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Live concert performance

Citation for published version:

Brennan, M, Behr, A, Webster, E, Frith, S & Cloonan, M 2016, 'Live concert performance: An ecological approach' *Rock Music Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 5-23. DOI: 10.1080/19401159.2015.1125633

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/19401159.2015.1125633](https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2015.1125633)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Rock Music Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Rock Music Studies* on 26 January 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19401159.2015.1125633>

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LIVE CONCERT PERFORMANCE—AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Live Music Exchange (Adam Behr, Matt Brennan, Martin Cloonan, Simon Frith and Emma Webster)

For the last decade we have been engaged in the study of the history, economics and sociology of live music in Britain. In this paper we will consider the value of “ecology” as an analytic concept (rather than just a buzzword) and compare an ecological account of the setting in which music happens to the use of previous spatial metaphors, from Durkheim’s milieus to Straw’s scenes. To illustrate our argument, we present case studies of three Scottish concerts; one in a small-scale venue (Glasgow’s King Tut’s), one in a mid-size venue (Edinburgh’s Queen’s Hall), and one in a large-scale venue, the 12,000 seater SSE Hydro.

KEYWORDS

ecology, live music, venue, Queen’s Hall, King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut, SSE Hydro, Glasgow, Edinburgh

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INTRODUCTION

For the last decade we have been engaged in the study of the history, economics and sociology of live music in Britain.¹ From quite early on in our research we adopted what we termed “an ecological approach.” This was a convenient way to address our starting research question: what are the material and cultural conditions necessary for a live concert performance to happen? Ecology seemed to be the best way of making sense of the relationships between the various factors and actors involved. If, in the abstract, a concert could obviously only happen in a particular place, at a particular time, with the right kind of social collaboration (between promoters, venue owners, performers and their managers, audiences, technicians, security staff, etc.), our concern was to explain why a particular concert happens in *this* setting, at *this* time, with *this* audience and the collaboration of *these* people. Our ecological approach was a short hand way of putting *place* at the center of the economic and cultural networks we were exploring.

More recently we have been discomfited to realize that “ecology” has also become a commonplace term in music policy documents, replacing previous correlate notions such as creative industry “quarters” and “clusters.”² Indeed, the term has become so ubiquitous as to become essentially vacuous: taking an ecological approach is a good thing to do—it means taking lots of things into consideration—but there is no explanation of why thinking ecologically is a better way of getting at the complexity of factors that make musical cultures flourish than thinking sociologically or economically.

From an academic perspective, then, this seems to be a good moment to reflect on the value of “ecology” as an analytic concept (rather than as a buzzword).³ What, if anything, does an ecological approach bring to rock music studies?

Dictionaries define human ecology as the study of the relationships between people, social groups and their environment, a definition that does not immediately suggest a way of approaching live music that is very different from that of, say, social geographers or ethnomusicology. The key term here, though, is environment. When we started our research we were immediately aware that one essential difference between listening to live performance and listening to recorded performance is that the former is spatially and temporally specific, and that this fact is central both to the economic problems of live music promoters and to the cultural value of concerts to both performers and audiences. One of the questions that interested us, therefore, was how the materiality of a musical place (its size, shape, acoustic and physical accessibility) affected the social construction of musical meaning.

Cultural sociologists have long understood the importance of a sense of place to our concepts of society, as can be seen in the various spatial metaphors that they have supplied popular music studies: *milieu sociale* (Durkheim), art world (Becker), cultural field (Bourdieu), pathway (Finnegan) and scene (Straw). But while all these terms illuminate the structure of social relations that make music (and other cultural forms) possible and draw attention to the dynamics of creativity, whether involving complex power struggles or modes of collaboration, they do not really take into account the material and physical aspects of music making. From Durkheim (217) onwards—“Our whole social environment seems to us filled with forces which really exist only in our own minds”—cultural sociologists have been more interested in the symbolic representations of the factors that shape music meaning-making than in the material limits on where and how music can be made and heard. Even recent interest in music’s technological environment and the application of “actor network

theory” to popular music studies still tends to treat this environment as more significantly symbolic than material (see Prior).⁴

The value of a concept like “scene” for popular music scholars is that it describes a social process of music meaning-making which is *not* limited by the materiality of place, whereas it is precisely these constraints that interest us. Further, an ecological study of live music means studying social agents who are not in any coherent ideological way members of the social networks that are described by Becker’s art worlds, Bourdieu’s cultural fields or Finnegan’s social pathways. Historically, as we discovered in our research, promoters have been well aware that the environment in which they have to work is material as well as cultural, political as well as economic.

We will illustrate the general argument here by means of case studies of three Scottish venues: small-scale (King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut), mid-size (Queen’s Hall) and large-scale (The Hydro). In the study of King Tut’s we will show how an ecological approach draws attention to patterns of cause and effect that may not be immediately apparent to the participants concerned and makes possible a more nuanced account than is usual of the economic power relations that shape the live music business. As this case shows, one of the advantages of an ecological approach is that it makes us sensitive to musical relationships over time. Of course live concert performances necessarily take place at particular historical moments, but the environment with which we must be analytically concerned is temporal as well as physical and cultural. The second case study, of Edinburgh’s Queens Hall, addresses a different issue: the ecology *within* a music venue, paying particular attention to the construction of an audience. The third study, of the Glasgow Hydro, develops these points

by focusing on a straightforward but often neglected question in rock music studies: how does an appropriate space for major rock events come to be there in the first place?

KING TUT'S WAH WAH HUT, GLASGOW

We have written about King Tut's elsewhere (Frith et al. "Analysing live music in the UK"), in a paper in which it was examined in the context of Pete Webb's theoretical matrix of the networked worlds of popular music.⁵ What Webb's network theory misses, however, is the significance of the non-living environment, which our ecological approach addresses. We approached King Tut's, then, with the recognition that live music exists within both social *and* physical systems, and that factors such as the quantity and type of venues and transport links locally, for example, impact on each "resource patch" within the ecology of live music as much as the matrix of social networks. Our research concern, in short, was to investigate how "intrinsic" factors such as the social interactions between the various actors interact with "extrinsic" factors such as physical, geographical, economic, and legislative (licensing, health and safety, noise, cultural policies, etc.) structures. Other key extrinsic factors include the social and economic conditions which impact on the audiences available for the artists, the artists available to the promoters, and the venues available to the promoters into which to book the artists.

With this in mind, this part of the article examines how King Tut's operates within some of these contexts.

King Tut's is a three hundred capacity venue—"a pub with a venue attached" (Coet) — located just off the beaten track on the edge of Glasgow's city centre. It opened in 1990 and provides a platform for up and coming rock artists. The Killers, Bloc Party, Kings of Leon,

Stereophonics, Kaiser Chiefs and Oasis, for example, all performed at the venue before “making it” (a fact which the venue exploits to great effect within its publicity material and on its website). The musical program generally includes a mixture of local and touring performers, and although it is a small venue, it also sometimes features higher earning and higher status acts, such as The Breeders, Idlewild and The Beat.

King Tut’s is particularly interesting because of the relative heterogeneity of popular musical styles within the venue itself, and the consequent diversity of the audiences and artists who use it. During our research period at King Tut’s in June 2009, for example, we experienced metal, rock, indie, grime, techno, and acoustic folk to name but six. This variety highlights King Tut’s flexibility in terms of the musical genres it accommodates,⁶ and is also reflected in the age range of its attendees: from 14 year-olds for certain shows all the way up to 70+ year-olds for the weekly Saturday matinee jazz gigs in the downstairs bar.

We have argued elsewhere that Glasgow is an example of a “healthy” live music ecology (Webster and Behr), and King Tut’s fulfils a significant and *stable* role within this environment. This is an effect of both the stability of the venue as a physical space—it has remained open on the same site and has not significantly changed structurally since the 1990s—and of the relative stability of its employees⁷ and their relationships with cultural intermediaries such as booking agents and tour managers, and the social capital and knowledge accrued over time. It is this stability that has in part enabled Glasgow’s local live music ecology to thrive, just as it is this ecology that has allowed King Tut’s and other local venues to flourish.

Promoters invest in emerging artists who have been endorsed by agents at the start of their careers in the hope that they will be high-earning acts in the future (while, at the same time, arguably exploiting local artists—by paying much lower fees—who lack such endorsements). To illustrate this point, one of the gigs attended during the research period featured Goldheart Assembly, a pop/experimental band from London who had been together for about a year before their inaugural Scottish show at King Tut's. The band's name was the most prominent on the show-times poster at the venue and was at the top of the "what's on" blackboard downstairs. However, while this positioning reflected the band's status as headliners, in the concert's actual running order they were sandwiched between two local bands, the Ten to Five Project and Acutones, the latter of whom had a significant fan following in Glasgow and had been booked in order to bring a crowd. As Tut's booker/promoter, Dave McGeachan, explained: "If it's a small act, you put local supports on to help sales if the band at that stage aren't worth that many people but hopefully they will be in the future" (McGeachan). Such delayed rewards are also how promoters and other actors within the ecology build social capital with artists and their various intermediaries, in the form of loyalty, reputation and favors, in order to continue to promote them in the long-term (see Webster). Good relationships between such actors are economically vital.

Once the band is booked via the agent, the promoter has "got to keep the band happy, and we do that in King Tut's in various ways" (McGeachan). One way is by feeding every artist who plays at the venue, as opposed to sending them out with *per diems* (fixed amounts of money which artists can spend in local eateries).⁸ As bar manager, Guillaume Coet, explained, "One of the things I always like to say [is] that the Manic Street Preachers always say, 'Thanks King Tut's: the first place we ever had hot food on tour'" (Coet). Other ways of

building long-term relationships with artists are by providing a professional in-house sound engineer, sound checks, and a comfortable (and private) backstage area.

King Tut's as a venue and a promoter does not simply build and maintain a relationship with artists and their representatives, however. The other vital part of the live music ecology—what could be considered the “resource” within the live music food chain—is the audience, on whose continued patronage the venue is dependent.⁹ As Coet went on to say, “King Tut's just wants to be seen [as]—or just to *be*—the venue that has some of the best shows and [where] our customers can have some of the best experiences” (emphasis in original). To this end, the venue tries to look after its customers, whether by ensuring there is enough toilet paper available or by planning the gig curfew so that Mondays to Thursdays—“school nights”—do not end too late to enable people to get home at a reasonable time (Francis). Certainly, some of the audience members we interviewed talked of loyalty to King Tut's and descriptions of the venue included “intimate,” “permanent,” “professional,” and “friendly.”

In its role as a place in which artists perform, King Tut's operates vertically and horizontally within Glasgow and beyond. Horizontally, it forms part of a network of small venues at which bands of a certain level and status appear.¹⁰ As the case of Goldheart Assembly illustrates, King Tut's positions itself as a “platform venue” in Glasgow (and, indeed, in Scotland), which provides a step-up for bands at the start of their careers. It is often the first place a touring band will play in the city, serving the same purpose as venues like Thekla in Bristol or The Adelphi in Hull. Vertically, it is a stepping stone to bigger and bigger venues in Glasgow itself, from Tut's to the ABC, Barrowlands, the O₂ Academy, the

Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre (SECC), and now the SSE Hydro, which is in the SECC campus.¹¹

Another factor in Glasgow's relatively healthy live music ecology is the *heterogeneity* of music-related places and music-related people within the city and their relative abundance. There are a number of venues of varying sizes from pubs to arenas, and, while King Tut's owner/promoter DF Concerts is the dominant promoter for rock music within the city, there is, for the most part, still room for others, not to mention a plethora of artists from across a wide range of genres.

We now consider King Tut's in a national and global environment. The venue is owned and operated by DF Concerts, the largest promoter in Scotland, and one of a handful of promoters in the UK with the skill, reputation, money and experience to promote at the highest (and most lucrative) levels; in Scotland, at least, the company is therefore "competitively superior" (Krebs 221). DF Concerts is, in turn, owned 67% by LN-Gaiety (a 50/50 joint venture between the US-based global corporation, Live Nation, and Ireland's dominant live music company, Gaiety Investments) and 33% by another major UK promoter, SJM. DF is therefore able to operate in a local, national *and* global market because of the parent companies' clout. For example, in 2009 DF promoted Bruce Springsteen in his first Scottish concert since 1981, arguably due to Live Nation's influence and financial backing (Cloonan and Frith).

Promoters may also work both as competitors *and* collaborators with other promoters, depending on the gig. DF Concerts' parent company Live Nation bids against other companies for national tours, for example, but also collaborates with them, not just through

the ownership of DF Concerts. Various mutual relationships exist with other national promoters SJM and Metropolis through the Academy Music Group, for example, which owns and operates the O₂ Academy chain; and, as of 2013, with V Festivals, also in partnership with SJM and Metropolis. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere (Webster forthcoming), the live music sector, for arena shows at least, operates as an oligopoly: a small number of interdependent companies dominating high-level gig promotion.¹²

Finally, while it is important to understand how the local fits into the national and the global, it is also necessary to keep coming back to the fact that live music is ultimately local music, in that it has to happen in a particular place. What has been very apparent in our research is that promoters in different places deal with widely varying circumstances, particularly with regard to legislative structures and in their relationships with local authorities. King Tut's could be seen as a model of how venues can work closely and positively with local authorities, in the sense that the relationship between them appears to be one of trust and cooperation. DF Concerts is certainly well regarded by Glasgow City Council and other local regulators, who "see us bringing something new to the city, be it Glasgow or wherever, so they work with you well and try to accommodate everything as well" (McGeachan 2010).

DF Concerts promotes at every level within the commercial live music industry in Scotland and is also the promoter of Scotland's largest greenfield festival—T in the Park—for which the promoter necessarily negotiates relationships with licensing, police and health authorities, among others. DF even organized the Pope's visit to Glasgow in 2010 which shows how the company operates politically at levels well beyond many local venues, with relationships at the highest level of government.

Other venues and promoters experience less harmonious or even hostile relationships with local authorities. Indeed, 2014 saw a spate of English venues under threat of closure due to conflict with local residents, planners, and councilors over noise. Changes to planning laws in the 2010s mean that it is easier for developers to convert properties in city centers for residential usage, which can have negative connotations for venues which were there first.¹³ To counter this, 2014 also saw the launch of Independent Venue Week (independentvenueweek.com) and the Music Venues Trust (musicvenuestrust.blogspot.co.uk), initiatives which draw attention to the plight of the UK's small venue circuit.

To conclude this section, then, King Tut's is a local venue inextricably intertwined with a wider ecology, and many factors—social, cultural, physical, economic, legislative—must be taken into account to appreciate the complexity and richness of the venue's interactions within its immediate and not so immediate environment.

QUEEN'S HALL EDINBURGH

Our next case study venue is the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh. Built as a church in 1823, and then converted into a music venue in 1979, the Queen's Hall is a 900-capacity space which hosts approximately 200 performances a year across all genres. It is therefore a flexible venue in some respects, but as a former church, it is not so flexible in other ways: the pillars and pews, for instance, add character to the hall, but the pillars can obstruct sightlines to the performance onstage, and the pews are not altogether comfortable. The Hall receives some subsidy from Edinburgh City Council and is the home of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, which is directly funded by the Scottish Government. But it also relies on commercial income from venue hire by amateur and semi-professional artists and promoters, as well as

Scotland's biggest commercial promoters like DF Concerts and Regular Music. The latter promoted a gig by cult indie rock band They Might Be Giants on 15 November 2013, and it is this gig that we will use to investigate how the various actors drawn into the orbit of a gig—including audiences, venue managers, caterers, and promoters—navigate the ecology *within* a live music venue.

Our method for gathering audience data was two-fold: we conducted an in-house and online questionnaire for gig attendees, and also collected reflective diaries from selected audience volunteers, who, in exchange for venue ticket vouchers, wrote about their experiences the week before the gig, during the gig itself, and the week after the gig.¹⁴

There were three significant components to audience behaviors prior to the gig that can be interpreted through an ecological lens: choosing the friends who would go with them, trying to select the best tickets for an event with allocated seating, and their navigation of the city of Edinburgh itself in relation to the Queen's Hall as a venue. First, going to a gig is usually a social event that involves choosing who to bring with you, where they are based, and where you will meet them. As Sean put it in his diary before the gig: "This is very much a joint venture with my wife so we have been talking about it for some time, arranging to meet friends before the concert for a few drinks etc." The They Might Be Giants gig had ticket allocated seating with cabaret tables on the floor, so fans also had to plan their spatial relationship to the gig at the moment they booked their tickets. Susan explained in her diary:

Normally, I recommend gigs to people I think would like them, but I haven't invited anyone else to TMBG. I think it's partly to do with the fact that it's an allocated seating gig ... [I later] read the band's Facebook page - they're saying that everyone can come down to the front and dance. I'd be a bit disappointed by that if I'd forked out the premium price for a table at the front. If that happened in Glasgow on a Friday night there'd probably be a riot! ... Decided I'd better dress for a standing gig rather than a seated gig just in case - foldable layers that can fit in my bag, rather than a big coat.

The audience also needed to situate themselves not just with friends and within the imagined venue layout, but with the venue's physical relationship to the rest of the city.

Audience member Jacob traveled up from Bristol for the show:

I check TMBG website for tour info. Tempting me most, the Edinburgh show outshines others with its historical venue at Queen's Hall, cheap flights from Bristol and friends to stay with accommodation. I contact Queen's Hall to discuss seating and book 2 in the North Gallery front row.

Others, like audience member Steve, were less than excited by the prospect of making their way to the gig:

I'm looking forward to the concert, but dreading getting there and getting back. Parking in Edinburgh is a nightmare, but public transport from where I live is non-existent, so I'm going to have to use a combination, which makes the experience expensive and means I can't have more than one drink after the gig. I'll also have to drive the last 20 miles in the dark, which I hate. ... I'm trying to work out how I'm going to get home as the Lothian buses website is a tangled waste of space and trains seem to stop worryingly early. Can envision dying of exposure trying to sleep under cardboard boxes at Waverley station. This is why we never go out.

Once the audience has arrived at the venue on the night of the gig, new kinds of spatial interdependency emerge. The audience itself became part of the spectacle for Annabelle:

I mainly watched the crowd. Decided that I was probably just a bit older than the average crowd member, which freaked me out because to me they looked so very middle aged! It was great to see the crowd below us having such a good time even though I couldn't really relate.

Or as Susan put it:

The one distraction, for me, was the amazing view of the audience that the seats afforded us. I couldn't take my eyes off some of the people in the front row, who were so lost in the music that they became part of the performance.

Being in the same physical space as like-minded strangers is an important part of the experience, as Sean recalled:

[We] find ourselves beside a much younger aficionado - her father played TMBG when in the car when she was a kid. Her and her brother remain fans. It turns out her

father was Michael Marra, a stalwart of the folk and concert scene in Scotland for many a long year, sadly missed. Again adds somehow to the sense of occasion.

As one might expect, audiences found their physical position in the venue significantly affected the experience of the gig, especially in terms of acoustics and sightlines to the artist.

Annabelle noted that:

We felt our seats “in the Gods” hadn’t allowed us to hear the lyrics or much of the banter between songs. I didn't recognise the new tracks we listened to this morning although apparently they had played them on Friday.

Dorothy noted after the gig that, “In order to be fully absorbed myself, I need to have a line of sight to the band, or at least be able to feel my own response alongside, rather than outwith, that of others.”

On the other hand, another audience member—presumably with better seats—specifically commented in the survey that the “Queen's Hall is a brilliant venue, really like the acoustics there.”

The performance space is not the only important environment in the ecology of the venue. The bar is a crucial social space for many, especially after the gig. Sean was glad to head “Back to the bar for a de-briefing. Everyone in agreement that it had been a splendid show—good venue, good sound, good visuals, great band. Much to discuss.” Howard chose “Not [to] see the support band preferring to spend time in the bar areas catching up with friends.”

Meanwhile, Dorothy stayed on and

Hung around for about ten minutes watching members of the band connecting with the stalls audience after the gig. I was really touched by how carefully the drummer nurtured the emotions of the fans. Drumsticks, skins, playlists and tokens were all handed out with care, courtesy and grace. Lots of happy people.

To summarize the argument so far: when They Might Be Giants played at Edinburgh's Queen's Hall, multiple perspectives—across different social and institutional actors and over time—were in evidence. But if a gig obviously cannot take place, or at least cannot successfully take place, without an audience which is in itself a complex “environment,” at the same time, the multifarious experiences contained within the audience exist in a feedback loop not only with the artist but also with another group, heretofore often absent from accounts of the live music experience: the venue staff.

Whilst the reflective diaries and surveys illustrated the variety of what members of TMBG's audience felt about the night, this other constituency—the staff—perceive the audience as, to an extent, more of a unified entity—a group to be managed. Even at a successful event—which by all accounts the sold-out TMBG show was—something akin to the “swan effect” is in play. What looks like a graceful glide above the water masks intense, sometimes frantic, movement underneath.

This was apparent before the show, as the audience members socialized, stocked up on beer and perused the merchandise stalls. The overriding concern of the venue management staff was that the band—having previously opted for “cabaret style” seating—had decided that they would invite people with restricted views to come up to the front, and the whole audience to stand up and dance. How this would go down with people who had paid for table seats in an area of the hall that might now effectively be turned into a dance floor was, for the staff who would have to manage the consequences, a matter of grave concern. Potential refund strategies were considered and the hour before the show—from when the band had announced their intention to reconfigure the audience space “on the fly”—were fraught.

In the event, disruptions were minimal, the atmosphere of the show as a whole unsullied by the band disregarding the seating plan. The call to “get up and dance” came within seconds of the show opening and it proceeded as a rock gig with inbuilt audience participation a key component. But partly this was because of the relatively older audience demographic for the show.

The duty manager, reflecting on the night put it thus:

You just didn't really know what was going to happen. Then they decided that they were going to tell everyone to stand, jump and dance around when we had seats and tables out... It turned out to be absolutely fine. Whereas if there was a different band or if something else – if that had happened at a different concert, there could have been all types of logistical problems.

The audience’s investment in the night was with the band itself, rather than a prescribed way of interacting with it. The overall character of the audience is partly contingent on the act itself, as was reflected across our Queen’s Hall research. Members of staff, whilst acknowledging the heterogeneity of audiences, still spoke of different audience constituencies as having distinct characteristics. Certainly TMBG audience members, as with other rock audiences, have less of a direct relationship with the venue than their folk, classical and jazz counterparts. Adrian Harris, Queen’s Hall Chief Executive, remarked upon the difference:

Interestingly enough, probably the one group of people that it doesn't work so strongly with is, broadly speaking, with young people coming to pop and rock events. I don't think they have that sense of ownership or belonging. I think their sense of belonging is to the band, wherever that band is playing.

Beyond genre audiences or demographics, the venue’s marketing manager also spoke of the TMBG audience *itself* as a coherent entity, a “tribe,” his role seeming to militate towards a homogenizing tendency.

They Might Be Giants besides the cluster fuck of the seating and that part, I thought it was a blast. Again, to see that tribe come in – it's like the geek tribe... The fact that there is an audience in our city that has that – I was sitting upstairs doing video at one point and they're all singing along to what would amount, in any other group, to an obscure B-side. They know all the dances and the funny – it's a misfit audience and that's their home.

The promoter took a slightly broader view, looking at TMBG's history of playing in Scotland, and the longer-term pattern of relationships between artist, booking agent and his own company. He noted that whilst it is not unusual for different generations to attend the same show this was markedly the case with this one and, again, that it was a factor of the relative niche appeal of the band.

With the Edinburgh show, it was quite evident that there were two generations within the same family coming to the show... That's fairly unusual. It's not something we never see—I mean there's always an element of that, because normally parents have got the kids into the music because it's been available to them to listen to, particularly something that's not mainstream in the chart at that particular time (Stout).

As the promoter went on to note, the likely audience demographic also largely dictates the choice of venue.

But certain venues, we know it's certainly easier to sell a show in one venue against another for a certain style of artist, so you'll try not to use some venues for a different style of artist. It's very difficult to do something in... a nightclub, for an audience that's kind of 50+ and wants to sit down and doesn't want to be in a black box... it's the environment, and the location and how easy the parking is, and how often that audience has been there before (ibid.).

The gig itself, then, is the “ecology” in action. Any ecology, whether physical or conceptual, is made up of its constituent parts. Whilst the venue is a *physical* node within the wider system, it is also host to the *social* (and musical) embodiment of that system. The relationships between the various actors that constitute a “field” or “art world” are bounded and marshaled by physical and commercial considerations into a particular venue. It is within this space that the various institutional and organizational considerations come to a crux. This is where the inchoate concept of “an audience” coheres physically in the present to become,

for the venue staff, a crowd. Individual experiences and skill sets (from playing an instrument to pouring a beer) combine within the venue. This, like a Matryoshka Doll, is also part of wider system of other venues, transport infrastructure and so on. The live music ecology, then, is almost fractal in nature, but only up to the point of the concert itself, wherein the musical, social and physical interactions are finally negotiated.

THE GLASGOW HYDRO

Glasgow's SSE Hydro marks something of a departure from recent practice in the building of arenas: rather than being part of a larger multi-purpose enterprise, it is a dedicated entertainment venue. Its construction can be seen as emblematic of a number of things. First, it shows Glasgow City Council's continuing commitment to developing Glasgow's cultural infrastructure, with the Hydro standing alongside other developments such as the new Riverside Museum as key visitor attractions. Second, it indicates the local influence of the commercial live music sector: the venue was built in response to its concerns that Glasgow's existing arena, the SECC (see below), was not designed as a music venue and was often unavailable as it was being used for exhibitions. Third, the economic context is important: the Hydro was built at a time when the expansion and rationalization of the global live music was encouraging talk of a live music boom.

The Hydro aims to stage around 140 shows a year and claims to be the fourth most popular arena in the world (SSE Hydro, "Timeline").¹⁵ It opened on 30 September 2013 with a concert by Rod Stewart, but its origins can be traced back to the development of its sister venue the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre (SECC), in 1985. The SECC was one of a new range of arenas that in many ways transformed the economics of live music in the UK. These venues were often multi-purpose and generally held around 10,000 fans for music

events. While aesthetically often lacking the feeling and intimacy of smaller, sometimes purpose-built, entertainment sites, arenas offered promoters and acts economies of scale previously unavailable in the UK. Instead of having to play four or five nights at town X, bands could now play to the same number of people in one night. Glasgow's arena was the SECC, built to stage conferences, exhibitions and gigs. A key aspect of the building of such venues was the involvement of the public sector via what was in effect an indirect subsidy to the commercial entertainment promoters who use them; while hire fees certainly contribute to the costs of material upkeep of local authority owned arenas, they certainly come nowhere near covering the original building costs.

Initially the SECC was jointly owned by the Scottish Development Agency (which had drawn up plans for an arena in 1979), Glasgow District Council and Strathclyde Regional Council; it is now owned and operated by SEC Ltd, a private company in which the City Council's share holding is 90.86%. When it opened in 1985 it could accommodate 10,000 people at music events in Hall Four.¹⁶

In the longer term the inadequacies of the SECC as a music venue were to become apparent. The fact that its spaces had to be shared between entertainment, conferences and exhibitions meant that it was not always available when promoters wanted it, with knock-on consequences for their ability to attract touring acts—with time sensitive schedules—to the city. In addition its design militated against “authentic” musical experiences and its nickname of “the big red shed” was not one which suggested that audiences were likely to encounter a wonderful aesthetic experience. Such venues offer the chance to *see* major artists, but rarely to engage with them. In the SECC's case the first attempted solution to some of these problems was the building of the Clyde Auditorium (known locally as the Armadillo), which

opened in 1997. However the fact that it only held around 3,000¹⁷ meant that this was always a partial solution, a concert hall generally suitable only for medium sized acts. Hence the decision to build a new, entertainment-focused venue on the same riverside site as the SECC. Branded as the Hydro (after receiving £15 million sponsorship for a ten year period from the energy company Scottish Hydro), the venue is purpose built for entertainment and, unlike the SECC, does not let out its space for conferences and exhibitions.

Plans for what was originally known as the National Arena were first mooted publicly in 2006 and like the SECC, the Hydro was part financed with public money: the European Union provided £1 million, the City Council £15 million, the economic development agency, Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, £25 million; the remaining £77 million came from the private sector (details here are subject to commercial confidentiality but include £15 million in naming rights from SSE as well as investment from the Hydro's strategic partnership with AEG Live, the neighboring car park project with Canada Life, and various other partners listed on their website (SSE Hydro, "Timeline"). SEC Ltd. itself got some of the money to put towards the Hydro from the sale of other assets (Wilson; Behr, Brennan and Cloonan)

Crucially the Hydro was planned to meet economic rather than cultural needs, or perhaps it would be better to say that it was meant to meet economic ends through cultural means. As Scottish Enterprise explained: "This arena is a vital new asset if the city is to continue to grow as a tourist destination" (Wilson). Advertisements for the new venue began to appear in various outlets in July 2012, over a year before it was due to open. Its modernist design was undertaken by Foster and Partners and its spaceship-like exterior gives it an important presence in the central Glasgow skyline.

Both the SECC and the Hydro stand as examples of public investment in popular entertainment in the modern era. These were not initiatives designed to help local musicians but to attract internationally renowned acts—and thus tourists—to the city. The message to be given was that Glasgow was a cool place to visit (or work or live in): See! It can attract the best acts in the world to a venue within easy travel distance from the city center. Edinburgh (Glasgow's closest rival) can't make such a claim—it doesn't have such a venue nor even a suitable space on which to build one—and so first the SECC and now the Hydro become, for better or worse, *the* Scottish venues for arena-sized acts to play (and for arena-sized audiences to attend).

The SECC and Hydro represent something of a new era in British public funding of the performing arts. The old Arts Council model was based on a concept of market failure. Financial support was provided for organizations, venues and events which could not survive in the market; the Arts Council brief was to enable access to the finest art to the widest range of people. The financial model for the Hydro (and the SECC before it) is rather different. The sorts of events for which these venues are designed—gigs featuring highly popular, generally internationally famous, performers—would be likely to take place (and attract audiences) in any case. Artists such as Rod Stewart or Lady Gaga would still play concerts, whether or not state funded arenas existed. To put the argument plainly, venues such as the Hydro do not affect *whether* a gig will take place, but *where*. They do not affect *something* happening, but the *somewhere* of its location. The Hydro helps Glasgow maintain its place on the touring map of international stars and so secures access to such stars for Glasgow's population and others attracted in (and the latter are more economically important—in terms of spend—than the former).¹⁸

From the perspective of Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, it is obvious that it is better that music fans' money is spent in Glasgow rather than in Edinburgh, Newcastle or Manchester, and that Glasgow is thought to be a cool place to live or visit—look at all the stars who play there! But the funding mechanisms involved—including large sums of public money—mean that large commercial operators are effectively getting a subsidy in the building of a venue which suits their purposes but does not cost them anything to maintain. This is a state funding policy based on market success rather than market failure and can lead to a skeptical response to concert promoters' claims to be risk takers at the cutting edge of capitalist practice!¹⁹

One implication of this is that the success of such venues is seldom seen in artistic terms. While there is obviously kudos in attracting big names to the city, the discourses surrounding the venue are routinely couched in economic terms. An early report on the project stressed that it was likely to create 1,400 jobs (Wilson) while soon after the venue opened, the city's *Evening Times* newspaper was celebrating "The Hydro Effect" which, it claimed, had sparked an economic upsurge in the venue's locality, Finnieston, due to "the wallets of well-heeled concert goers" (Leask).²⁰ In keeping with its corporate image, the venue also has a club membership scheme which, for a minimum of £3,000 a year, gives members access to a private bar in the venue as well as "guaranteed access to tickets for each event" (SSE Hydro, "The Hydro Club").

However, another important aspect of the Hydro is that it is dedicated to entertainment; it does not have conference and exhibition income. (It has this in common with the Leeds Arena, which opened in the same month). It remains to be seen whether the market can sustain demand for such purposes—market failure has more than one meaning. It also remains to be seen whether arenas will retain their popularity with policy makers and whether

such people will remain in thrall to concert promoters. Meanwhile the Hydro and Leeds Arena show the perceived strength of the live entertainment market. Both were conceived before the global financial crisis and both were taken to conclusion because policy makers, including local politicians, assumed that the live entertainment market would remain buoyant. On behalf of the citizens of these towns whose taxes helped build the venues, it is to be hoped that such optimism does not prove to be misguided.²¹

CONCLUSION

We began to use the term “ecology” in our research into the business of live music in response to a couple of observations and a repeated theme emerging from interviews with promoters and venue owners. The observations would be familiar to anyone who has hung around a venue before a show starts, or sat and watched a sound check in a stadium: first, there seemed to be a surprising number of people walking back and forth apparently doing nothing; second, everyone seemed focused not on the music as such but on the material conditions of music-making, on technology (all those cables, boxes, soundboards, lights, computers, etc. to be heaved and positioned and secured) and on bricks and mortar, on the effects of the shape of the building on entry and exit, stage arrangements, acoustics, security and musicians and audience movement.

What quickly emerged from our interviews, meanwhile, was that promoters and, in particular, venue owners, were as much if not more concerned with their relationship with regulations and regulators—in terms of licensing laws, noise, health and safety and so forth—as they were with their dealings with agents, managers and musicians. To put this another way, it became clear to us that people who weren’t members of a music world or scene (as those terms are usually used) were just as significant for the way rock gigs are constructed.

Putting these observational and interview findings together, we had to rethink what we meant by the live music environment. Hence our use of the term ecology.

In this paper we have illustrated our approach with three case studies, but the underlying question remains to be answered: is “ecology” a helpful term in the analysis of live rock music? The answer seems to be no and yes!

No, in that part of what our work suggests is simply that we need make more complex existing socio-economic accounts of the construction of live music events, to ensure that people and activities carefully kept backstage to ensure that the performances themselves seem magical are brought into the glare of the academic spotlight. We need to understand what those people apparently wandering aimlessly or marching purposefully about as a gig is put together are actually *doing* (this was an important aspect of our Queen’s Hall research).

But, that said, there *is* more to this than a richer understanding of social networks. An ecological approach draws attention to three other points. First, it draws attention, as all our case studies illustrate, to the *materiality* of the buildings in which live music happens. Such buildings may or may not have been constructed as musical sites; even when they were, the musical ideology inscribed in their physical and acoustic design may or may not be compatible with the physical symbolization of contemporary musical communities. Either way buildings don’t just exist in people’s minds. The history of British rock, for example, cannot be properly understood without reference to the places available for performance and what they made possible and impossible (see Frith et al.). Live music is therefore best understood as a living cultural practice that is embedded

in—and depends on—a surrounding material culture.

Second, a musical event is not just cultural, the result of ideological agreement among actors who, in coming to such agreement, form a musical world. A live musical event also involves constant negotiation with people who are *not* part of a shared ideological construct. These relationships between two kinds of actors mean that live music is an *interdependent* musical world made from what might at first seem like unrelated spheres of work and types of worker. It is true that some of the people in the latter group (who we might in general call “regulators”) may, simply because of their everyday engagement with venues or events, become default members of these musical worlds. We certainly found example of particular local authority licensing and noise abatement officers who could be described this way. But we also found many more examples of national and local authority officials making decisions without any reference to live music at all but which have profound consequences for what kind of music could be made where, in both positive and negative terms; encouraging some sorts of musical event (as at the Hydro), and preventing others (as when planning officers allow residential building near music clubs with devastating consequences for what sort of music those clubs can stage when). In other words, and more broadly, many of the most important policies *for* music in a locality are not specifically *about* music. (Frith, Cloonan and Williamson 83).

Third, though, the value of the term ecology lies elsewhere, in drawing attention to issues of sustainability (see Keogh). This is particularly important for policy makers (and a reason for welcoming the term’s routine appearance now in policy documents). When policy makers are considering how to sustain a local musical culture or bolster a national musical economy, it is important that they understand the relationship between all the factors we have discussed

here. It is important that they realize that a decision about, say, the subsidy of public transport, has, among other things, significant consequences for who can get to a venue and when. Similarly, while the primary goal of commercial promoters is to pursue their own profits, they too need to be aware that a policy which, in competitive terms, makes it impossible for small promoters or venues to survive will, in the long term, have a decisive impact on their own sustainability too. Our historical research suggests that the recurring tendency towards oligopoly in live music never ends well! The bigger the company gets, the less its centralized components understand how new musical communities, new musical places, appear and develop. Interactions at ground level increasingly become the province of staff (at venues like King Tut's) whose immediate concerns are different from those of corporate strategists. An ecological approach helps to draw out the complexities of these highly variegated industrial and geographical relationships. It draws attention too to the complexities of relationships across time: while a gig is always necessarily taking place *here* and *now*, it is also bound into an ecological development of how gigs happened in the past and how they will happen in the future.

These three points of focus—the *materiality* of venues, the *interdependence* of otherwise disparate actors, and the *sustainability* of the resulting live music culture—form the basis for future research into the ecology of live music.

NOTES

1. For details of this project see the Live Music Exchange website, which includes an archive of our publications dating back to 2003, see <http://livemusicexchange.org/>

2. See, for example, EKOS; Fisher; Mean and Tims; and UK Music.
3. For an incisive critique of the problematic use of the “ecological” approach to questions of cultural (as against economic) sustainability in ethnomusicology debate see Keogh.
4. The music psychologist, Eric Clarke, has developed what he calls an “ecological approach” to the *perception* of music, arguing (to quote the blurb for his book) “that the way we hear and understand music is not simply a function of our brain structure or of the musical “codes” given to us by culture, but must be considered within the physical and social contexts of listening.” Our concern is to bring together an understanding of the physical and social contexts of listening to *and* making music in the analysis of the live music industry.
5. Using this matrix, King Tut’s can be described as operating within, first, the local milieu in Glasgow; second, within Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production—in this case, the live music industries; and third within the relationships that the first two levels have with other milieu, including local and national culture, economy and politics, and *global* culture, economy and politics.
6. It should be pointed out that the upstairs venue does not have seats other than a few benches and has a low ceiling with a flat acoustic, which means that it is only generically flexible to a point. In addition, it is what could be described as a “black box” venue—all the walls are painted black—and so it would be unsuitable for classical recitals, say, practically, acoustically and aesthetically.
7. Promoter Dave McGeachan, for example, has been working for DF Concerts since 1999, while CEO Geoff Ellis, started his career with the company in 1992.
8. The presence of an on-site commercial kitchen at King Tut’s, predominantly catering to the audience and to local office workers, allows the venue to feed bands in a way that other

venues of comparable size are unable; it is also open all day unlike many other venues of a similar size.

9. Ecologists are concerned with naturally occurring environmental parameters—rainfall, temperature and soil type. Analogously, human beings are limited by humanly created economic, temporal, and social parameters: money, time, and the size and quantity of social networks. It is worth noting, for example, that during our research period in King Tut's, which took place soon after the financial collapse of 2008, King Tut's staff noticed lower attendance and lower spend on food and drink as audiences struggled with an economically lean period.

10. As Dave McGeachan explains: "A lot of people say the 'toilet circuit' but I don't like including King Tut's at all in that; I don't like the phrase."

11. Interestingly, this is also the order of magnitude in which DF Concerts trains its "gig reps" (artist liaison) so that they gain experience at increasingly more complex shows. DF also like to maintain continuity for returning bands via the reps, hence one particular rep always "reps" Idlewild's shows as they started at Tut's with him as a rep and he now knows the band and a lot of their crew (Francis).

12. This oligopoly also dominates the large-scale festival market with Live Nation involved in festivals such as Reading, Leeds, Latitude, and Download. At the Festival Congress in Cardiff in October 2014, festival promoter James Scarlett of 2000Trees complained that the big Live Nation-owned (or co-owned) festivals are "squashing" and "suffocating" smaller festivals such as his, and suggested that they are deliberately trying to put independent festivals out of business in order to increase profits for their shareholders.

13. Venues include Manchester's Night and Day Cafe ("Johnny Marr..."), Brighton's Blind Tiger (Cooke) and Bristol's The Fleece ("Bristol venue ...").

14. The names of all reflective diary participants have been changed for the sake of anonymity.
15. And see also Glasgow City Council, “The Hydro.”
16. See Glasgow City of Music, “Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre.”
17. *ibid.*
18. For the relationship of live music and tourism in the UK see the 2013 UK Music Report, *Wish You Were Here*.
19. Although it could also be said that there’s a kind of “market failure” in the state funded arena model insofar as the market itself can’t set the venues up in the first place. See Behr, Brennan, and Cloonan (24), and, for further discussion, Cloonan.
20. One argument for Glasgow Council’s investment in the Hydro was that it would bolster Finnieston’s regeneration.
21. There are some precedents for this in Glasgow. In 2009 the City Council, under the auspices of its arms-length Culture and Sport Glasgow, stepped in to take over the running of the Royal Concert Hall, City Halls and Fruitmarket venues when the body running the buildings, Glasgow Cultural Enterprises, found that it could not afford essential maintenance (Smith).

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