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Middle Eight

Live Music Exchange

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In 2008 Martin Cloonan and I were awarded a grant by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to run a research project on the history of live music in Britain. This was before 'knowledge exchange' and 'impact' had become research funding imperatives (I don't remember that we even had to include an impact statement in our original research application). The project was therefore straightforwardly academic, with a post-doc research officer (Matt Brennan), an attached PhD student (Emma Webster) and a monograph planned as the output.[1] By the time the project was completed in 2011, however, the AHRC had started a follow-on funding scheme, designed 'to support innovative and creative engagements with new audiences which stimulate pathways to impact'. This gave us an opportunity to continue the project, so we duly applied for and received a grant for a year's impact activity (from February 2012).[2]

In bidding for funds for this follow-on project we argued that our discussions with promoters had suggested the following needs:

- for an accessible archive of reliable research data so that each new policy initiative, whether at local or national level, didn't have to begin with a 'mapping' of the field, the re-gathering of data that has been gathered many times before;
- for a consensual understanding of best research practice, drawing on comprehensive critical knowledge of the various academic and other research studies of the UK's music sector;
- for music business training programmes providing properly informed teaching of the skills required in the promotional business;
- for better public understanding of the live music business.

The starting point of our original project had been the 'economic dilemma' facing the performing arts, as identified by Baumol and Bowman (1966). They argued convincingly that live music could achieve neither the economies of scale nor the reduction of labour costs to compete in price terms with mass entertainment media. How, then, could the business of promotion be sustained? Our research confirmed Baumol and Bowman's original economic argument, but in addressing the issues historically we could also document promoters' adaptability to changing circumstances and ingenuity in finding economies of scale and increasing productivity (through festivals, venue chains and the application of digital technology to ticketing, for example) and in attracting subsidy and additional funding (from the state, record

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companies, broadcast media, commercial sponsorship, etc.) What became clear from our promoter interviews was that what might seem a simple economic activity –putting on a concert, paying costs out of ticket sales – actually involved a complex set of social and economic relations.[3] Two aspects of this were particularly interesting.

First, live music promotion significantly involves the state and thus political decisions. This is partly a matter of regulation – promoters have to take account of drink and entertainment licensing laws and health and safety requirements (regarding noise levels and crowding, for example) – but also because there are a range of government policies that do not concern music but nevertheless have consequences for its performance, for example, planning and transport policy, immigration acts, and the various measures concerning the sale and consumption of alcohol. At the same time the public sector invests heavily in live music both nationally and locally, whether through such cultural bodies as the BBC and arts councils, as an aspect of education, tourism and leisure policies, or in its financing and continual support of exhibition and arts centres. The importance of state policy for live music in Britain was one reason why public understanding of the promotion business, as informed by credible academic research, was a concern for the people we interviewed.

Second, the live music industry is necessarily both local and non-local. It has to happen in a particular place at a particular time and promoters therefore have to understand local market conditions, but they are also bringing performers into different localities, dealing with non-local agents, with the national and international music business. Live music is, after all, mostly organised around tours (even if just round the local pub circuit). And promoters deal with musicians (and audiences) over time. A promoter supporting a band starting out can benefit from the band's subsequent success, as it moves from small to large venues; club owners' profits come as much from the audiences' loyalty to the venue as to the appeal of particular acts. A promoter, in short, is involved in a complex set of trust-based economic relations across time and place. From a long-term perspective the most successful gigs are not necessarily the most immediately profitable. Academic analysis of the subtlety of the decisions involved here is instructive for both promoters (not least new entrants) and policy makers.

After thinking about how to 'enhance' the impact of our research, we suggested we would do the following:

- develop an online newsletter with a reach across all sectors of the live music industry to provide expert but also engaging and sometimes polemical analyses of political, economic and business news relevant to the live music sector, thus showing how our research findings could be applied to the industry's ongoing concerns;
- provide summaries/analyses of our and other research findings as the basis of an accessible longitudinal database of research findings in the field;
- organise workshops/seminars at both local and national level to bring together different interests (for example large- and small-scale promoters) to explore each other's concerns;
- provide material for training courses at various educational levels for all participants or would-be participants in live music business and policy;
- act as a broker between academic research and live music policy makers in the public and commercial sectors.

In conceiving this programme we were, in part, following non-academic models of knowledge exchange. The industry appeal and public impact of free authoritative online commentary was indicated by the US-based *Lefsetz Letter* (which covers all

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aspects of the music business and had become essential reading for executives) and the UK-based bulletins posted by Hamish Birchall on the Live Music Forum site (which focused on the problems of the Public Entertainments Licensing system and were crucial to the political campaign that led to its eventual revision).[4] Our aim was to use similar methods to establish the value – and impact – of our own research, while also employing established knowledge exchange methods such as seminars and workshops.

Hence Live Music Exchange was established (http://livemusicexchange.org/), a web resource that we set up to offer the following services:

- a weekly digest providing links to live music news, features and events;
- a weekly blog post from variety of contributors – academics and non-academics;
- An archive of live music research publications from academic, government and media sources.

We have also so far organised two LMX events (in Leeds and Cardiff) with two more to follow (in Glasgow and London), working with local activists to bring together promoters, policy makers, academic researchers, educators and fans.

These events, like the website, have met their declared aims but also raised questions about the effectiveness and limitations of 'creative' engagements with 'new' audiences. What I want to reflect on here, then, as this project comes to an end and we begin to explore how LMX can be sustained, is what is meant by 'impact' in popular music studies. John Williamson, Martin Cloonan and I have written elsewhere (Williamson *et al.* 2011) about the problems of knowledge exchange between popular music academics and music industry bodies (which often seem intuitively committed to knowledge resistance), and I won't repeat those arguments here (though I could certainly add examples of irritated industry responses to LMX blogs as 'unhelpful'). Rather, I want to describe the ways in which LMX has so far been successful and unsuccessful in order to consider: (a) the effects of digital media and social networking on research dissemination; (b) popular music researchers' and teachers' sources of knowledge; and (c) the status of academic work in everyday music practice. The question here is not whether research should be 'useful' (obviously, yes) but whom it should be useful for.

First, then, how would we assess the impact of LMX so far? We planned the website to have two functions: as a resource, giving people access to accumulated knowledge and informed opinion, but also as the site for a kind of community, a place where people with all sorts of interest in live music could argue, tell each other stories, get a sense of common purpose. On the evidence so far, we have been successful in achieving our first goal but were perhaps utopian in expecting to achieve the second. We are steadily accumulating site subscribers, visitors and viewers, and a good range of people have contributed blog posts; however, we haven't generated ongoing discussion – blog posts elicit few comments. There are exceptions to this. LMX played a significant networking and informing role, for example, in the Campaign against Leafleting Ban.[5] When an issue is a concern across the live music sector, LMX can be useful in articulating that shared interest but, in itself, the site is unlikely to build such a community.

There are two further points to make about this. First, a research website has to offer continuous information. The most valuable and valued part of our site is the weekly live music digest and accompanying blog. The conventional model of

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research dissemination (a model still assumed in some ways even by the AHRC's follow-on funding programme) has a clear beginning/middle/end. The research is carried out; findings are written up; results are disseminated; a lump of knowledge is transferred. On the LMX site, by contrast, research is presented as an ongoing process of data gathering and interpretation, interpretation that is continuously revised. This has interesting implications for our academic authority. The blogs we publish, for example, are not peer reviewed (though we obviously exercise our own editorial quality control); they are presented as work in progress or opinion offered to generate debate. Public engagement here doesn't mean disseminating fixed findings or conclusions, but providing people with information and ways of thinking about information that they will then develop for themselves.

The second point is that such usage is essentially individual. As already noted, the LMX site hasn't involved much in the way of social networking, community building or interactive debate. We can map who is using the site (and show that it does indeed attract academics, live music practitioners and the general public in a rough ratio of 3:2:1), but not what they do with the information or opinion they find there (although we do assume that university subscriptions are taken out so that the site can be included on student resource lists). The interesting contrast here is with the seminars we've organised, which have been far more obviously successful in terms of networking – getting people with different interests to talk to each other and reflect publicly on their own practices. If the website is like a busy library – well used by a variety of borrowers who neither know nor seem much interested in each other – the seminars work better to make knowledge exchange a communal process and more effective, as a way of doing research, gathering knowledge through a process of public interrogation. From this perspective the aim isn't how to make sure our research has an impact, but how trying to have an impact is a way of doing research.

One of the more interesting questions that can be asked about popular music studies is where its knowledge comes from. Popular music academics don't usually derive their authority simply from being well read; they also more or less explicitly draw on their status as fans. But this doesn't solve (and may exacerbate) the problem that faces all research into contemporary culture, that what one 'knows' is actually always out of date. The time gap between doing research and having the findings published means that popular music research is always describing a situation as it was rather than as it is (my first popular music research publication, *The Sociology of Rock*, based its argument on the commercial success of EMI, a company which, by the time the book was published, was synonymous with commercial failure). And academics whose authority is based on their direct industry experience are likely to be even more dependent on dated understandings. 'Insider' knowledge, as cited by journalists, for example, depends on anonymous sources that are not necessarily reliable. One of our research findings was that even highly successful promoters could have a skewed understanding of the contemporary live music business, tending to assume that it still works in the way it worked in their formative years. This is the context in which a research website like LMX is particularly valuable in providing an account of knowledge in progress. In an unexpected way, research funders' concern that we have an impact outside the academy means that we have to think just as creatively about how to have an academic impact too.

This leads to my final question: who is knowledge for? Who are the 'new' audiences on which the AHRC would like us to have an impact? In our original proposal

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we went along with the assumption that our crucial research 'users' should be people engaged in one way or another with the business of live music promotion – promoters themselves, but also agents, managers and musicians as well as politicians, policy makers and regulatory authorities. We had a commitment to increasing 'public understanding', but hadn't thought through who that public was and what possible use they might make of our research. One of our starting aims was to make LMX financially self-sufficient as a consultancy. We were thinking in terms of cross-subsidy – activities for which a fee would be paid, covering the costs of those services that would be freely available, the latter having an economic function in establishing the consultancy's brand value. In as far as we thought about citizens/consumers it was by ensuring that our activities, methods and information would be transparent and open to public scrutiny.

We duly carried out some audience research for a live industry client (Guilfest) which was well enough received and could have been used as a calling card for other such work, but the experience also acted as a reminder that market research is not academic research – it is too functional in concept and design and an uneasy reminder of how unbothered the industry is to mine personal data for its own ends[6] – even if it is the only sort of research for which the industry is willing to pay. People in the live music business certainly value academic research, but don't see it as something in which they should invest. It seems to be thought of, rather, as a public service, something that should be done by universities or funded by research councils as part of their obligations to the taxpayers who pay for them. This may well be a logical conclusion to draw from impact rhetoric (it ties in with current government thinking about open access research publishing), but it raises a dilemma for academic researchers themselves. We are very happy to go on developing LMX as an effective public service. We are presently unclear, though, as to how it will be resourced (the digest takes one day a week to put together), and this is a dilemma that is likely to face any popular music researcher seeking to reconcile the demand to develop ties with industry as a possible source of research support with a commitment to research as a public good, the value of which (even to the industry) is that it is not driven by the industry's understanding of its 'needs'.

Endnotes

1. The research findings are, in fact, being published by Ashgate as a three-volume *History of Live Music in Britain*. The first volume, covering 1950–1967, was published in March 2013.
2. The team was joined by Adam Behr.
3. We interviewed more than 100 promoters from different generations, places, genres and types (and sizes) of business.
4. See http://lefsetz.com and http://www.livemusicforum.co.uk.
5. See https://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/uk-government-remove-leafleting-restrictions-for-small-scale-local-events-7.
6. The difference between academic and industry attitudes to the use of consumer information (via FaceBook, for example) was the most obvious source of tension at our Leeds seminar.

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