THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL IN THE LIVE MUSIC INDUSTRY Have Concerts Become An Afterthought For Music Venues?

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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
Undergraduate Honors Thesis
Have Concerts Become an Afterthought for Music Venues?

**The Effects of Alcohol In the Live Music Industry**

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The live music scene has been a consistently growing industry especially in recent years, but alcohol sales are often a crucial economic factor in keeping the doors open for venues, particularly at smaller ones. This study observes the effects on the live music industry incurred from a heavy reliance on alcohol sales. Data collection includes budget analysis for venues of various sizes, musicians’ income, and surveys and literature reviews on the effects of alcohol sales at live music events. The study will provide a unique perspective on the current economics of the live music industry and recommendations for further research.
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INTRODUCTION

If you were to go to a concert tonight, would you buy an alcoholic beverage? You may want to, you may even have planned on it, but the music venue hosting the show is relying on you to actually make that purchase. The rumored prophecy that record labels receive nearly all of the money from record sales and streaming revenue is sadly true; this forces artists to hit the road and sell as many concert tickets as possible.

Live music has been a popular source of entertainment for as long as the history books date back. The style and structure that music performances are arranged in on the other hand, have changed drastically throughout the years. “Whenever humans come together for any reason, music is there... music is and was [always] part of the fabric of everyday life” (Shah). Over the past 20 years, the number of concert tickets that are sold annually have increased, and it continues to generate more money with each year (see Figure 1). While this may sound like a great statistic and boost the hopes of success for music venues; in reality, the sale of concert tickets alone is often not enough to keep small venues’ doors open for business. The one thing that many music venues and festivals have in common is that they make a huge profit from beer and liquor sales.

The ability to sell alcohol with the extremely inflated mark-up prices (which is always in high demand at concerts), has had a significant factor in the structure of the live music industry that we know today. A study from the Department of Psychology at Loyola University found that live music promotes patrons to drink an immoderate amount of alcohol, averaging 3.4732 drinks
bought/consumed per person at concerts (Hamilton). As the industry continues to change with societal and cultural evolution, the need to observe the effects that alcohol has imposed on the live music industry has become important to understand the direction that concerts are headed. From the research gathered for this thesis paper we may reasonably ask, have concerts become an afterthought for music venues?

A MUSICIAN’S STRUGGLE

The widespread demand for concerts, has been steadily growing for many years now giving artists the ability to respond by going on tour. The ability for these artists to go and make a whopping sum of money on the other hand, is far less probable. Musicians are becoming more likely to respond to the demand for concerts now than ever before because of the heinous contracts that most musicians form with their respective recording labels. These contracts (which will be discussed further in this section) have made it immensely difficult for recording artists to profit from their own songs, at least enough to live off of. The continuous increase of concerts held annually, has given music venues the ability to meticulously construct contracts between themselves and the artist. These contracts now include clauses that will often require bands to sell a certain amount of tickets on their own or even wait to earn a profit until all production costs for the show have been recouped by the venue. These imposed obstacles for artists have all been set in place as a result of the effects of alcohol in the live music industry.

More Concerts, More Money
In order to fully conceptualize the reasoning that alcohol has been able to change the structure of the live music industry, it is important to understand the financial difficulties that musicians face and the hardships they must endure in order to profit from their music.

A band/artist is essentially nothing but a cover band unless they have enough charts to put together a record. Once an artist has released an album, they can then begin the endeavor of getting their music heard and they can hope that the public responds well to their work. Now, assuming the album is received well by their given audiences, it is reasonable for the musicians to begin to believe that their album will sell. The sad truth is that most active musicians who are releasing albums today collect almost none of the profit generated from record sales. This is a real problem for musicians since they need to have some source of revenue to pay the bills. According to a study conducted on over 5,000 musicians, it is reported on average that their sales on recorded music only makes up for 6% of their personal income (DiCola).

*Figure 2* shows that according to the same study, artists are finding most of their revenues coming from touring and concerts.
The widespread availability of technology has also had a great push to get artists on the road. Not only are more people able to now create music on their personal computer than ever before making the number of touring artists even higher, but online music streaming has been introduced as well which has become an immensely popular method to listen to music with. Unfortunately for artists, the slim profit margins seen from record sales is eerily similar to the new and highly popularized method of finding and listening to music, which is of course streaming. If you look at Figure 3, a chart will illustrate the breakdown of how streaming revenue gets redistributed and the minimal share that an artist receives each time someone streams their song. On average, streaming services will pay .068 cents for each song streamed, but since artists are only receiving 6.8% the revenue generated, they will only take home .0004 cents (Masnick). Despite the appearance that musicians are facing numerous hardships from receiving minimal percentages from recording distribution, the ability to make music available on a widespread basis (because of the internet), it is easier to get their music out there and heard by audiences who may want to come support them by attending one of their concerts. There is no way to sign on the internet and download a concert experience, which leaves artists with a dependable source of income.

**Pawn In Their Game**
If most people were asked to describe the purpose of a musician at a concert, they would say something about being able to create music for the audible enjoyment of the audience. However, in the eyes of a bar owner, they are a tool to get people in the doors that they can then sell alcohol to. One bar music venue owner stated, “Live music is important to most of us. But it is a significant expense and is only worthwhile if it produces more than it consumes, just like advertising and anything else we spend money on in order to sell more ounces. But so many of the bands that come through here have no clue what their job is. Your job is to sell booze. You're not here for any other reason” (LeDrew). While this may seem like a dramatic over exaggeration to most, this is the harsh reality of the conditions that musicians are touring under. Ultimately this forces artists to focus their attentions on selling as many tickets as they can, because the more people they get to their shows the more willing a venue will be to rebook the act in the future.

This new and emerging demand that music venues are requiring from their booked artists has irritated many musicians and has discouraged many musicians from touring under today’s touring structure. A Chicago musician wrote in an open letter of the difficulties he has faced with being booked in today’s society while venues prioritize his ability to sell tickets over the musical talent he possesses. He noted that one venue, “had implemented a deal for local shows in which a Chicago artist’s pay only comes after $350 in production fees is recouped by the club. In addition, the venue keeps fifteen percent of ticket sales” (Safran). Another frustrated musician, Dave Goldberg, wrote of his negative experiences getting booked by a venue: “She then informed us we had to bring 25 people minimum. Didn’t even offer us extra money if we brought 25 people. I would have laughed other than it’s not the first time I’ve gotten this proposal from club owners. But are there musicians really doing this? Yes. They are so desperate
to play, they will do anything” (Robley). As concerts become one of the few remaining ways for artists to make money (pushing them towards touring), music venues have been able to refine their search for talent by determining which artists can attract the greatest amount of people to sell their most profitable item, alcohol.

There are undeniably several touring artists that are able to make a significant amount of money off of ticket sales without the need to sell copious amounts of alcohol, unfortunately this applies to only a very small percentage of musicians due to an increase in production costs for live performances. From 1982 to 2013, the top 1% of touring artists have more than doubled their share of touring revenue from 26% to 56.3% (Lindvall). This leaves the other 99% of touring artists to 43.7% of the income. In fact, “While record sales have plummeted, concert revenues have soared (at least for the industry’s 1%)” (Hogan). To see how many tickets that some of the most successful artists sell for their tours, please reference Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Number of Tickets Sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor Swift</td>
<td>1,787,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garth Brooks</td>
<td>1,782,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny Chesney</td>
<td>1,363,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke Bryan</td>
<td>1,288,752</td>
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<td>692,642</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14,952,526</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GENERATING A PROFIT

With the influx of concerts throughout the United States in modern society, most venues have realized where their true money-making capabilities are coming from; the answer is irrefutably alcohol sales. Alcohol is the reason so many music venues/concert halls have been able to keep their doors open. The reason alcohol is able to generate such a consistently high revenue is due to several factors including: the markup prices venues use to turn a profit, sponsorships, advertising, and the habitual psychological effects that music has on a person’s alcohol consumption intake. In this section the methodology of turning music venues profitable, advertising/sponsorships, and psychological conditions deriving from alcoholic beverages will be examined and analyzed.

Profiting In a Venue

As previously discussed, ticket sales are rarely profitable with the exception of a very limited number of musicians. Production costs for concerts are on the rise, so much in fact that for medium and small sized venues, that selling tickets, signing sponsorship deals, and other ancillaries no longer are substantial enough to viably support a music venue without the critical sales of alcohol (Atomique Productions Ltd.). This forces us to ask the following question: Why does alcohol undeviatingly contribute to the prosperity of a music venue?

The answer is relatively simple, alcohol is sold at an extremely high markup price leading to significant profit margins. Luckily for artists, sometimes contracts with the venue will include
a percentage of profit earned from the bar to be given to the band at an average rate of about 15%. So, just how much is alcohol marked up at a concert? The answer to that is not as simple because depending on the type of drink sold and the profit margin a venue is hoping to make, however, we are able to examine the average markup price per category of alcohol. Bottom-shelf liquor is a very cheap to buy for music venues since they buy it in bulk by the case (usually 6-12 bottles per case) at an average of $7 per bottle. A bottle holds 1.75 liters, and an average poured mixed drink consists of 1.5 ounces of liquor. After doing the math, this amounts to 31 cents of spirits per drink. The soda or juice added costs nothing more than 13 cents per drink adding up to a grand total of 44 cents per drink. If just one drink is sold at $5.75, the markup of said drink amounts to a mind-boggling 1206%. Beer is no exception to retaining a substantial markup price. For example, a 24-pack of Budweiser costs a venue around $20.55, if the bar was to sell just one beer at a conservative price of $3.75, they are still able to make a 341% profit (Gordon).

Figure 5 illustrates the markup prices on bottom shelf liquor, draft beer, brand liquor, fancy beer, bottled beer, and wine.

Austin, Texas is a notoriously thriving city with a flourishing live music scene encapsulating it. The financial reports stemming from this southern city have painted an obvious
picture of the financial revenue generator that liquor is. Two of the venues that have been able to profit the most has been Barbarella and Red 7. Since Barbarella and Red 7 have made an astounding combined revenue of $380,000 from alcohol on a monthly basis ($200,000 per month from Barbarella, $180,000 per month from Red 7) (Swiatecki). Barbarella is a small/midsized venue while Red 7 is a small venue with a capacity of 1,000 people. The revenue generated from alcohol sales keeps these small venues thriving.

While alcohol sales are far more important to small venues on account that large venues can book A-list musicians that have the potential to sell tens of thousands of tickets, large venues still turn to alcoholic sales for extra revenue and financial support. The University of Illinois’s Assembly hall made the decision to allow the sales of beer and wine on premises during the Spring of 2010. Since the arena can fit more than 15,000 people in for live music performances, the potential to earn gargantuan profit exists. In a single concert held at Assembly hall for the artist Jason Aldean, the University of Illinois was able to sell over $100,000 of beer and wine (Wurth). Not only does alcohol provide a direct form of revenue, but several artists that have the potential to create a huge draw refuse to play at venues that do not sell alcohol. ZZ Top and Kenny Chesney for example had both previously refused to play at the University of Illinois prior to the permission to sell alcohol on the university’s campus. These concerts would likely have made a reasonable amount of money on ticket sales alone, however that was not an option since the artists declined to play anywhere without booze

**Psychological Factors**
There have been numerous scientific studies conducted relating the sound of music to consumption levels and enjoyment of alcohol. At no surprise, the studies all find conclusive results that music makes people want to drink on a psychological level. Since these effects have been researched and analyzed thoroughly by music venues, they are able to figure out how to adapt their concerts around the optimal conditions to sell alcohol under. These studies showed a correlation from volume, genre, and tempo on the taste perception and consumption rate of people drinking with background music.

The genre of music at a concert has a surprisingly strong determinacy on how much alcohol the venue will be able to sell. When comparing the number of drinks sold between rock, country, hip-hop, and reggae shows; rock, country and reggae shows tend to sell significantly more than hip-hop music. Rock sells the most collective types of alcohol and hard liquor, while country music sells more beer than any other genre (Bhalla). The science of the alcohol sales rates in comparison to genre has to do with the amount the human brain seeks sensation based on musical style. The two genres of music that lead to the highest sensation-seeking levels is rock and the blues. The only genre that has been found to inversely effect sensation seeking is religious music (Sullivan, Buchholz, Martin, Ennis, and Recher).

The reason genre has to do with sensation seeking in the brain, is because of tempo differentiation and volume. Fast paced music is a mental stimulant, causing a positive increase in emotion while slow music has the inverse effect. In a study, 40 undergraduate students were given drinks with music playing at variable tempos. The results show that the subjects being studied drank at a variable speed without their awareness. Fast paced music resulted in the average participant finishing a drink every 9.7 minutes, while slow music was found to lead to a drink time of 13.52 minutes (McElrea and Standing). Similarity, the volume that music is being
heard at directly relates to drinking times because of its mysterious ability to alter people’s taste perception (this is one reason why venues play music so loudly). In one scientific study, it found that playing music in a venue at the usual sound level (72 dB) resulted in the average patron purchased and drank 2.7 drinks, while a venue playing their music loudly (88 dB) saw 3.7 drinks sold per person (Jacob). Volume has the ability to change drinking habits because of its ‘distracting’ effect on the brain. The louder that music is played in the background the more distraction there is on taste perception. Through scientific findings, we now know that this is due to the correlation of decibels that music is played at on the perception of sweetness on our taste buds. The louder the music is heard at, the sweeter the alcoholic beverages began to taste to the sample group.

**Sponsorships & Advertising**

Since venues have realized and capitalized on the benefits from selling alcoholic beverages, we have to wonder how alcohol has become such a big part of the scene despite the psychological evidence that was previously reviewed. Most of this can be attributed to sponsorships and advertising.

$1.4 billion was spent this past year alone on sponsorships with artists, venues, and festivals which has been a steadily rising annually. 2011 had $1.17 billion in sponsorships while 2012 increased to $1.22 billion, 2013 rose again to $1.28 billion, and 2014 saw $1.4 billion (IEGSR). To no surprise, the company that is most active in sponsoring music affiliated parties is Anheuser-Busch (replacing Coca-Cola, the previous most active sponsoring company). Beer companies are 3.3x more likely on average to sponsor music than the average company while
spirits are listed at 4.4x. These alcohol sponsorships often lead to advertisements with well-known musicians which are all around us.

A study of more than 13,000 people tried to tie a link between exposure to alcohol advertisements and consumption levels of alcohol. The results found that if a subject consumes alcoholic drinks rarely or refrains, advertising is more likely to alter the perception of drinking in a positive light, and will lead to heavier drinking patterns in their future. Adversely, people that are heavy/habitual drinkers are far less likely to be persuaded to drink more (Smith and Foxcroft). Since there has been a steady increase in sponsorships for the music industry throughout the past few years, the amount of advertisements similarity remains increasing. There are numerous artists that can be seen on television or billboards representing alcohol brands. For example, Beck shows off Jim Beam, Pharrell Williams smiling with Qream, and Sean Combs (Puff Daddy) living the Cîroc ‘lifestyle’ which can be seen in Figure 6. The sponsoring of the industry’s most popular artists has encouraged drinking in through lyrics promoting alcohol. The top 167 most popular songs according to Billboard
Magazine, included 46 direct references to specific alcohol companies in 2009-2011 (Parsons and Greisen). This ultimately leads to a person’s unconscious susceptibility to alcohol’s advertising techniques.

THE REPERCUSSIONS

The live music industry has a symbiotic relationship with alcohol companies in the sense that as one industry increases their profitability, the other contributes to the proliferation of the counterpart’s revenue. While it may seem idealistic for these two industries to benefit off of one another, it actually creates several repercussions. All-ages venues have been faced with a difficult problem to overcome, which is how they will manage to turn a profit without the ability to sell alcohol. One of the major issues that many venues face are the legal regulations that restrict audiences to be above a certain age depending on state laws. Often times if alcohol is being sold, no one is allowed to enter the venue unless they are above 18 or 21. This has stirred quite the controversy among the public, as a result of children and teenagers below the age limit being legally restricted from the exposure to many live music events. For the venues that do permit liquor sales, a financial reliance has begun which has torn the focus away from live music to alcohol sales.

The Struggle For All-Ages Venues
The continual expansion of alcohol’s importance in the live music industry has imposed a terrific burden on all-ages venues. For a venue to be considered all-ages it not only has to undergo some additional costs such as extra security, but it also must not sell alcohol in order for underage audiences to attend. This has caused an immense financial struggle among these age-assessable venues, forcing many of them to go bankrupt. Most venues cannot survive on selling low-cost tickets without selling drinks at a steeply inflated price. All-ages venues also have found it difficult to attract talent to play in their venue since many of them have contracts that delegates a percentage of the bar’s earnings to them. The theoretical idea that an underage venue quickly becomes apparent invalid since strict laws are in place to make sure that does not happen, and if so they can face colossal fines and/or criminal charges.

Portland, Oregon has been a city notorious for a thriving music scene that has been historically assessable to all-ages. Unfortunately, many of these venues have been unable to keep their doors open in recent years. The reasoning is simple, “So what’s the problem? Why are these places closing? One answer, three words: alcohol and money” (Fuller). Some of these venues have been able to sell alcohol at specific concerts if they enact a 21+ policy or receive special permission from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, however this has put the undesirable profit margins in a direct spotlight. Many of the all-ages venues in Portland such as the Crystal Ballroom, Roseland Theater, and Backspace have all been able to survive by finding special legal loop holes to sell alcohol. The Roseland Theater for example has a 21+ balcony at all times while it will still often host of-age concerts to sell more booze (Fuller). The one thing that all three of these venues have in common is that they compensate for the inability to sell alcohol by selling tickets at a higher price.
The employees in Portland’s music venues have come to realize what they need to do to make money, and so while some all-ages venues have found ways to marginally stay afloat, others have taken the road to sustainability. Matt King, senior talent buyer at Mississippi Studios in Portland, talked about his view of live music economics saying, “At the end of the day, we're a bar. Bands get most of the [ticket revenue]. We're lucky to be able to cover staffing and insurance and all of that from a show. We really only make our money off of selling drinks and food, and when we have an all-ages crowd, it just hurts that” (Jarman). Since many live music experts agree with Matt, most venues have decided to take the alcohol sales route, causing another issue; the lack of exposure to music for underage children and teenagers.

**Youth Exposure To Live Music**

The widespread realization that most of the music industry relies on the sales of alcoholic beverages has caused most venues to adapt a structure that allows them permission to use this alcohol as a financial crutch. This has significantly decreased the amount of availability of live music opportunities to the youth (0-21 years old). Some cities such as Iowa City, Iowa, have realized the severity of this issue and attempted to combat these legal policies. A law that was put in place in the Summer of 2010 was meant to help keep underage children from drinking at bars, while still allowing them to go and attend the concert, the catch being they had to be off the premises by 10:00 PM. In a realistic sense, few shows are concluded by 10 PM which has heavily restricted the number of concerts that the effected age groups can attend (Yenigun).

Understandably, parents with children typically do not want them drinking alcohol before coming of age. Matthew Hayek, the Mayor of Iowa City during the passing of the new
ordinance, said that “The scene downtown was ridiculous. I mean, we had people throwing up all over the place, fights, cops were always there. Half of all 911 calls in the downtown area were alcohol related and 19-year-olds were the most frequent victims. The law wasn't set up to even affect the music scene. It was a side effect of it” (Yenigun).

If a venue was to take the risky route to earning a profit by selling alcohol without checking for a valid ID, they can be legally held liable. Some regulations are extreme, take Massachusetts for example, where serving a minor can make the venue susceptible to a $2,000 and the possibility of serving up to one year in jail. In order to check the age status of a patron in a venue, extra security is needed to scan for minors whom are drinking among the crowd since the venue can still get in trouble if a police officer observes sees underage drinking. If a venue gets caught breaking law ordinances, they could be shut down by the law, or closed due to extensive fines. It may impossible to determine a final solution to keep the youth from drinking, while being able to attend concerts, and still have a venue make money; however, it is vital that the public understands the cause and effect that alcohol has put upon children who want to attend live music performances.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Although extensive research has been conducted for this thesis to observe the effect of alcohol in the live music industry there is further research that I recommend be collected. I offer my recommendation for the following three areas to be researched further: analyzation of laws
around the world that have the highest gross profit from live music for all-ages, data collection to observe the different substantial revenue streams in venues of all-sizes (sale of tickets, food, alcohol/beverages, merchandise, etc.), and study the correlation in growth patterns between the live music and the alcohol industries.

A major repercussion discussed from the sales of alcohol at live music performances is the inability for children to see concerts. In order for national and state legislatures to determine the best measures to take to help fix the issues found with age restrictions while simultaneously helping the music industry’s gross revenue, preexisting laws should be analyzed. By examining numerous previous attempts at structuring laws that would work on a legal, social, and financial level, American cities would be able to adapt their current laws to eliminate the issue with minor’s exposure to music and financial dependence on alcohol.

One of the issues that I found during data collection is that venues were not necessarily unwilling to give me their financial revenue stream data, but they were uncertain of what their financial revenue stream numbers actually were. I recommend that a study be implemented that observes venues of various sizes and what percentages of their gross revenue is coming from selling tickets, food, alcohol/beverages, merchandise, etc. By doing this, venues may begin to further their strategic ticket pricing methods, alcohol markup percentages, and what kind of shows to book.

My final recommendation is to conduct a long-term study of growth patterns between the live music and alcohol industry. By observing both of these industries for an extended period of time, a pattern should begin to form showing how these two industries counter depend on one another. After a correlation has been noticed, a better image of the future of the music industry
will be painted, and we can begin to conceptualize whether they will continue to grow together or begin to rely less on one another.

CONCLUSION

Upon examining and analyzing numerous journals, websites, news articles, and research papers on the effects of alcohol in the live music industry, it has been determined that there have been many notable effects from alcohol in the music industry. As concerts grow in popularity, so do the number of touring artists. Venues have near exclusively focused their attention to selling alcohol (particularly the smaller ones in size) since they realize how much room there is to turn a profit. The focused attention on alcohol sales has forced many touring musicians to prioritize their responsibility away from making beautiful music towards raising attendance numbers. The higher the attendance numbers artists achieve, the higher the profits become for the venue, and the likely-hood of a given artist getting rebooked increases because of their ability to aid in alcohol sales. Although it may seem ideal for both music venues (that permit alcohol sales) and alcohol companies to simultaneously benefit, several repercussions arise. All-ages venues have been quickly disappearing leading to the inability for children to see live music. While there may be no end in sight for the mammoth effect that alcohol has played in live music; by examining the profitability from alcohol and the repercussions it causes, a clearer picture for the future of live music becomes apparent.


APPENDICES

Figure 1

North American Concert Ticket Sales Revenue from 1990-2014 (In Billions of USD)
Figure 2

Average Income from Major Revenue Streams

- Touring & Concerts: 28%
- Teaching: 22%
- Employed by a Symphony or Band: 19%
- Merchandise: 10%
- Session Musician: 5%
- Songwriting/Composing: 6%
- Other: 7%
- Record Sales: 6%
Figure 3

Share of Streaming Revenue

- Labels: 45.6%
- Platform: 20.8%
- Taxes: 16.7%
- Songwriters/Publishers: 10.0%
- Artists: 6.8%
Figure 4

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Figure 5

![Image of a drink with markup percentages for different types of beverages]