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## LIVEMi: REIMAGING MILAN

*Popular Music Policies and Urban Regeneration*



The paper will try to discuss the pilot study conducted at the beginning of my PhD research project about live music in Milan; the paper brings together some of the issues outlined in the research report commissioned by the consultant- organizer of the initiative under study, LiveMi.

LiveMi (which stands for live music in Milan) was a publicly funded initiative hosting live acts of emerging artists in the subway stations of the city centre.

The paper will examine how emerging music was used by the city council as a strategic tool to promote an attractive image of the city both externally and internally. This project has been launched with the idea of promoting Milan as the “Italian music city” – including emerging music. Besides, by organizing the initiative the city council tried to answer to the decline of the city centre as a site of cultural entertainment by making its subway stations more sociable and lively places.

The role of this initiative will be discussed and compared to similar initiatives taking place at the international level, aimed at promoting music production and consumption.

Using LiveMi as a case study, the research addressed to the following questions: what are the different perceptions and representations of “Milan as a music city” held by the various subjects involved – such as councilors, consultant and musicians? Which image of the city does LiveMi aim to promote and why? What role does LiveMi play in fostering emerging music in the city and in regenerating the metro stations? In order to address these questions, the paper will start by reviewing the literature about music-related policy-making strategies, pointing out emphasizing the relevance of the local context generating them and at the same time including policies and regulations not directly formulated for the music sector but still having an impact on it. It will follow an analysis of music situation in Milan to understand how Milan can be differently regarded as a music city. And finally, the relevance of LiveMi, as a policy mechanism aimed to rebrand the city, and to foster emerging music will be discussed.

## Methodology

The case study LiveMi was analyzed through a qualitative methodology. Ten events of LiveMi were held on Saturdays from 13 March to 8 May 2010: during this period, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted to musicians involved.

These interviews were intended to (a) identify musicians experiences and constraints in playing live music in Milan and (b) assess their participation in and evaluation of both the project and the notion of “Milan as a music city”. Moreover, three of the organizers, two councilors and one consultant supporting the initiative were interviewed in order to understand the synergies between LiveMi and this Municipal Administration and also to collect some assessments and proposals regarding the status of emerging music and the notion of “Milan as a music city”.

Furthermore, participant observation was conducted to understand the role of music performances in transforming subway stations into lively and sociable places for music consumption and performance.

## Popular music policies as urban regeneration and rebranding strategies

The debate over the contribution of the arts, including music, in promoting renewals of urban environments has been pivotal in the policy agenda of many cities, especially those experiencing deindustrialization crisis<sup>1</sup>. These policies have been led by the principle of “culture-led regeneration”, with culture being both high and popular and related to creative and cultural industries as sources of urban regeneration. These strategies were linked to the optimistic narratives of the “creative city”<sup>2</sup> which have been criticized because they advocate culture as an agent of the physical regeneration and marketing of cities<sup>3</sup>. Later analysis has therefore outlined the negative effects that these policies can entail and have stressed the need to take into account the peculiarities of each context.

As a analysis of the different music policies adopted in several British music cities<sup>4</sup> has pointed out, policies produced significant results, although different in different contexts. Implementation of these strategies appears dependent on the characteristics of the local urban context, and influenced by economic and cultural issues as well as competing political agendas.

Some cities have given priority to the promotion of musical tourism and heritage making music part of the travel experience by exploiting music sites or music events<sup>5</sup>, while others focused on developing services

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first examples is Bianchini, F. & Parkinson, M., 1994. *Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration: the Western European Experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of “creative city” was for the first time developed in Landry, C. & Bianchini, F., 1995. *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*. London: Demos.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “creative city” has been criticized in Peck, J., 2005. Struggling with the creative class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29 (4), pp. 740-770; Pratt, A. C., 2008. Creative cities: the cultural industries and the creative class. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B – Human geography*, 90 (2), pp. 107-117.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to this research: Brown, A. Cohen, S. & O'Connor, J., 1998. *Music Policy in Sheffield, Manchester And Liverpool: A Report For Comedia*. Manchester: MIPC.

<sup>5</sup> This importance of music event and music tourism has been analyzed in: Atkinson, C., 1997. Music's Place in the Packaging of New Orleans for Tourism. In: S. Abram, J. D. Waldren & D. Macleod, eds. 1997. *Tourism and Tourism: Identifying with People and*

to support small businesses, adopting dedicated policies to boost local scenes or to create cultural quarters or to provide infrastructures. Some were funding events as re-imaging strategy. Some policies concentrated upon the high music, and others upon popular music. Some Councils have been actively involved in defining cultural policies, sometimes leading to tensions and resistance by existing organizations, while in other cases the approach has been more laissez-affair<sup>6</sup>.

In this context, initiatives coming from below were found to communicate with the logic and policies from above, through a partnership between public and private investments, as «the discursive opposition of top-down to bottom-up/laissez-faire is increasingly failing to articulate the complex needs of the music industry at local levels»<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, a coordinated approach to the music industry is required with the inclusion of other policies that may not have been made with the intention of affecting the music sector (e.g. relative to training/education, social welfare, tourism and licensing) yet impacting on music production and consumption<sup>8</sup>.

The analysis of popular music policy needs a broader approach, not confined to cultural policy, because «each branch of popular music policy is based on a specific conception and is thus articulated to the varied and often contradictory discursive domains (such as considering music as being a problem or a solution to social issues) in which popular music is situated»<sup>9</sup>.

For instance Brown, Cohen & O'Connor<sup>10</sup> cite the role of late-opening licenses in promoting the “night-life economy” of Manchester and its reputation as “24 hours’ city”. The promotion of the nightlife economy and of the urban cultural vibrancy has in many cases not been legitimated as an object of cultural policy, but instead has been regulated and contained<sup>11</sup>. These issues are connected to broader processes of inner-city gentrification, which in turn can be linked to real estate investments in the areas where music is hosted<sup>12</sup>. These problems were analyzed in several cities, demonstrating the difficulties municipalities face in mediating the impacts of gentrification and of urban development and in balancing competing interests and needs, together with the desire to promote the music entertainment and the development of the night-life economy<sup>13</sup>.

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*Places*. Oxford: Berg; Gibson, C. & Homan, S., 2004. Urban Redevelopment, Live Music, and Public Space: Cultural Performance and The Re-Making of Marrickville. *International Journal Of Cultural Policy*, 10 (1), pp. 241-259.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, A., O'Connor, J. & Cohen, S., 2000. Local Music Policies Within a Global Music Industry: Cultural Quarters in Manchester and Sheffield. *Geoforum*, 31, pp. 437-451; Cohen, S., 2007. *Decline, Renewal And The City In Popular Music Culture: Beyond The Beatles*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Cohen, & O'Connor, 1998, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Cohen, & O'Connor, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Rutten, P., 1993. Popular Music Policies. A Contested Area. The Dutch Experience. In: T. Bennet et al., *Rock And Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*. New York: Routledge, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Cohen & O'Connor, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Lovatt, A. & O'Connor, J., 1995. Cities and the night-time economy. *Planning Practice and Research*, 10 (2), pp. 127-134.

<sup>12</sup> Zukin, S., 1991. *Landscapes of Power. From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkley: California University Press; Zukin, S., 1995. *The Cultures of the Cities*, Cambridge. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson & Homan, 2004.

Besides, the main «factor contributing to the demise of music venues has been that of changes to noise laws and community attitudes to the “noisy” rock/ blues/jazz venue», especially those of the newer gentrifies residents of the area<sup>14</sup>. The authors analyzed a policy initiative intervention aimed at responding to the demise of music venues by funding free outdoor live music performances. The authors deem this initiative as only effective in the short term; moreover, its attempt to re-brand and keep the quarter vibrant and attractive to private investments, ended up contributing to gentrification processes. Rebranding strategies employing music events as an instrument to promote the city as a vibrant realm has been used as a way “to put the city on the map”, and to give cities a competitive advantage.

As many authors have pointed out<sup>15</sup> cities invest in special events as branding strategies in order to re-imagine themselves as “creative”<sup>16</sup> and ‘music cities’. The efficacy of event-based rebranding strategies still needs to be properly assessed as «investing in events can lead to sustainable practices if the process is embedded within a consistent approach to cultural policy»<sup>17</sup> and in the specificity of each context.

Therefore, before looking at the policy mechanism under object, the following analysis will try to outline the local peculiarity of Milan in its relation to the music sector.

### **Representing Milan as a “music city”<sup>18</sup>**

Before discussing about LiveMi, it may be worthwhile to say something about “milan as a music city”, in order to understand which issues this policy mechanism was trying to address.

My interviews with musicians and councilors allowed some degree of insight into the different needs and problems they were considering when looking at Milan as a music city.

Milan appears to present a contradictory situation. Councilors emphasized how Milan can rightfully be considered the Italian music capital, due to the presence of major and independent record labels, radio stations and international-level concert halls and arenas, and especially with respect to classical music, hosting the famous La Scala theatre and a prestigious Conservatoire.

It was interesting to see the ways councilors prioritized music. One of them emphasized his efforts in bringing big names and in organizing big events as a way to attract tourism.

<sup>14</sup> Gibson & Homan, 2004, p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, G., 2003. Hard-branding the Cultural City. From Prado to Prada. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 (2), pp. 417-440; Scott, A. J., 2000. *The Cultural Economy of Cities. Essays on the Geography of Image-Producing Industries*. London: Sage.

<sup>16</sup> As in the already mention Landry & Biachini, 1995, or in Florida’s idea of the “creative class”: Florida, R., 2002. *The Rise Of The Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>17</sup> García, B., 2004. Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration in Western European Cities: Lessons from Experience, Prospects for the Future. *Local Economy*, 19 (4), p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> The term “music city” has been used to describe cities renowned internationally because of their music heritage and tradition, traceable to a particular music style (e.g. Grunge as the “Seattle sound”) or to a famous band (e.g. Liverpool for the Beatles), so as to underline the association between specific localities and specific music styles, to a special “Sound City” (Cohen, 2007), and to emphasize the presence of very active music scenes. The term ‘music city’ has been adopted by UNESCO to identify those cities that meet certain requirements: being recognized as centers of music production and creativity, hosting festivals, promoting local music industries, having music schools and conservatories, being equipped with infrastructure aiming at promoting local music abroad, and finally having indoor and outdoor venues dedicated to music production and consumption. These are the criteria needed for a city to enter within the “music city” network, joined by Bologna, Ghent, Glasgow and Seville.

As remarked by the event main organizer-(who also acted, as we will see, as a mayor's consultant), the city council music policy is mostly focused on big events and big names as means to re-imagine the city and increase tourism:

*The concert in San Siro is a white elephant, you turn on the lights for an amazing night and then... the drama is this.*

*The council seeks events, but doesn't go beyond that or try to seek everyday art. (organizer-mayor consultant)*

The "superstar effect"<sup>19</sup> of attracting big names is not facilitating new talents and generates in the audience a lack of curiosity towards new music, which is regarded as another cause of the decline of small venues for emerging artists playing unreleased songs<sup>20</sup>.

Indeed, interviewed musicians complained about the possibilities for playing their own music being mostly limited to musical contests. The artists didn't feel Milan as the capital of Italian music and they instead complained about a lack of space and a significant reduction and initiatives to play live:

*Milan was the capital of music. In Italy everyone will say that Milan is the best to play. But Milan is actually the worst.*

*We count on one hand the ones that make you playing... (musician, 7)*

*No, we do not feel absolutely Milan as a city of music. Ok there is La Scala theatre but then there's nothing there... There would be many more local live music venues to give a chance to those who want to play in a small venue...*

*(musician, 9)*

While Milan features a rich fabric of bars, cafes and clubs, it lacks a "pub rock scene"<sup>21</sup> and a circuit of small venues (with the exception of a few social clubs of nonprofit cultural organizations called ARCI) providing local artists the chance to perform live, in a casual and sociable atmosphere.

Many interviewed artists connected the reduction of live music venues and initiatives to severe controls which have been affecting live music and causing venues to either close down or (more often) to disuse music licenses. The law<sup>22</sup>, which imposes a 80db to noise emission, along with the economical infeasibility of proper noise isolation, forced many previously-active venues live music entertainment they used to have.

Noise regulations have forced many live acts to transform into acoustics sets; security reasons have restricted admission and/or dancing permit in many small venues and clubs, decreasing not only live acts but even dj-sets.

The establishment of this new regime of controls and regulations came following residents' complaints about noise disturbance and was affected by the pressures coming from the powerful residents commit-

<sup>19</sup> Rosen, S., 1981. The superstar effect – "The Economics of Superstars". *American Economic Review*, 71 (1) pp. 37-49.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson & Homan, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, A., 1997. Going down the pub: The pub rock scene as a resource for the consumption of popular music? *Popular Music*, 16 (1), pp. 97-108.

<sup>22</sup> The law about noise pollution which fixed the decibel limitation to 80 is the n. 447, 26 October 1995.

tees lobbying against night entertainment. These problems are particularly affecting those residential areas nearby the Arena and the Stadium, both traditionally used as summer outdoor venues, and in the Navigli district, a night entertainment district with an high concentration of residential buildings.

*The issue of decibel is a cultural problem ... the issue is that of tolerance, even by citizens. Those who live close to San Siro stadium know that the concerts serve the whole community... We have tried to offer them free tickets for the concerts, but the next day they were complaining again ... I have been summoned by this committee because of decibels. If I am condemned because of decibels to "abuse of power", I lose my job. (councilor)*

Councilors and policy-makers interested in fostering music entertainment seem to be powerless against those regulations and are finding many difficulties in being able to mediate the competing interests and needs of different groups – namely of those complaining for night disturbance and of those promoting music entertainment. Besides, as one of the organizers confirmed, Milan has many bureaucratic constraints (such as the needs for multiple permissions and licenses issued by different departments) which don't facilitate the organization of music events.

*Milan is a hard city: here you need a license for the occupation of public space, and license of public entertainment. Even for stupid things they want to issue permissions. In Bologna you don't have to ask for licenses, you just present the project and in the morning of the event, they come for inspection, they check and they give you the green light. That's it. Here there's too much bureaucracy. (organizer)*

Interestingly, many of the interviewed artists stressed the need to move outside the city centre in order to play. The local artists rarely mentioned music venues in Milan, but rather placed outside the city boundaries

*One thing I noticed is that in Milan there are just only big music venues where we'll never manage to play while in the province there are some nice clubs, but smaller, but more available. (musician)*

The outcome is that the center of Milan is becoming a "dead zone" especially in the night hours. This is probably due to the presence of a Business district and a Shopping district (known as Fashion Quadrilateral) and of luxury residential buildings inhabited by powerful residents who are opposed to the night life entertainment. Besides, even though Milan hasn't experienced early waves of gentrification in the inner city<sup>23</sup> as the city centre has always been inhabited by the upper-middle class<sup>24</sup> new waves of gentrification are now taking place as especially fashion firms and boutiques are boosting real estate values – pushing

<sup>23</sup> Sharon, 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Bovone, L. ed., 1999. *Un quartiere alla moda. Immagini e racconti del ticinese a Milano*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

many cultural activities outside the city centre and replacing them with boutiques, which are making the city centre not lively and vibrant in the late hours, as this councilor nostalgically assesses:

*When I was a kid I went to the cinema in the centre, then there were the open pizzerias, clubs. The centre was lively, now no more ... maybe it's to try to avoid various problems have always tried to bring out of town all the cultural activities. Yes, the center is dead for a certain time on, no point in having a center so dead. (councilor)*

All those issues are contributing to the loss of cultural vitality of the city centre, to which LiveMi tries to respond by funding free live music performances.

### **The case study of LiveMi**

The paper will now examine the ways LiveMi tried to address some of the problems and difficulties Milan faces in relation to live music. From the overview just outlined, LiveMi represents a departure from the initiatives traditionally funded by the city council, which is, as I already mentioned, usually supporting big events with big stars as marketing strategy to attract tourism and money.

LiveMi became a big showcase for emerging Italian talents: it hosted around one hundred live acts of different music genres (with 8 performances of emerging musicians and band plus a final performance of a famous musician each Saturday).

The city council attempted (a) to address the problems faced by emerging artists, (b) to change their perception of Milan as hostile and unfriendly towards their music, and (c) to re-brand and market the city as friendly to emerging music.

It was therefore interesting to find the reasons why the City Council was interested in re-branding and marketing the city as friendly to emerging music. The interviews with councilors and organizers enabled to understand the synergies existing between LiveMi and the municipal administration.

*LiveMi comes from the chats I had with the Mayor. I know her from a long time... so she opens her mind to the rock culture, a culture that does not belong to her, because without me the rock culture wouldn't belong to the Mayor. I'm talking about the Mayor, it is important to understand that there must be these synergies, not just me, the emerging artists... so we also spoke about measures that the Mayor would take... to revitalize the metro and the city centre of Milan... What I was pushing was to create a showcase for emerging groups... So the idea is a combination between me and the Mayor. (organizer-consultant)*

The event was organized by the new mayor web-marketing consultant, a famous music journalist of various television programs and, who had been in the past well known to be the “godfather of Italian emerging music talents”. He was handpicked by the mayor in order to answer to the discontent regarding mayor’s actions and image as being old and detached. This was a rebranding strategy the mayor needed in

view of the 2011 elections and of the 2015 Expo. By using grassroots marketing activities (such as creating a mayor YouTube channel) and by organizing initiatives such as LiveMi, the consultant was trying to re-imagine the city and the mayor as younger and friendly towards live acts. The mayor attended several performances to show her support to the initiative.



**Figure 1.** The mayor and a councilor interviewed by the organizer at LiveMi

This consultant was actually trying to put emerging music into the policy agenda as a strategic tool to rebrand Milan and the mayor as more attractive and “young”. Moreover, he managed to mediate between two clashing worlds: on the one side the mayor was interested in enacting a re-branding exercise, while emerging artists perceived positively the initiative as organized by someone who had been always involved in supporting new talents. The presence of this figure helped the initiative being legitimized by the musicians:

*The difference here is in the organizer. He is a “manna from heaven” for emerging artists. He is the godfather of emerging music.* (musician, 19)

Subway stations were recognized by interviewed musicians as privileged sites to host emerging artists, as they offered the chance of intercepting new audiences of passers-by not normally used to listen to emerging music, and therefore LiveMi tried to address the issue of the lack of curiosity which was regarded as one of the causes of the decline of live music venues in the city:

*Here it's better than playing in a square; people passing are forced to listen to you if they want to reach the platform.* (musician, 11)

By using participant observation, it was possible to see how the area surrounding the stage became a gathering place for many people who stopped attracted by the music performed. It was interesting to notice

that, at the end of the live acts, the area surrounding the stage returned to be an interstitial crossing point, confirming the role music played in transforming the subway station in a more sociable place. This was also one of the goals LiveMi aimed to achieve, namely the regeneration of the subway into a place for cultural and musical entertainment.



**Figure 2.** A LiveMi performance

It has to be noticed that the subway setting represented also a way of managing the “noise issue”. While avoiding to tackle the strict noise regulations themselves, the initiative managed to sidestep them by finding a venue not surrounded by residential buildings and therefore without residents.

However, LiveMi didn’t succeed in becoming, as in the initial idea of the organizer, a start-up for a new regulation about music performances in subway stations. The positive effects on music entertainment lasted only for the duration of the event. Despite its relative length, LiveMi can be regarded as a short-term policy mechanism. Moreover, the project lasted only for one edition because its organization depended on the personal friendship existing between the mayor and the organizer-advisor, and therefore funding for the advisor contract and the initiative itself were not renewed by the next city council.

In the final analysis, LiveMi ended up being only a small part of a broader marketing strategy by the advisor-organizer aimed at re-imagining the city and the mayor in view of the 2011 electoral campaign.

## **Conclusion**

LiveMi can be considered an interesting case study insofar as it demonstrates the need «to look at the intersections existing between political, economic and cultural issues in a local context»<sup>25</sup> when dealing with music policy strategies.

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<sup>25</sup> Gibson & Homan, 2004.

Firstly the case study highlights the difficulties faced by local authorities in dealing with the live music sector. The creation of a live music scene depends upon policymakers' awareness of its cultural and economic relevance, as they can influence it through regulations and financial support. However, this support can often conflict with other interests and needs, which policymakers have to balance between. The city council was addressing the problem of live music in an ambiguous way: on the one hand, enacting strict regulations (especially the severe decibel limitations) which restricted live music events and venues; on the other hand, funding initiatives such as LiveMi to promote music consumption and production.

In LiveMi the only way the council found to address the noise issue was to relocate performances in a public space (the subway station) far from residential buildings. This mechanism merely made politically easier for the council to patronize music events, instead of helping to create an infrastructure or facilitating the already existing grass-roots music initiatives.

Secondly, this case study enabled the identification of key issues to be considered in future research about the dynamics of the live music sector in Milan and its relations to the city council.

In this respect it's important to remark that musicians are not the only subjects to be considered when dealing with music policy strategies. It is necessary to look beyond the mere provision of facilities for musicians, and to factor in the "soft infrastructures" constituted by the networks of people involved in the music sector<sup>26</sup>. These "soft infrastructures" are constituted by social networks, connections and human ties encouraging the exchange of ideas between people and institutions. The analysis of the actual interactions and activities existing within this creative subsector is acutely needed before any policy strategy can be applied<sup>27</sup>.

Besides, there is a need to look at the creative industries sector in a broader sense in order to understand the possible cooperation or competition existing between multiple subsectors (such as the fashion industry in the case of Milan), and even to consider all those people which might have different needs or interests needs (such in the case of Milan, the powerful resident committees).

Moreover, those informal ties can impact on the adoption of policies themselves. Interactions among music makers, cultural intermediaries, advisors and councilors need to be taken into account in order to understand the music policies applied.

As this case study has demonstrated, «the policy has on occasion been the product of close, informal networks»<sup>28</sup>. LiveMi has been mainly the product of a personal friendship between the mayor and the advisor and by a personal interest of the advisor in pushing the mayor to fund an initiative aimed at fostering emerging music. The practice of choosing personal friends from the music industry as "informal advisors" to overcome a policymaker's musical has to be taken into account in analyzing policy strategies.

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, Cohen & O'Connor, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Fleming, T., 2004. Supporting the Cultural Quarter? The Role of the Creative Intermediary. In: D. Bell & M. Jayne, eds. 2004. *City of Quarters. Urban Villages in the Contemporary City*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, Cohen & O'Connor, 2000, p. 10.

This tendency hinders any long-term approach, since each policy mechanism is limited to the span of a single electoral term and a single city council. This brings to the forefront the need to examine the historical contingency of each initiative, especially in cases where policy strategies are aimed at reimaging the city in view of future elections. During the last political campaign taking place from March to May 2011, live music became one of the key issues in the political agenda of the candidates. This led to the opening of a communication channel between the candidates and several operators in the live music sector of Milan (such as venue managers, promoters, musicians).

Through this channel emerged the clear need of a shift in the city council role: from being a direct organizer of music events (while hindering existing live music events and venues) to being a facilitator to the operations of the live music sector by simplifying bureaucratic constraints. Also horizontal coordination among different departments appears necessary, integrating policies, regulations and licenses directly or indirectly affecting music production and consumption. Until now security measures, public transport management, licensing and regulations about alcohol and smoking, and real estate businesses have influenced live music in Milan much more than any music-supporting policy mechanism.

In this sense, a representative body in support of live music, capable to navigate the sector's complexities and to enact negotiation and lobbying with the city council could play an important role in the future.