

TOP OF THE POP-UPS

SUPPORTING LIVE MUSIC
IN LONDON THROUGH
POP-UP VENUES



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INTRODUCTION

London is a mecca for performing artists, with most of the big-name music acts having performed in its legendary live music venues before they hit the big time. However, artists, promoters, club and bar owners have voiced growing concerns about the lack of live music venues: over 100 live music venues in the West End and 50 music venues across the capital have closed. Iconic venues such as the Marquee Club, the Astoria, the 12 Bar Club, the Black Cap, [Madame Jojo's](#) and the [100 Club](#) have disappeared and very few pubs (such as the Dublin Castle in Camden) put on live music acts.

One of London's key attractions is its music culture. Artists make cities vibrant and create an edge that attracts tourism. London's music venues provide jobs for hundreds of thousands of people, from bar staff to promoters and technicians, and it is where many bands get their first real experience of playing live and attract millions of visitors to London.¹

Since 2007 London has lost 35 per cent of its grassroots music venues. It is feared that if this decline continues it could have major implications for the long term future of a creative and cultural sector that feeds into the UK's £3.8 billion music industry.^{2 3} Londoners therefore need new and innovative ways of providing venues for music acts.

As this report will argue, pop-up music provides a significant opportunity to help strengthen and revitalise London's music culture, providing new venues and making great use of disused spaces in London.

POP-UP VENUES FOR LIVE MUSIC: THE WAY FORWARD?

London leads the way in its creative use of "Pop-Up" ventures, which have now become commonplace by capitalising on using unused spaces across London on a temporary basis. With a pop-up, people are given the opportunity to trial an idea or project without the risks and on-costs associated with setting up and maintaining a project on a permanent basis.

Pop-Up ventures have become a massive trend in London and the last 5 years have shown that London's pop-up culture is a huge success, ranging from restaurants, shops and cinemas to name but a few. The music industry is no different and whilst it is true that the demand for live music is as popular as ever, it has to be said that since the early 2000s the traditional custom of music fans going to the same pub or club has changed, with these fans wanting different and newer experiences.

1. <http://www.londonlive.co.uk/news/2016-06-13/a-golden-plated-industry>

2. <http://musicvenuetrust.com/london-taskforce/>

3. <http://www.cityam.com/220035/why-britains-night-time-economy-needs-be-protected>

CASE STUDY 1 – SOFAR

One such example is Sofar⁴, a company set up in response to the needs of people wanting a different experience.

Musicians, bands and artists sign up to play at events, choosing to be paid from voluntary attendee contributions, digital donations or by having their gig filmed and uploaded to the SoFar Sounds Youtube channel. It has been cited that there are around 2,000 requests for each London gig, but invitations to the purposely small gig are extended to only 50-60 of these applicants and in June 2015 Sofar Sounds teamed up with Uber to host a series of secret gigs.

“There was something wrong with live music...” says Rafe Offer, the enthusiastic Chicago-born, London-based co-creator of Sofar Sounds, the “secret gig” club that furnished me with unlimited Date Kudos back in 2012.

“You had two choices – you can either see it in a giant amphitheatre, where that tiny dot in the distance is the lead singer from Muse. Or you see it in a small venue, but the issue with that, especially with new music, is that people talk, people text, people drink...”

“There’s very little focus and respect for the music, especially for new acts. My friend Dave [Alexander, co-founder along with third founder, Rocky Start] and I were at a gig and it was so loud we couldn’t even hear the musician, that’s when we decided that there had to be another way...”

Key to Sofar’s success is its strong online presence and word of mouth. Fans choose the area of town where they want to go see the show without knowing exactly what the venue will be or what artists will perform - the element of surprise and the feeling of exclusivity keeps fans coming back. The Sofar website brings together musicians, venues and fans, uses a mix of staff and volunteers, and finds event spaces as random as people’s bedrooms; they then invite hopeful music lovers to these secret Sofar shows. Sofar has now spread from London to Paris, New York, and other cities and hosts in 268 cities worldwide, and is really popular in areas where there are not many music venues.

CASE STUDY 2 – THE SILVER BULLET

The UK’s first ever ‘pop-up’ live music venue, The Silver Bullet⁵, opened at the end of May 2010, and was a one-stop-shop for music lovers and followers of the edgiest club nights that London had to offer, courtesy of high profile live acts and DJs. It gave the opportunity for emerging acts to perform, and launched the career of John Newman, who worked as a bartender at the venue in 2010, an experience he credits as introducing him to London’s live music community.

4. <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/features/interviews/interview-sofar-sounds-148367>

5. <http://www.venues.org.uk/news/first-pop-up-music-venue-opening-in-london.html>

At the time of the pop-up, Silver Bullet owner Tom Allerton commented as follows:

“Perfect for those constantly hunting down the next best thing, the intimate 175 capacity venue will be the new home of cutting-edge quality music in the capital before it fires up its engine and moves down the tracks of history to its next location. The Silver Bullet is a temporary fixture on the scene and such a nomadic existence will make for a venue that never has the chance to let its moment in the spotlight wane or become routine, resulting in a consistently fresh experience for those who make the most of its temporary residence”.

As well as nurturing the talent of local musicians in a range of Blues, Rock, Jazz, Reggae and Hip Hop jam sessions from Sunday to Wednesday, the venue has played host to some big industry names including Rudimental, Laura Marling, Lords of the Underground, Congo Natty, DJ Derek & Don Letts.

HOW COULD NEW POP-UP MUSIC VENUES BE FINANCED?

Crowdfunding could have significant potential to fund new pop-up venues. Music fans have a passionate motivation for funding emerging bands. After all, the first online crowdfunded project is thought to have occurred in 1997, when Rock band Marillion⁶ were unable to afford to tour after the release of their seventh album. American fans therefore used the then fledgling internet to raise \$60,000 so they could play in the US. Although the band was not involved in the first round of fundraising, they have since used the same techniques to successfully fund the production of their following three albums. Other creative projects soon followed suit, such as films and journalism, and the first crowdfunding website appeared in 2001. In 2012, there were over 500 crowdfunding platforms online, and February of that year saw the first crowdfunded project raise over £1,000,000.

DOES LONDON HAVE SPACE FOR POP-UPS?

Disused or abandoned underground stations,⁷ railways arches, bus depots, garages and warehouses could be put to good use as pop-up live music venues, and take live music to a whole new different level, creating new and exciting trends in areas of London not necessarily known for their culture. One such example is the Aldwych – a closed station that is made available for filming purposes.⁸

Some local communities are already making use of existing buildings. A recent example is an initiative by the Rev Tom Plant (a heavy metal-loving vicar), who applied for a licence to turn Camden town’s 19th-century church into a live gig venue for music events, where bands are now permitted to play music 3 evenings a week. According to Rev Plant, funds raised from its usage as a live venue will be directed towards repairs and outreach initiatives including a debt and legal drop-in service, and programmes for the homeless.

6. <https://www.virgin.com/music/how-marillion-pioneered-crowdfunding-in-music>

7. <http://www.derelictlondon.com/london-transport.html>

8. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25576814>

THE NIGHT TUBE

At the moment, most of London's live music takes place in the centre of London, where space is at a premium. The Night Tube will not only provide economic benefits to London's night-time economy but will enable the creation of "pop-up" music venues outside the city centre, opening up new creative hubs in cultural wastelands; fans will be able to travel to venues outside the centre of London without having to factor in paying for a cab; and there would be the additional benefit of getting home safely after a night out.

CONCLUSION

Londoners are passionate about music and this report demonstrates that music fans and artists, individually and collectively, want something different from playing in the same pubs and clubs. Artists and music fans are looking at imaginative and alternative ways of continuing London's live music scene. Londoners want a vibrant, but not vibrating, neighbourhood, and some venues are no longer suitable for use as music venues. One of the solutions is the creative use of disused spaces for live music, which would provide flexibility to musicians, promoters and music fans and where residents would not have to endure the noise often associated with live music.

RECOMMENDATION #1 - The Mayor should work with developers and TfL to identify potential sites such as disused tube and Overground stations, railway arches, abandoned bus depots and garages that could be used to host live music events. Once identified, these sites should be publically listed and a strategy developed that would ensure a significant number of these sites are used for cultural activities.

RECOMMENDATION #2 - The Mayor should hold a yearly music fringe event to celebrate and promote local musicians and artists with the support and participation of all London boroughs and across all demographic groups. This would be a London equivalent of the Edinburgh Fringe, and look to attract all the best of developing talent for a yearly cultural festival. In order to ensure that all of London participates, the Mayor should promote an innovative use of space, such as pop-up venues.

RECOMMENDATION #3 - The Mayor should work in collaboration with cultural entrepreneurs in assessing the viability of setting up a website, supported by apprentices and volunteers, to enable artists and musicians to hold live music events. This site would match property owners with the space to host artists and budding musicians looking to pursue their passion.



FEEDBACK

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