experience and perspective which ordains it a value it didn't have before.

Contextualizing a Question

Exploring these keywords have helped me gain a deeper understanding of small venues and the problems that they up against. I have decided my question will be "How has live music depleted since the 1960's and what can make it thrive again?". I have reached this question by looking into the problems that face live music. Through these keywords I have explored in many ways why small venues are closing and struggling but not so much on how small venues can thrive. I plan to use primary evidence, collected via interviews by venue owners and organiser's regarding the problems they face and possible solutions. Although I have heavily researched the issues facing venues, I still believe there's more to learn as well as what could make a thriving toilet circuit. To understand how a venue can thrive, I believe I will need to thoroughly investigate the policies regarding live music and funding. I chose the timeframe of 1960's to now, because the modern pop music form originated in the late 50's. I believe that for my dissertation I will need to research how coronavirus has affected live music industry. Currently festivals and concerts have either been delayed or cancelled, with many venues are at risk for closing. Some venues like Bedford Esquires have turned to crowdfunding websites to help keep the doors open (McCarty, 2020). Others like the Windmill in Brixton have released a compilation album with various underground artists and bands such as Black

Midi and Kate Tempest to help raise money for the venue and local soup kitchen (Randell, 2020). Although these two venues they have had help from the public there are many venues out there that don't have the support these two have.

Question

How has live music depleted since the 1960's and what can make it thrive again?

Figure

Figure 1 - <http://cdn2.thelineofbestfit.com/media/2009/03/thepoint.jpg>

Figure 2 - <https://news.images.itv.com/image/file/1747153/img.jpg>

Figure 3 - <https://i2-prod.walesonline.co.uk/news/article12327502.ece/ALTERNATES/s615/Monkeybar.jpg>

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