

A Study into the Practices and Method's in
New York State's Music/Performance Scene

by

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Limitations:

Venues will not disclose their financial details to me for security purposes, not allowing for a focus on the economics of an event as well as requirements for the venue to make ends meet. The time constraints as well as for this school year will not allow me to have multiple venue options, into the diversity of the music / live performance scene in New York. The Survey's were small in quantity and only 50 were distributed, causing for a small sample size. The sample size was also primarily focused on the students attending SUNY Purchase.

GoldSounds Bar and the Nuyorican Poet Café were scarcely used as sources as I only was able to attend three events between the two locations and failed to make communications with management at each location. The primary focuses will be on The Stood and The Bitter End for the research.

Introduction:

New York state is an oasis for opportunity in the performing arts. Having a thriving nightlife scene in the "City That Never Sleeps", there are plenty of groups ready to perform their passions on stage towards their audience. The main goals for the artists, as well as the establishment, is to support themselves through an audience and eventually make a healthy, self-sustaining business using multiple forms of media, marketing and compositions. Venue's across the state each have their own model as well as audience based on the demand of their target demographics, resources and mission.

SUNY Purchase, is a State College which holds a thriving music scene that is student run, with assistance in funding from the college itself via their non-profit 501c9, The Purchase Student Government Association. The field research that I've conducted on the venue itself, was spending upwards of ten hours a week documenting the events, attendees, staff and the space itself. The murals and merchandise within the building were made and designed by visual arts students. The events brought in young adult demographic between the ages of 18 – 25. There is not a bar present within the venue and alcohol consumption is prohibited within the space (*Safer Space Policy: Purchase Code of Conduct*)

Venue Research:

The Stood is used mainly for music events that range from all genres and artists. The main room of the Stood itself is a lounge with multiple video games, pool tables and ping pong tables at the disposal of the students and attendees. Initially, this space was called the 'Student Center' and was just a lounging area for students. Through a number of years and frequent student involvement, The Stood became a center space for most live performances and clubs at purchase college. The Stood also provides services such as a print making shop, an art gallery space to showcase local artwork. It also boasts a practice room space for bands on campus to set up rehearsals, and three stages (Cinema/Whitsons/Main Stage) that are used for an array of purposes that are not limited to music, such as: film, dances, presentations, theater, group and club gatherings. Of course, to run these operations, there are seven students whom assume the coordinator position in their field of expertise.

The staff positions which manage the Stood include: The Stood Coordinator, General Programming Coordinators (GPC's), Major Event Coordinator (MEC), Tech Coordinator, Maintenance Coordinator and overseeing the positions, the Student Activities Coordinator (SAC). Each of these jobs have a niche, but are all necessary for the Stood the serve as a venue as well as community center for the students at SUNY Purchase, and anyone who arrives at the space.

Although each role is equally as necessary as the last, the two positions which oversee the daily and overall operations are the Stood Coordinator and SAC. Meila Migdalia, the Stood Coordinator sat with me for an interview and discussing her management of the venue space, her aspirations for the venue itself and her main priorities to maintain the Stood audience. She is a junior, print making major in the Visual Arts Conservatory at the College. She initially began her time at the Stood last year, working closely with the staff heads of the space, learning the ins and outs of the space, and how to assist with any task at the Stood itself. Her versatility and passion for the work she did for the Stood earned her the promotion to Stood Coordinator from working desk duty just over a year ago.

“I was just like most Purchase kids, you know? I saw the Stood for the first time, and was like ‘Holy cow, this is the spot to be! It’s so DIY, ran by the students!’ Once I started working in it, I [felt] more in love with the Stood and found myself getting eager each day to open the door at 4:00pm.” Meila had been working hard for her first year as coordinator for the space and had a goal to improve the main challenge, that faced the management of the whole space itself: communications. “The setbacks, are when we double book, or do not respond within a reasonable time frame to students and any who book the space. We are students with classes and tons of things that we have to do in our day to day, so of course at times there may be a slip up.

The split of roles helps to even out each workload for us and whenever a problem may happen like ‘tech not being booked’ or ‘a time slot that has been approved for two different people in the same space’ we work to compromise with the student and set the show up for them as planned,”

Last year, this was also a hot button issue for the venue as the online booking website for the school, www.roombook.com is an outdated website that has barely made updates within the entire seven years it has been around for the college. The solution for this last year was the usage of a new Gmail, for students to direct Stood event inquires. This year however, began the implementation of www.Pantherlink.com, for events and club organization through the Purchase Student Government Association (PSGA). By next fall, the booking requests will all be submitted through the new website and serve as a nexus for organizers to have a direct line of information as well as communication with the students and PSGA.

Meila, in addition to her background within the visual arts, also plays music and works as a solo artist. She learned throughout her time performing around New York that a significant factor that determines the liveliness of a venue is its stance on inclusivity as well as security of the space for its patrons. “The great thing about the Stood, is that anyone can play here, as long as they put together the show and go for it! We don’t allow problematic people into the space, and we focus on diversity in our lineups, and events. Like a bill could have, a hip hop act, a drag performer, a hardcore metal band, and a neo-soul group and it promotes an open minded feel for each show!”

The last subject the Stood coordinator had discussed was the matter of the needs for a venue to maintain a steady growth, without overburdening themselves, their audiences and performers. “Typically, when you have a venue there is a bit of circumstantial things to think about. Demographics like age groups, ethnic backgrounds of the owner and of the area it is in,

the income of the people around the area, accessibility and so on.... But the thing is, it is hard to have a venue satisfy all three factors of audience, the business and performers, and basically, it's more like a pick two system. It's just not possible for a venue to survive without setting itself as its main priority.”

Venues are often also bars to accommodate for the nightlife of New York. These bars, cause for most shows they curate to be only allowed for people that are 21 and over. Which makes the music culture tied into bar culture, and closes its doors to potential patrons solely towards age restrictive policies. This does not necessarily need to be the case and does more harm towards the business model rather than protect it from liability. The New York State Liquor Authority (NYSLA), has a compliance policy towards club owners to allow for those under 21+ to attend, as long as no alcohol is being served. There must be a notice made out to the NYSLA at least 10 days prior to the event. (www.sla.ny.gov). These events, do have the loss of alcohol revenue, but significantly bring up ticket sales for performances as the inclusivity increases. More inclusivity means, increased attendance, and benefits all three parties.

Migdalia stated her main priority for any space to become successful, is to allow for inclusivity to be its focal point. “It's important to see to your main demographic's tastes, but they are never your only ones! There isn't just one flavor of ice cream, there isn't just one beer at a club. Expanding your fanbase, becomes so easy once you actively listen and show you are receiving their feedback. It's what makes a spot, into a ***Dope*** spot!”. The Stood is an embodiment of this business philosophy and maintains their dominance in the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) music scene, in Westchester, New York.

Moving forward, The Bitter End Rock Club was the next area of my research into the New York City, music scene. A for-profit business, run by Paul Colby, the venue itself dates

back to 1961, and was made as a blues, funk & rock and roll location back in its inception. The venue doesn't exclusively have those genres showcased, and allows for any performer to showcase their medium on stage as they entertain the crowds. The venue also has designated days and times to allow for open mics, and open jams to the general public to allow for more performers at any level to have a place on stage to showcase themselves. Although, in order to perform on bills on a typical night, the artists that request a bill or a spot within a bill must be somewhat established. More established artists, are placed within the weekend time slots as they can provide larger draws for the bill itself.

The Bitter End is a great example of what can be accomplished when there is room for accessibility for artists of any caliber. Paul the general booking manager as well as manager of the club, had mentioned this to me during an event I had attended in October 26th of this year. "It's important to make time for artists that dream to perform on stage. We have had great artists have their humble start right on that stage, and they made the night come alive. That magic is what is created night after night at the Bitter End, and that's why we are on the map!" Colby said confidently after the 9pm, headliner had finished up their set.

I asked about some obstacles that present some difficulties for the club itself. "It comes down to bands and artists helping to promote the events themselves online and in general along with the venue. When bands don't bother to promote the events themselves and don't reach out to fans it causes events to be poorly attended. The other issue on promotions is encouraging audience members that went to support one group, to stay. Too often, a group will immediately leave once a performer they went to see is finished and it hurts everyone really. Sure, they paid their tickets for the show, but the bar doesn't make money, and other bands are often dealing with the consequence of this playing a significantly less attended set."

This issue however is a difficult one to address as new live and local talent isn't incentive enough. The issue lies with the bands that bring members out to encourage members to listen to artists on their bill. Paul made an excellent analogy to tell band members when this occurs. "When you invite your friends to a multi-group bill, tell them to treat it like a movie. You wouldn't just step out of a film just because you caught your friend's cameo, right? No, you wouldn't! You would catch the whole flick! And I promise that they would have time to catch at the very least another full set on a bill with a little encouragement. We notice when bands have staying power with their audience and support the business, and they are the ones we always happy to continue making bills with."

Promotions and Marketing:

Promoting an event, as well as promotions in general are essential tools for any artist trying to showcase their work and create a larger fan base. Promotion online can at times be a challenge due to Facebook's current algorithm, making advertisements less visible on news feeds as well as in discover feeds. In order to make them more visible, the band themselves must have others interact with 'reactions' and comments to make the post increase its presence online. That means, making comments on event pages, liking and reacting to posts themselves. Word of mouth and directly contacting fans also are significant boosts towards turnout.

Promotions and marketing are major factors towards attendance of events, but accountability on the both ends are necessary. When a venue doesn't advertise on their event page, or provide a pre-sale ticket link online it discourages potential customers. And unfortunately, common tactics used by promoters and venue owners are to sponsor "Pay to Play"

events. These events require bands to make a certain amount of money in ticket sales or out of pocket in order to participate in an event, and it involves a band becoming contractually obligated to be held liable for the money they need to bring to management (for example: 20 tickets for \$15.00 each which comes out to \$300). This business model encourages bands to simply pay off the money themselves as ticket sales are difficult to come up with and are incentivized with: Extra tickets to sell for which they can keep the profit. Photographers may work the event to capture each artist and venues that are typically out of range of the performers, are now accessible.

Paul Colby then discussed his views on the practice and it is not something the Bitter End would consider. "Pay to Play, doesn't work out most of the time a band would partake in them. Sure, it could mean that there could be a full show, but rarely are there groups whom sell out!" When the Bitter End sponsored that model of band engagement, they found that typically, attendance for the event would 25% to 35% less attended than a typical event and would cause the bar sales to be dismal for the evening. On average, an event on a weekday would yield between 30 - 45 people that would attend a show, though they are most likely to stay for one or two acts. Pay to play would typically have between 20 – 30 people attend, though they are more incentivized to attend the entire evening as the ticket sale is double the amount they would cover at the door (\$20). Most venues, including the Bitter End have their weekend shows as their main draw events as the projected number of attendees is between 50 and 75. The weekend is reserved for groups with larger than average followings and whom are well established on social media. Three or more of these groups are placed on a weekend slot, along with an opener group that has a smaller following, in order to allow for a growth in their demographic. Paul selects these

openers based majorly on their sound as it would be best to keep similar sounding bands on these prime-time dates.

Essentially, The Bitter End focuses their establishment on communicating with groups in and outside of the venue. The venue isn't demanding and is open towards all performers from all walks of life. "You could be playing your very first show, or be on tour for the eighth night in a row. If you have something to share up on that stage, then you belong up there." Colby said with a smile. The Bitter End, much like The Stood focuses their attitude towards open communication, inclusivity and promotion. Artists that promote the event, support other groups on their bill, encourage audience engagement and approach management to make a connection with them are on the path to success. The responsibility falls on both the venue and performers to create an enriching atmosphere for live music.

The most efficient and profitable shows are created when venue's and artists both communicate with each other and promote their events together. A prime example for proper band etiquette and practices is the alternative rock band, Bonsai Trees. Formed in 2010, Bonsai Trees is a 3-piece group with members based in Connecticut, New York City and Philadelphia. The group has grown significantly over the last eight years, with over 2,600 likes on their band page on Facebook and over 1,100 followers on their recently created Instagram. The group is led by the guitarist, lead-singer and co-founder, James MacPherson (pronouns: they/them). Bonsai Trees, recently finished a summer tour around the United States, has released two albums, and is currently mixing and finalizing their third for 2019.

Local Musicians and DIY Strategies:

MacPherson is based in New York City, and is the general manager for the group. They described their process in management of the group. “When we all went to separate colleges, at first, we were worried the band wouldn’t last much longer past high school, but it actually was the greatest thing that happened for us! We each had a music scene around our areas grew our fanbases in each state over each year of college! We hit 1,000 likes our band page our collective freshman year in 2013!” The band had their primary following in their initial hometown in New Haven, Connecticut. They were playing numerous shows based on their relationships with others in the scene, based on three factors: their music, their support of other artists and their emphasis on audience captivity and engagement.

James shared their methods on improving the bands following and successfully booking events over the last eight years. “People recognize when you’re being genuine with them, and just want to be heard. Sharing other people’s music online, and promoting your community, encourages others to do the same and encourages connections! It’s important to know though that it takes a lot of effort and time, and it works faster when you have each member of your band do it too, but just keep consistent and I promise that people recognize and support you as well. Bands then ask you to play with them, and you network with the other groups on the bill and eventually, you’ll be playing a lot more with others! PLEASE INTERACT WITH AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE AT SHOWS! Personal connections are everything as an artist!” emphasized James. It is a strenuous task to grow a group from the ground up, and requires patience, and passion for your work.

Bonsai Trees, was recognized by their musical peers based on their continuous support of music they enjoyed from their friends and peers. The second factor was posting engaging content with various music videos and performances on YouTube and Facebook. Professional

photography during live events also was a significant help. The drummer of Bonsai Trees, Nick Sokol explained the benefits of posting consistent and engaging content. “When a band has more stuff to show for themselves, out there, people that enjoy one song they heard are gonna wanna check out more. It doesn’t even need to be music! Like a goofy photo every once in a while, will make people more likely to see you online and continue to see you. Venues and managers love to see bands that are frequently checked out and liked on social media. It’s a sign the band has a great following and can bring heads to a show.”

To further the findings made on Bonsai Trees, I had sat down with another local group that plays within the tri-state area of New York, Philadelphia and Connecticut. The artist known as Lillimure, based primarily in Peekskill, New York is led by front woman Lilli Oliviero. Lillimure is a Rhythm & Blues, Funk and Pop music group. The online following is also growing steadily with 1400 followers on Instagram, 400 likes on Facebook, and over 3.000 monthly listeners on Spotify. Oliviero initially began her college career at Berkeley College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, and transferred to purchase college this fall into the studio production program.

Lilli has recently released two singles at the beginning of the year, and is currently working on an album she hopes to have prepared before the end of the 2019 spring semester. As a front woman for her project, as well as being a woman of color, Lilli works harder within the live music scene. She practices daily for about 2 or 3 hours a day, then she acts as her own manager and promoter. Maintaining a professional musical career while balancing schoolwork also proves challenging. “I thankfully am not dealing with as much negative interactions, within playing live shows. The venue staff and other performers show me the same respect they give themselves, but, it doesn’t mean I don’t occasionally have a sound person talk down to me

because they (but usually he), believes I am clueless towards live sound.” Lilli addressed these common frustrations in the industry and performances. “I find that making a personal connection with people prior to your time on stage is essential. I mean the venue staff, the players and the audience all want to see what the person on stage is about.”

Furthering our discussion, Lilli described three central pillars which guided her growth and her approach as a professional artist. They are: practicing with consistency, being honest in your craft and with others, and having patience in your projects. Her first point, practicing with consistency, means two things: practice your material often, and make sure your group members do this as well both solos and at rehearsals. Bandmates in Lillimure, each are held accountable to practice the material on their own time and attend each rehearsal prior to an event. “The players I work with are people that I can trust are responsible to with the music at hand as well as communicate with me.” Lilli states. “Their consistency both in their playing and their means of keeping contact are essential for the group to play great shows and leave impactful moments with the audience. I can get that artists have to compromise on multiple rehearsals but in my personal experience, the most rehearsed group always is remembered on a bill.”

The next facet of Lillimure’s development in the local music scene, is her approach and attitude on and off stage. Honesty is a significant theme in Lilli’s music, as most of her songs are accumulations of her experiences in life. She facilitates an atmosphere of vulnerability and creates emotional bonds with her listeners. These bonds lead towards new and engaged fans whom listen to her work online after shows. “When you’re up on stage, that’s when you speak your truth so that it can be heard. People resonate towards vulnerability and they want to be able to be like “YES!!! I get that, I felt that!” during songs in your set. When I’m on stage I don’t put on a persona, or change myself from the way I act in person. In my experience, remaining down

to earth and approachable, is essential to connect with your audience.” Although stage personas are pivotal for certain artists, Lilli raises an excellent point. Remaining approachable and relatable significantly increases your chances in gaining a following.

The final point that is raised is the concept of patience in one’s work and projects. Maintaining professional work in the field of music requires a rigorous amount of labor. Consistently releasing music, playing shows, and creating new music takes a large amount of time in order to reach the apex of your creation. Most artists have other responsibilities which limit these and though it is essential to remain on task with your projects, you must take opportunities to take a step back from each. During a period of writer’s block for example, an artist can be discouraged from playing a new show because they may feel they haven’t made new material to play for an audience. This can be especially discouraging during a period of time where other artists may be releasing new music or when other artists are playing consistent shows.

Ironically, these times are actually necessary for an artist in the live music scene. These factors though discouragement, provide a means of a healthy challenge for artists to further their quality of past material, or to absorb new material from others to gain motivation. Lilli explains this process of patience: “A successful artist should NEVER be comfortable with where they are with their music. You have to push yourself to get your sound tighter at all times! You have to push yourself to reach out for opportunities! You have to realize that your best work comes from your discomfort and the best way to release yourself from that feeling is going through it! A really good thing I learned from my time in Berkeley is to re-arrange your work that you have made in the past. See yourself from an angle you didn’t anticipate had existed. It opens a door for your composition and can even change your feeling towards a song in your repertoire.”

“You should also not only reach out to just venues and other groups! Consider reaching out to a publicist and photographers to help you with your image online! These both help to strengthen your brand online and help maintain a “buzz” over your content!” Lilli currently works with a publicist that reviews her music as well as shares the music in order to be further reviewed by other music journalists. This opens doors for her music to reach larger demographics and also helps to establish her presence online. “Basically, never get comfortable with where you are. You can’t get caught up in praise and numbers, you must move forward with your music. Just never cease your momentum! It doesn’t mean playing constantly, or writing constantly, it means keeping up with your craft. As long as you know you are constantly conscious of your effort, you will eventually reach success”

Engagement of Audiences:

The research made so far, has discussed an overview of performers and organizers. Both sides of the business shared their thoughts on what merits success in live performances, and leaving a positive impact for each side. Considering these points made by Mr. Colby, Ms. Migdalia, Ms. Oliviero and MacPherson, a survey was constructed from the student body of SUNY Purchase. The survey was distributed among the student body, having their ages range from between 18 – 23. Questions on the survey focused on three factors: The spending patterns at live events, their ideal experiences for live events and their incentives that make them wish to attend an event.

The majority of those surveyed, preferred using their cards or payment apps on their phones when making purchases (30%), and typically don’t bring that much money with them to

live music events. This makes it easier for venues to make sales, but local bands should consider electronic means for sales at events to sell merch. Most people don't wish to spend much money when they visit live shows within this age demographic of 18 – 23. The preference of event spaces, are mainly house shows as all fifty people selected that option. House shows are shows sponsored by local bands that are accessible to most people as there isn't an age requirement or a spending requirement in a typical event. The age requirement for certain venues (I.E. Bar Venues) limits access to a potential market and demographic. Though most venues must go through a process to allow for patrons under 21 to attend or perform making it discouraging and at times expensive to make an exception for those underage.

The last focus of the survey was what incentivized someone to come to an event, and what factors made them wish to stay. About 30 of the 50 people preferred a social-able experience at live shows, outside of the performance itself and the venue they attend. When the time spent at a live show is a good time with friends, people are more likely to stay for a longer period of time and spend their money on the goods and services of both the space and performers. This means that engaging with the audience, brings together the best outcome for all three parties. Therefore, it's important when diversifying your demographic, to encourage and participate open dialogue and conversations between all attending the event. People remember interactions more than music and more than the space itself.

Conclusion:

As an arts management major, we focus on matters of our trade and methods used by professionals to ensure their success in their respective fields. I gravitate towards the path of

music management and marketing as I am myself also a musician. This thesis granted me an opportunity to gain insight into the music scene of New York, and understand the perspectives of venue owners, other emerging artists and the general public to better help each group gain their end goals. The key factor of all three groups is a matter of communication and interaction. When one party makes a conscious effort to be warm, welcoming, and concise in their communication, other parties respond positively towards the approachability. This extends online as well in regards towards emails, posts, event pages and general marketing. Communication truly is key.

Each artist should take an opportunity to attend shows that they aren't on, and sometimes, when their friends aren't playing on as well. This will help develop connects outside of their social circle, as well as strengthen their presence in a particular venue. Paul Colby of the Bitter End, encourages this practice, as most venue owners are equally as passionate about the music as the performers themselves. "I love to feel the energy someone brings to the bar. It makes me happy to let someone so passionate go on stage and play their hearts out. And when they receive as much as they give, I know to give them the call back on another gig. It's respectable..."

Supporting your local music scene is vital if you wish for its support as well. Artists, recognize this as well, and use this factor in booking future shows. Lilli Oliviero and James MacPherson both don't book shows with those with poor communication skills and are in general difficult to work with. Venues most hold themselves accountable with their means of organizing a live event, and eliminate inefficiency in their staff and direct communications with groups. This means addressing complaints of emails not being returned or not being specific in regards to backline for events. This also means addressing problematic sound engineers that may condescend artists and patronize performers. Ultimately, both parties need to address their methods and constantly seek a superior means as to how they accomplish a live event.

For those looking for the key to success in this area, I will leave you with this: Prioritize your project, and see it as a something that needs constant upkeep. Stagnation is remaining comfortable with the concept not being at its peak, and should be discouraged. SPEAK to others and make connections, both in and outside your demographic and understand what they respond to both positively and negatively. And finally, do what it is that you are passionate about for yourself, not for an audience, not for money, but because it makes you feel complete. With those factors, success is only steps away.

Appendix

Appendix A

Survey of 50 conducted at SUNY Purchase

How frequently do you attend music events within a month?

0 - 1,	35%	(18)
1 - 3,	40 %	(20)
4 - 6,	15%	(8)
7 - 8	5%	(3)
Other: _____	>5%	(1)

On average, what is the amount of money you bring with you to events?

None,	10%	(5)
\$1 - \$5,	25%	(12)
\$6 - \$10,	25%	(12)
\$20 - \$30,	10%	(5)
I use a card usually	30%	(16)

Do you typically go to local shows to bands you don't know well?

Not at all	10%	(5)
Not Frequently	10%	(5)
Sometimes	20%	(10)
I do, but only with someone I know on the bill	40%	(20)
Yes, I like hearing new groups I'm not familiar with	20%	(10)

What is your preferred place to watch shows? chose all locations which apply

House Shows	100%	(50)
Bar Shows	50%	(25)
General Venues	50%	(25)
Upscale Venues	80%	(40)
Festivals and Outdoor/Indoor Concerts	40%	(20)

When you spend money at a show, what exactly are your purchases? Choose your first priority

Band Merch	10%	(5)
Bar purchases	20%	(10)
Transportation	5%	(2)
Door tickets	50%	(25)
I don't make purchases at the shows I attend	15%	(8)

What makes the greatest experience for you at a live music show? Choose one

The friends I spend time with at the show	30%	(15)
The venue itself, and how the space is engaging	15%	(8)
Live music and the groups that play them	45%	(23)
The potential to meet new people	10%	(4)

What makes you engaged into a music group? Choose one

Their sound and music	50%	(25)
Their interactions I make outside of a show	20%	(10)
Their presence online	10%	(5)
Recommendations from a friend	20%	(10)

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