

Audiences
What Keeps Them Away

META AUDIENCE RESEARCH

by Dave Cross

Generator commissioned an extensive research programme to find out what prevented people from attending gigs.

REPORT TO GENERATOR NORTH EAST LIMITED
AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

VENUE AND PROMOTERS
PERCEPTIONS OF LIVE MUSIC EVENTS IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND
PREPARED BY: SCOTINFORM LTD
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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study conducted amongst promoters of live popular music and venue owners/managers. The aim of the research study was to look at attitudes to and perceptions of the live popular music industry in the North of England amongst large and mid-scale venues as well as pubs, clubs and art centres. In particular the research study aimed to look at the following aspects:-

- the impact of live popular music on venues
- marketing of live popular music events
- barriers to attendance at venues

- levels of support provided by local authorities, breweries etc

RESEARCH APPROACH

A total of 12 personal interviews were conducted with a random sample of promoters and venue owners/managers based in the North of England during March/April 2000. The sample was broken down into the following areas:

- Newcastle upon Tyne
- Sunderland
- Middlesborough
- Durham
- Cumbria

The aim of the survey was to interview a good cross section of venues and music promoters. The three largest venues interviewed were the *University of Newcastle*, which has two venues one of 1200; and the other holding 300 people; and the *University of Northumbria*, which has a venue capacity of 1200; and *Sunderland University* which holds 1000 people. All of these venues are easily accessible and situated near to public transport links. Other smaller venues interviewed consisted of pubs, clubs, art centres and Council owned premises, all of which offered a good programme of live music events.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Perceptions of live popular music events

Live popular music was considered by all interviewees to be flourishing within the North of England. The closure of two of the largest venues in Newcastle City Centre - the *Riverside* and *Mayfair*, has meant that many smaller venues such as pubs and clubs have filled the gap by providing their own programme of live music events.

Many of the pubs and clubs interviewed had invested in their premises by designing a purpose built stage for live music. Although venues were actively developing a good music scene they shared the view that there were less "grass roots" bands coming through with more tribute and mainstream bands performing to an older audience.

Most of the venues interviewed stated that they found it more difficult to attract a younger audience than an older one. This is mainly due to the fact that there is now much more in the way of entertainment for younger people, other than attending live music performances, and that there were few good, quality new bands coming through from which to choose. Young people can now watch a band playing live on television or over the Internet.

With the exception of students, young people in the North East of England have a strong preference for attending pubs and clubs at weekends and are more likely to be drawn to a venue, which has a good DJ/dance night than a venue that is promoting live music. A small number of venues stated that the most effective way of encouraging a younger audience to visit the venue was to hold club nights (DJs and dance nights) and cross-over nights. Most of the pubs and clubs interviewed included dance nights in their programme of events. The *Cornerhouse* in Middlesborough, *Buddy Milligans* and the *Mercury Lounge* in Carlisle, and *Monroes Bar* in Workington all make a point of including new young bands in their programme of events whenever possible, and rely on the bands to bring a new younger audience to the venue. The *Cornerhouse* had 250 bands performing at the venue during 1999 and can attract around 300 people per night. The venue has live bands performing on two nights per week, mainly at weekends and hopes to increase the number of performances to include weekday nights. *Buddy Milligans* had 60 performances within a 5-month period. *Monroes Bar* in Workington holds a music workshop each Saturday morning to encourage interest in live music amongst school children. Both of these venues have live music performances three nights per week consisting of jazz, blues, folk and popular music.

Venues and promoters tended to have a maximum of three bands performing each week

mainly on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening. Midweek audiences were difficult to attract, mainly due to the fact that people in the North of England have limited disposable income and tend to wait until the weekend to spend their money on entertainment. Also poor late night transportation links to the more rural areas has meant that people are less likely to venture into the City Centre on a weekday.

The success of a new band is in general determined by how the band performs on the night and how it interacts with the audience. Interviewees were of the view that the music industry in the North of England will gain greater support this year with the *Newcastle 2000* Music Festival which will be held during May 2000.

Impact of live music on attendance at venues

The closure of the *Mayfair* in Newcastle City Centre has meant that attendance at events held at the *University of Newcastle upon Tyne* and *Northumbria University* has increased. *Newcastle University* held 53 shows during the 30-week university period, two shows per week. This included music, drama and comedy events, with one event held midweek. The *University of Northumbria* hosted 12 open shows per year at the Student Union. These events were open to both students and the general public. However, open events that include the general public are limited, as they require a special licence from the City Council. Local bands play at *Sunderland University* every Saturday night in a small venue holding around 80 people. Sunderland University also attracts big name touring bands, which play to a much larger audience. However, the venue manager stated that 60% of their programme of events consists of DJ/dance nights and 40% live music. He felt that it was easier to generate interest in a DJ night than for live music performances and that lack of interest in live music in Sunderland stems from the fact that there are few good venues where new bands can perform. The demographic profile of students is changing, with more local students staying at home to attend university and only affluent students moving away from home. This has resulted in the university venues competing with local city centre venues with which students are familiar and who also promote live popular music. The universities felt that the provision of more open licenses would provide them with a competitive edge in terms of attracting big name bands.

Smaller venues such as pubs and clubs were keen to increase customer loyalty by introducing live popular music to their venue. Live music was also seen as a good way of advertising the venue through word of mouth, flyers and posters. Most of the venues interviewed were experimenting in different types of music including jazz, rock, reggae and indie as this enabled the venue to attract a good mixture of customers in terms of gender and age who would then revisit the venue on other occasions.

Word of mouth recommendation was regarded as particularly important to venues such as *The Cluny*, which is not based in a city centre location.

Most venues introduce a cover charge for live music events. This is mainly to cover the cost of the hire of the band, hire of PA and lighting. The venue needs to ensure that the band will attract a new audience to the venue in order to generate an increase in turnover.

Support for Venues

Venues that have a regular programme of live music events are more likely to attract free publicity through local radio stations and newspapers than those venues that do not offer live music performances. However, there was the view that breweries and drinks companies were less likely to support live popular music events than DJ/dance nights.

The decision to hold a live popular music event was taken by license holder rather than the brewery. Very few live music events were linked to promotional nights supported by a brewery or drinks company. Venues would welcome support by the breweries or drinks companies in order to increase the number of live events held at the venue.

The role of Generator was seen as a vehicle to showcase new bands, support music festivals as well as venues within the region that have a programme of live music events. Generator was regarded as a useful lobbying group particularly regarding support from local Councils.

Most of the venues interviewed were not sure of the range of support provided by Generator to small and mid-scale venues. Many would welcome advice and support with marketing of music events and also felt that more support was needed to increase the number of good quality new

bands.

View of what makes a successful event

The success of a live popular music event was largely down to the enthusiasm of the venue owner/manager or the venue promoter. Interviewees who had been involved with live popular music for a long time and who understood the industry tended to be more successful in attracting new bands and in creating a lively and well known venue.

A good event also relied on the charisma of band in terms of their visual appearance and ability to perform to the audience. A number of venues mentioned that they had come across some poor quality bands that did not interact with the audience and therefore did not stimulate any interest in the music performed.

Bands that do not perform well tend not to attract a good audience and are often not asked back by the venue. The appearance of and atmosphere in the venue is also considered an important factor in attracting audiences. A number of venues interviewed had recently improved the design and decor of the venue in order to attract new customers and more bands.

Successful venues tend to be those which have a purpose built stage for live bands to perform. *Mercury Lounge* in Carlisle is a new café/bar venue, established in September 1999. The owner has recently redesigned the venue to include a small stage for live music and a dance floor for dance/DJ nights. The venue has seen an increase in its customer base since introducing live music.

Another new venue, *The Cluny* based in Newcastle, was set up 8 months ago as a bar with a venue attached. The venue hosts a complete mixture of live music such as reggae, dance and rock and includes a regular jazz night once a month. The programme of live music is still at an experimental stage and will be reviewed at the end of the year but there has been an increase in the number of customers to the bar since the programme of live music was introduced. The venue hopes to gain a late night license by the end of the year, which will benefit dance/DJ nights. The venue manager at *The Cluny* feels that since the Riverside in Newcastle closed there are a significant number of people interested in live music who are seeking out smaller venues to see live shows.

A significant number of interviewees, particularly promoters felt that there were not enough suitable venues for live bands to perform in the North of England. Some mid-scale venues have had to turn down shows, which can create a poor image amongst promoters of touring bands. The smaller pub and club venues that took part in the interview programme also stated that they were inundated with calls from bands wishing to perform and they did not feel that there was enough venues willing to showcase new bands. Of the venues interviewed none had to advertise for live bands to play at their venue, although the quality of some new bands was lacking. Most venues that had a regular programme of live music attracted bands from all over the country and overseas.

The main difficulty experienced by venues was marketing live music nights to a wider audience than their local area. A successful venue was regarded as one, which was committed to promoting live music and committed to showcasing local bands.

Levels of income generated by live music events

All interviewees agreed that live popular music events do generate additional income to a venue as a result of an increase in turnover at the bar. However, most venues stated that they tended to break even on live music night after deducting the cost of the band, PA and lighting. Ticket prices were generally set to cover the cost of hiring the band as well as the price the market would bear.

Younger audiences are more price sensitive than older audiences therefore live events that aim to attract a younger audience were generally considered loss leaders in terms of revenue generated.

Events aimed at young people were regarded by venue owners/managers as a good method of advertising the venue to young people as well as encouraging future attendance. For live performing music events ticket prices varied depending on the type of band. Ticket prices that were set by national promoters and range from £10-£12 whereas ticket prices for unknown

bands or local bands were priced between £4 -£6 per ticket. DJ nights and cross over nights were regarded as good income generators and can increase turnover at venues by around 30%. This is mainly due to the fact that overhead costs were less, a number of venues increase drink prices for DJ and crossover nights and that licensing hours tend to be longer. Also customers remain at the venue for the entire evening and spend more money as a result. The venue manager at Sunderland University stated that it was more difficult to sell tickets for live music events than for a DJ night. A £5 admission fee for a DJ night would be sold out within a matter of days whereas a £7 ticket to see a live band would take longer to sell and the venue would either break even or make a loss.

Barriers to attendance at events

1. **Marketing:** promotion of events appeared to be the main barrier to attendance. Most of the venues interviewed had a limited marketing budget that tended to be spent locally. Flyers and posters for local events at venues tended to be of a low quality, usually a photocopy, as many venues did not have the budget to produce glossy posters or leaflets.
2. **Transportation:** limited late night and rural transportation was a problem for all venues across the North of England, particularly in attracting customers to midweek events.
3. **Licensing Laws:** for the university venues one of the main problems was the lack of licenses for open events at the venue which included the general public. All venues felt that better licensing laws would ensure that customers remain on the premises and can enjoy their evening at a more leisurely pace, resulting in a more profitable and enjoyable event.
4. **Competitive Entertainment:** with so much entertainment available for young people, including the internet and digital television, that current audiences are reluctant to attend events by local or unknown bands. Audiences are now more sophisticated in their choice of venue therefore venues need to invest in improvements to their premises in order to attract new customers.
5. **Environment:** the general public is more likely to attend live performances at venues, which they feel safe and comfortable. A number of venues have invested in improving the image of the venue and developing a good music scene in order to attract new customers.
6. **Type of Music:** pub audiences attending live music events are becoming older and as such tend to be less interested in bands that perform original material. As more tribute bands are playing in bars there was the view that some music events are "dumbing down" musical tastes to the extent that even if the live music event is free, it is unlikely to attract a large audience if the band is playing original material.

Marketing of events

Events were promoted either on a national level by event promoters or locally by the venue. National advertising is mainly through advertisements in the *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* or listings in magazines. The main sources of local advertising is largely through the *Crack* magazine or local newspapers, radio.

Word of mouth is also one of the main methods of promoting events as is posters in shops and pubs.

A number of venues had mailing lists of people to whom they send promotional material about forthcoming bands.

One venue in Carlisle used radio coverage to promote events at their venue as well as producing a leaflet for distribution amongst customers.

The interview programme highlighted the fact that venues, which were committed to the promotion of live music, were actively marketing events at their premises. However, budget constraints meant that marketing material tended to be of a low quality and appeared unprofessional. Some of the smaller venues offered a two for one voucher to encourage support at live gigs particularly those held midweek.

Most of the posters prepared by the venues tended to be photocopies rather than professional glossy posters. However, posters and flyers produced by music promoters were much more professional, using full colour images. The name of the band was the main emphasis of the poster followed by the venue, date and time.

Venue organisers would also like to see more permanent advertising sites within Newcastle City Centre.

Promotion of a national event tends to start six weeks prior to the event whereas promotion of local bands tends to start three weeks prior to the event. All interviewees felt that promotion of bands in the North of England could be improved. They felt that there needed to be a more cohesive marketing strategy to promote the live music industry in the North of England as a whole.

Mid-scale and smaller venues do not have the resources to advertise live music to a wider audience and rely on Generator to increase awareness of the music scene across the region. Smaller venues would welcome marketing support from Generator. At present most of the smaller venues adopted many different marketing approaches until they achieve the most effective method for their venue. They tend to work on their own with little outside influence. Marketing support for smaller venues from Generator could be achieved through personal visits to venues to discuss individual marketing requirements. Seminars would also be a good way of informing smaller venues of best practice in terms of marketing of events. However, the cost of attending seminars could be seen as a barrier for some venue owner/managers. The interview programme highlighted the fact that many venues were interested in discussing their marketing approach and learning from other similar businesses.

Perceptions of outside music festivals

Open-air music festivals should be a good showcase event for new bands by providing exposure to the general public. However, some of the large festivals tended to concentrate on big name bands in order to attract interest. Festivals are promoted months in advance through posters, radio and magazines.

Interviewees felt that those who attended gigs at venues were as likely to attend an outside musical Festival as the general public. If a band performs well at a Festival event it will have a knock on effect in that it will attract interest from the general public who will attend performances at venues. Festivals are considered a good way of encouraging non-attendees to attend gigs at venues.

Interviewees were of the view that live music events promoted by Generator including *Newcastle 2000* Music Festival and *Cumbrian Cream* Festival were good ways of promoting live music in the region. Open-air music festivals also helped to highlight the fact that many pubs and clubs throughout the region offer live popular music as well as dance and DJ nights.

Perceptions of support provided by local authorities

Perceptions of the support provided by local authorities varied across the North of England. Venues in Newcastle City Centre felt that the local authorities were not as supportive as interviewees would have liked and that late night transport from the City Centre to outlying areas was considered to be poor.

Of particular concern amongst interviewees in Newcastle was the lack of advertising space and the fact that fly posters were not allowed.

Licensing of university venues was also considered poor and needs to be addressed. Interviewees were concerned about the impact of the new licensing laws that allow pubs extended licenses and how this will affect the balance between pubs and clubs in the North of England. In Middlesborough, the local council was considered to be very supportive and the *Cornerhouse* venue had regular meetings with local council officials. Late night transportation in Middlesborough was good and customers did not have any problems attending events.

Interviewees in Cumbria also felt that local council officials were supportive of their venue and were open to suggestions to encourage live musical events. A number of venues in the area had liquor licenses until midnight, which helped to sustain a good atmosphere in the venue and increase turnover at the bar.

A longer liquor license means that bands perform later and that the venue can also include a DJ in its programme of events as well as live music. A late liquor license creates a comfortable

atmosphere and customers are more likely to remain in one place for the entire evening, therefore generating more revenue for the venue.

CONCLUSIONS

- The music industry in the North of England was considered to be healthy and flourishing. However, there was the view that there were few good new bands coming through at grass roots level.
- Interviewees felt that Newcastle, in particular had few mid-scale venues and therefore were losing out to other cities that could accommodate many more touring bands.
- Interviewees shared the view that there had recently been an explosion of smaller venues now offering live music. Many pubs and clubs had their own programme of live music, performed mainly at weekends.
- The two university venues in Newcastle City Centre were the largest venues interviewed. Both had seen an increase in the number of touring bands that wish to hire their facility due to the demise of the *Mayfair*. The universities would welcome an increase in the number of open licenses for which they can apply in order to include the general public at events.
- Most of the venues interviewed provided a good mixture of music that included jazz, reggae, indie and rock music.
- Younger people were considered to be more difficult to attract to live popular music events and this was mainly due to the fact that there was more choice of entertainment available for young people and the fact that there were few young bands on the live music circuit.
- There was the perception that as more tribute bands were playing in pubs and clubs, audiences were becoming less experimental in their taste in music and were less likely to attend a live music performance by an unknown band.
- The support provided by City Councils varied across the region. Interviewees in Middlesbrough and Cumbria had a good relationship with Council authorities, which were considered helpful and supportive. However, in Newcastle City Centre venues felt that the Council could be more supportive by improving licensing laws and promotion sites for advertising of events within the City.
- Breweries or drinks companies sponsored few live music events. Sponsorship tended to be for dance/DJ nights, which were considered to be more lucrative in terms of the amount of money taken at the bar.
- It was thought that breweries and drinks companies should be more supportive of live music events, particularly cross over nights. Venue owner/managers would be interested in sponsorship of events in order to increase awareness of the event and of the venue.
- A successful event relied on three elements: the performance of the band; the atmosphere and appearance of the venue; and the commitment of the venue owner/manager or music promoter.
- Successful venues tended to be those which had invested in their premises, by providing a purpose built stage for bands to play. Knowledge of the music industry and the enthusiasm of the venue owner/manager were also important in creating a good reputation.
- The main barriers to attendance at live music events were limited marketing of events, poor transportation links in the more rural parts of the region and current licensing laws.
- Marketing and promotion of events varied depending on the budget available and the expertise of the promoter or venue owner/manager. Marketing of events at smaller venues

such as pubs tended to be of a low quality. Poster and flyers were mainly photocopies that were distributed throughout the local area. Music promoters adopted a more sophisticated marketing approach by designing full colour flyers and posters for distribution and advertising in local and regional music magazines.

- Interviewees would welcome support from Generator in raising awareness of music events in the North of England and to provide a co-ordinated approach to attracting bands to the region, as well as providing guidance to smaller venues on the most effective methods of marketing live music events.

- Open-air festivals were considered to be a good way of introducing live popular music to the general public and to show case new bands. Events such as *Newcastle 2000* Music Festival and *Cumbrian Cream* Festival were effective in raising awareness of live music events in the region and of encouraging the general public to attend venues which provided live music events.

- Generator was regarded as a useful lobbying group for the live music industry in the North of England and a good vehicle for raising awareness of live music through its support of music festivals and development of new bands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research study highlighted the need for support and development of the live music industry in the North of England. This can be achieved through a number of different ways:

- Smaller venues would benefit from sharing their experience with more experienced venue promoters and industry experts.

One to one sessions with individual venues would be a useful way to determine levels of commitment by each venue to live music as well as defining the level of support needed.

- As smaller venues were interested in finding out how other venues promote live music events and what makes a successful venue, a seminar on marketing and promotion of live gigs would be a useful way to strengthen and developing the music industry in different areas of the North of England. A network of seminars should be held in different areas across the North of England to address issues specific to each area and venues should be encouraged to share their "secrets of success" with others.

- The research study highlighted the fact that many venues have tried a number of different marketing approaches to increase audience attendance at live popular music events. These venues would benefit from discussions with experienced promoters on channels of communication that they have adopted and identifying the ones, which work well. In addition topics such as design and layout of posters and flyers would be of interest.

- The live music industry is generally quite a competitive environment however, there is the view that venues need to work together particularly in support of licensing applications, improvement to transportation links and to improve marketing of gigs. Generator was considered to be the most likely facilitator to ensure that venues work together across the region.

- Although there would appear to be no shortage of bands wishing to perform in the North of England the quality of new bands and the number of suitable venues is an issue. Interviewees were of the view that Generator should continue to provide support to new bands in the form of workshops and showcase gigs and continue to lobby for better facilities in which live bands can perform.

- In order to work in collaboration with venues and promoters, Generator should consider exploring the possibility of a subscription fee levied on venues and promoters. This would ensure commitment from venues and promoters to training, development, marketing and lobbying support provided by Generator.

APPENDIX ONE

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Daryl Robinson - *Newcastle University* Sue Collier - *Northumbria University* Andy Fitzpartrick - *Sunderland University* Paul Templeman - *The Ropery, Sunderland* Graham Ramsay - *The Cornerhouse, Middlesborough* Richard Myers Pete Ferry - *Newcastle Art Centre* Davey Bruce - *The Cluny, Newcastle* Dave Clark - *Buddy Milligans, Carlisle* Paul Sherwyn - *Michael Munro's Bar, Workington* Barrie Sougal - *Mercury Lounge, Carlisle* Jim Mawdsley - *Generator*