Anatomy of a Closure

Arguments for music venues and their associations to propose proactive, workable solutions to prevent further closures to their local policy makers.

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For nearly three decades, Don't Tell Mama (DTM) was part of the cultural fabric of central Helsinki. Established in 2012 in a building that had been dedicated to nightlife since 1992, the club functioned for years without conflict with its neighbours. When Tomi Häkkinen joined the management, DTM was a stable, established, lengendary gay club for the queer community in the city center of Helsinki and beyond.

Everything changed in 2018. A luxury hotel opened in the same block, on the opposite side of the courtyard. Shortly after opening, the hotel began reporting noise complaints from two guest rooms. Despite DTM's long-standing presence, no prior consultation had taken place during the hotel's development. From the club's perspective, it seemed self-evident that a new hotel would be properly soundproofed. It was not. Two years later, DTM exited its lease and disappeared from Helsinki's cultural landscape.

How can we gather arguments and support for music venues and clubs, to ensure that changes in cities, in sound environments, and in our ways of living together do not lead to further closures? These spaces are not marginal activities: they are democratic, social, artistic, and economic places that play an essential role in our collective lives. This report aims at being a practical guide for venues to initiate a dialogue with their local policy makers, based on arguments and initiatives that worked elsewhere.

This publication starts with the story of DTM but it does not end there. Through this case, we unpack the anatomy of a closure and then travel across Europe to explore what cities and venues representatives can do to prevent similar losses. From proactive planning to mediation, this is a story about what can still be changed.

"I know very few clubs with no noise complaints. Every music club or every bar playing music have some kind of noise complaints." *Robert Gaa – Night-Time Economy Commissioner in Mannheim and board member of the Clubkultur Baden-Württemberg.*

DTM is not an isolated case, nor a situation specific to Finland or Helsinki. It reflects a pattern that emerges repeatedly across Europe. These stories are not limited to Amsterdam, London, Paris, or Berlin. They are also the reality of smaller capitals and mid-sized cities, where venues face similar pressures linked to real estate dynamics and regulatory frameworks that fail to anticipate coexistence.

Simone d'Antonio is an expert of sustainable urban development, with a strong experience in supporting urban and regional authorities in planning. He reflects on his relation with cities:

"They usually ask for advice when they have a problem of noise. I usually tell them that they are starting from the end, and not from the beginning."

To understand where conflicts begin, it is essential to recognise that the issue does not start with the complaint itself. Once complaints are filed, venues often find themselves in a weak position: they face a lack of recognition, stigmatisation, and limited legal tools. These structural issues cannot be resolved within the short timeframe of a single dispute.

The starting point lies earlier. What emerges clearly is that noise conflicts are rarely caused by music venues alone. They result from multiple overlapping changes: cities are becoming denser, sound technologies are evolving, and social behaviours are reshaping our relationship to noise and private space. As acoustics specialist Richard Vivian underlines, complaints often appear not because a venue has changed, but because something else has. Addressing noise conflicts therefore requires starting earlier, understanding what has changed, and adapting frameworks accordingly, before complaints turn into closures.

Cities Are Changing

Cities are becoming denser, which has two direct consequences for live music venues: it becomes more difficult to open new spaces for music venues; and, as new residential areas emerge next to existing venues, conflicts also arise.

Poorly coordinated planning can result in conflicting uses on the same street. In a street that was initially commercial, a music venue may have been established. Over time, those commercial properties or offices may be converted into residential housing, creating incompatibilities that were not anticipated.

Planning notices may appear discreetly on a lamppost or a window somewhere in the district. Some local planning authorities allow venues to register their postcode to receive automatic notifications. This moment is crucial: at the very first sign that a neighbouring property may become noise-sensitive, venues should act quickly, seek professional advice, and clearly assert their lawful, long-standing presence and activities.

Urban change is inevitable. The challenge lies in how change is anticipated, managed, and accompanied, and how its negative effects can be prevented. From these observations emerge three clear directions for action.

Preventing conflicts and closures requires better communication and mutual understanding between cultural operators and planning authorities, more coherent regulation of urban development and licensing, and concrete measures to protect cultural spaces within the city.

Another case study: Shoreditch (East-London)

A well-respected music venue operates there with a licence until six o'clock in the morning and a capacity of around 600 people. A few years ago, a national hotel chain announced plans to build a hotel directly opposite the venue. The hotel commissioned an acoustic survey. Measurements were carried out on a weekday afternoon, with a sound meter chained to a lamppost for several days. Based on this data, the consultant concluded that the area was suitable for a hotel.

The assessment identified traffic noise, particularly around midnight, but failed to consider the reality of the area at night: a queue of several hundred people directly in front of the hotel, attending a venue that hosts late music events until early morning.

The venue owner saw a planning notice announcing the hotel project and decided to act via an acoustic consultant. Rather than formally objecting, he contacted the hotel's acoustic consultant directly to discuss how the building would be designed. As a result, high-specification façade insulation was installed, windows were sealed, and the hotel was made fully aware of the surrounding nightlife context during the planning process. The hotel opened without generating complaints.

The risk, however, was clear: had the hotel been built with weak façades and inadequate glazing, complaints would almost certainly have followed, and the venue would have been forced to change its operations.

The following sections explore these three dimensions and the solutions that can be put in place.

BREAKING THE SILOS: FOSTERING DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURAL OPERATORS AND PLANNING AUTHORITIES

> In the case of DTM, Tomi Häkkinen, together with his board, had to act as the sole intermediary between the club and the hotel, without any third-party mediation. The club proposed solutions, such as booking the two hotel rooms closest to the venue during weekends, but the hotel refused.

The municipality was not prepared for this situation, as is likely the case in many European cities. This lack of communication and coordination is largely due to the siloed structure of city administrations, particularly within planning authorities.

> Tomi explains: "It might be that it was no one's responsibility in the project. You have the architect, the people planning the pipes, the electricity systems, and so on. At the end, all plans are combined, but no one may have looked at what already exists around the site. Traffic and airports are typically considered, a music arena is visible, but a small music club is often not."

Salla Vallius served as Night Mayor of Helsinki between 2020 and 2021, shortly after the closure of DTM. At that time, venues had to engage directly with neighbours or new businesses, as no public mediation mechanisms were in place. This approach was spontaneous and self-initiated, but also unbalanced.

URBACT, a European cities network, supports municipalities in developing integrated action plans for sustainable change. Several cities involved in URBACT programmes have acknowledged these siloed approaches and responded by creating participatory groups that include multiple municipal departments, as well as external stakeholders. These groups typically involve transport authorities, urban planning departments, cultural departments, and others; such as in Barcelona, where the Night Office was finally created to ensure the protection and continuity of the music and nightlife activities in the city.

In Cologne, Benjamin Thele leads the Cultural Space Management Office, a noticeable department created in 2022 in response to venue closures. Initiated by local policymakers and informed by international city networks such as the World Cities Culture Forum, this office is responsible for designing new cultural spaces and protecting existing ones. As Thele explains: "We are input givers, but also translators between the language of cultural players and the city administration, because we recognise that many problems arise from misunderstandings."

IMPLEMENTING THE AGENT OF CHANGE: FROM PRINCIPLE TO POLICY

A more coordinated approach could include the systematic application of the Agent of Change principle.

The Agent of Change principle states that the party responsible for introducing a change is also responsible for managing its impact. Applied to urban development, this would secure existing venues and recognise their established status.

In theory, the Agent of Change principle should protect venues. In practice, however, courts often prioritise residential interests.

In Germany, rulings frequently favour housing developments on the basis that residential value outweighs that of clubs and venues, highlighting the limits of legal principles when cultural value is not fully recognised. In many countries, the Agent of Change remains a principle rather than a legal obligation. Moreover, enforcement often requires legal action, which is costly and difficult for venues. Finally, embedding the principle in law in other countries requires broader understanding and acceptance, as nightlife activities still face significant stigma.

In the UK, it has been incorporated into the National Planning Policy Framework, creating a duty for local authorities to follow it.

In Tallinn, the Agent of Change principle has been included in the city's new night strategy within the Cities After Dark framework. This demonstrates that the issue is not only about changing the laws, but it's also about changing the perception of the value of cultural and music venues in an urban context.

PROTECTING CULTURAL SPACES WITHIN MIXED-USE CITIES

In cities that are not yet fully dense, it is still possible to implement cultural protection zones. Cologne's protection zone, located in a former industrial area, aims to prevent gentrification by restricting new residential or hotel developments. As Benjamin Thele notes, "We were already able to prevent the construction of a new hotel there. In my opinion, this is a solution that works."

Other cities are experimenting with similar approaches. In Malmö, a cultural sound zone has been established in the Sofielund district. The initiative recognises that cultural activities generate sound and seeks to manage coexistence proactively rather than treating noise as a problem to be eliminated. By designating an area where higher sound levels are accepted, the city aims to protect existing cultural venues, support creative activity, and prevent conflicts with future residential developments. These protection zones are not intended to create mono-functional districts. The sound zone is integrated into planning processes, making expectations clear to residents or developers, and positioning culture as a legitimate and planned component of urban life.

The biggest task for modern European cities is to accomodate the very different and increasing needs of people living there.

As one interviewee noted: "In mixed neighbourhoods, conflicts of interest are inevitable, but not necessarily negative if there is dialogue and moderation. Mixed-use areas are more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable."

All interviewees expressed strong support for mixed-use neighbourhoods that combine daytime, evening, and nighttime activities. This diversity contributes to cultural vitality and urban safety. As another interviewee explained through a metaphor: "If you have monoculture farming, you will have problems. The same applies to cities: a healthy mixture of uses is essential." Cultural zoning exists in countries such as Australia or Canada, for example in Montreal. However, such models are not always replicable in European cities, which are often smaller, denser, and more constrained.

Historically, European cities were mixed-use. From post-war period through the 1970s, many city centres were increasingly reshaped around car traffic and commercial retail functions. As retail declines in many city centres today, there is an opportunity for cultural and creative spaces to play a central role in urban transformation. The 15-minute city concept, which promotes proximity and accessibility, should inherently include cultural practices and therefore live music activities.

Carmen Zapata, Barcelona's Night Commissioner, after nearly twenty years advocating for live music venues through ASACC, highlights the importance of spatial distribution: "My personal fight is to open bars, clubs, and venues in other districts to avoid concentration in one area. For example, in a big district with almost 10 venues concentrated in the same neighborhood, if you have 3 000 people walking at the same time on the street when the venues close, they will drink and scream and the impact is terrible in the neighborhood. But if these people are in between some different streets, that is supportable."

Beyond increasing urban density and the need for improved planning frameworks, many cities are also positioning themselves within a competitive landscape of attractiveness. As they develop into tourism destinations, they must manage growing inflows of visitors seeking local experiences, including live music and nightlife. This additional pressure reshapes neighbourhood dynamics and intensifies the need to balance residential life, cultural activity, and visitor economies.

BALANCING THE IMPACTS OF MUSIC TOURISM

The Music Cities Network is an independent, practice-driven network connecting more than 16 music cities worldwide. Those cities share the same vision to use music as integrated tool of city development. They work with music organizations on the ground but that are connected to the city's administrations. Their managing director Lena Ingwersen therefore has a range of insights on different scenes and regions. She notes: "Music tourism is now a category on its own. It is very important to think about this holistically. Rather than using it merely as a city marketing tool, it should be seen as an opportunity to develop long-term, place-specific strategies that benefit both residents and visitors. "

Music venues and clubs still deserve to be in the city center, especially since they provide activities and life after the shops close in the evening. However, over-concentration in historic districts may serve tourism while excluding local residents, especially when there are no parking spaces, or no public mobility at night. Developing strategies that support music and nightlife in multiple districts can help rebalance urban life.

> Reflecting on Helsinki, Tomi Häkkinen notes: "Everyone kept saying, 'just turn off the music.' Music was not seen as something that brings value, jobs, happiness, or life to the city centre. Since then, many hotels have been built, but tourism has not recovered after COVID. Hotel rooms remain empty, while venues have closed. Hotels are necessary, but they do not create a lively city. Tourism and public agencies are marketing the city, they like to use the images from the clubs, but the city is not helping them to operate."

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which brings together 82 music cities worldwide, does not explicitly list venues as a criterion to join the network, but live music venues are central to the applications and narratives cities present. Music venues are clearly identified as assets that cities are proud to showcase as part of their cultural identity.

Many noise conflicts originate in broader urban transformations: densification, gentrification, tourism pressure, and fragmented planning decisions. Yet urban change alone does not explain the full picture. To understand why traditional regulatory tools often prove insufficient, it is therefore necessary to look not only at how cities are changing, but also at how sound itself has changed.

Sound Technologies Are Changing

Urban change is not the only external factor transforming the live music landscape. Sound systems themselves have evolved significantly: they are now more reliable, more affordable, more powerful, and capable of producing much more energy in the lower frequencies.

However, in most European countries, sound regulations have not kept pace with these technological developments.

They do not reflect the reality that very low frequencies can now be produced at very high levels.

In environmental acoustics, noise is often measured using A-weighted decibels, indicated as dB(A) or LAeq. This weighting reflects the human ear's general response and is useful for assessing sources such as plane or traffic noise. However, it largely excludes low-frequency sound in music. As a result, measurements often fail to capture what is actually disturbing residents.

Complaints typically refer to "boom, boom, boom" sounds, almost always bass frequencies.

These low frequencies are also the hardest to control, as they penetrate walls, ceilings, floors, and windows far more effectively than higher frequencies.

Low-frequency sound has been measurable for decades, but legislation and guidance are still based on simple A-weighted measurements. In many cases, authorities and police services are not equipped with appropriate measurement devices or training, making enforcement both imprecise and ineffective.

LISTENING BEYOND THE NUMBERS

If basic sound measurements alone are insufficient, how can venue owners identify problems and make the necessary adjustments? Richard Vivian advises: "I always recommend to my clients that they should spend time outside their venue. It's difficult, because if you're running a music venue there are probably 101 things to do. But choose a night to spend some time quietly on your own, walking around your venue and listening. I still wander around at three or four o'clock in the morning outside venues, because I can't adequately appreciate the noise climate from measurements recorded on an unattended sound meter. I need to see where people gather, where taxis stop, how crowds move, is the fire door left open. It's a much bigger picture than simply saying the noise level is 60 decibels on the street."

This kind of observation often leads to practical and sometimes low-cost adjustments. In other cases, acoustic experts can help identify necessary operational or technical changes.

> Returning to the case of DTM, Tomi Häkkinen explains the measures they implemented: "We adjusted our speaker system and built isolated platforms for our subwoofers to prevent vibrations from spreading. We hired an acoustic expert to measure sound inside the club, outside the building, and inside the hotel rooms, to understand thresholds and the sound insulation performance of the building materials."

Legislation often takes time to adapt and to balance the interests of all parties. In 2019, Live DMA published the statement Music Is Not Noise, which provided recommendations for sound regulations better aligned with the realities of live music based on dialogue with music venues representatives.

"Policy makers and the live music sector need to collaborate as equal partners in order to produce good live music policies and should set up formal and informal platforms to enable this exchange." (White Paper "Music is Not Noise")

MEDIATION

Sound measurement becomes even more complex when it comes to noise generated by people outside venues: queuing, smoking, or leaving after concerts. In that case, sound regulations cannot go alone without appropriate mediation solutions.

As Richard Vivian explains: "You and I could go and see a band tomorrow night and walk home quietly. Or we could stop outside the venue, use nitrous oxide balloons, kick a beer can around, or start a fight. What we need are good operational controls. Under licensing legislation, venues can be required to have dispersal policies: how people leave, where they go, how they access taxis or public transport."

When sound measurement and regulation prove ineffective in addressing these issues, mediation becomes essential. Neighbours may feel isolated or ignored by authorities when their complaints are not addressed properly.

Night mediators can help counter this perception. In Barcelona, Carmen Zapata has developed several education and mediation initiatives since taking office, referring to this approach as "pedagogy in the street." Since 2022, trained night mediators circulate in the city from 23:00 onwards, resolving conflicts before police intervention. The city currently employs eight mediators, with plans to expand to sixteen.

Different mediation initiatives exist across Europe. Matthias Rauch, Head of Cluster Creative Economy and Focal Point UNESCO Creative City of Music Mannheim describes a local multi-stakeholder group: "It's a long process to reach consensus. Residents, city administration, and venue owners meet regularly to discuss neighbourhood issues from different perspectives."

A proven example of this approach is found in the Sant Martí district in Barcelona. Here, nightlife operators have made a sustained and meaningful

commitment through a public-private agreement to prevent incivility in the Poblenou leisure area after several years of conflict. Contributions are proportional to each operator's capacity, with Sala Razzmatazz providing the largest share and smaller venues contributing less, reflecting a fair and balanced collaborative model.

"Noise conflicts are not solely the responsibility of music venues; they are issues of urban governance, especially when noise originates in open streets," as Ingwersen points out. The fact that a single complaint can lead to a venue's closure, highlights a broader, systemic problem. Beyond local governance, this is also a national issue to be solved, just like noise levels measurement and regulations which are usually a national competence as well.

THE PUNISHMENT SYSTEM

> DTM representative recalls: "For us, it would have been helpful if there was someone to ask about this. And in a kind of neutral setting, because I felt like we were judged, it almost felt like we were constantly in a court if we called someone, the officials."
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> Despite acoustic improvements and attempts at dialogue, the hotel near DTM eventually filed an official complaint. The club faced the risk of a €25,000 fine if it did not turn the music down. At that point, it became clear that continuing operations was no longer viable. After discussions with the landlord, DTM exited its lease.

Carmen Zapata highlights the disproportionality of sanctions: "When inspectors detect an issue, they apply the full weight of the law: strict measures and large fines that put the venue's existence at risk. This does not happen in the same way in other sectors. Even when companies cause serious environmental harm, fines rarely threaten their survival. But for venues, they do. Music is not a crime. Dancing is not a crime. We live in a Mediterranean country; public life happens in the street. We need education and mediation, not closures. The pandemic showed us what happens when venues close: people gather in public space without any control."

Some municipalities have adjusted complaint procedures to prevent closures triggered by isolated complaints. In Barcelona, five complaints from different addresses are required to open a formal case. These cases are handled administratively rather than by the police. Authorities first meet affected residents, then bring neighbours and operators together to seek solutions before legal escalation.

Excessive fines can also undermine trust and restrein participation in local groups where it is also about creating trust, creating a sense of community and creating the urgency of working on the topic. Cities can instead offer supportive approaches, helping venues adapt sound management while enabling them to continue cultural activity and respect neighbours.

Club Hafen49 is one of the most popular live music clubs in Mannheim. It's an open-air space and there are noise complaints since a new building was built right next to it 10 or 12 years ago. However, the club has a direct measurement device and the music could legally be much louder than it was actually, so the complaints were not given.

In those cases, sound level monitoring systems are also instruments of protection, enabling venues to demonstrate compliance and defend themselves against disproportionate complaints. However, access to such monitoring tools, as well as to effective insulation and acoustic improvements, requires financial and technical support, particularly for small and independent venues with limited resources.

FUNDING AND INNOVATION

Several municipalities and governments provide funding to support soundproofing. In Cologne, the city allocated approximately €300,000 per year for venue insulation, with grants of up to €100,000 per venue. Tallinn has also introduced funding schemes for venues with year-round cultural programmes and is developing more flexible licensing to support their economic sustainability.

Investing in preventive measures such as sound insulation, acoustic consultancy, and operational improvements for music venues is demonstrably more cost-effective than managing the consequences of their closure.

Targeted public support for insulation typically ranges from tens to a few hundred thousand euros per venue, often as a one-off investment. By contrast, the loss of a venue can trigger broader economic and social costs: reduced local tax revenue, job losses and the erosion of surrounding hospitality ecosystems. Live music activity generates significant spillover effects in local economies and supports employment beyond the venue itself. When cultural decline sets in, municipalities frequently resort to large-scale regeneration schemes. The experience of emergency cultural rescue packages during COVID-19 further demonstrated that rebuilding collapsed ecosystems requires substantially higher public expenditure than maintaining them. From a public finance perspective, preventive investment in venue sustainability is therefore not cultural subsidy alone, but prudent urban economic policy.

It remains true that technical solutions are often costly and require expert guidance, but several solutions emerged from the interviews already. For instance, sound absorbers can be installed under terrace umbrellas to redirect sound away from neighbours. Limiters are often viewed negatively due to outdated experiences but modern DSP and loudspeaker management systems allow precise sound shaping and frequency control. These solutions require expertise and careful setup but are often far cheaper than structural renovations. Finally, professional advice is essential before investing in soundproofing. Effective sound isolation requires heavy, dense materials. Thin foam panels marketed as soundproofing solutions are rarely effective for low-frequency noise and should be approached with caution.

However, even the most advanced technical adjustments cannot fully explain the rise in conflicts. Equipment may generate deeper frequencies, and regulations may lag behind technology, but disputes ultimately involve people. Beyond urban planning and acoustic engineering, shifts in habits, expectations, and tolerance levels also shape how sound is perceived and contested. To understand why tensions have intensified in recent years, it is therefore necessary to consider not only the changes reshaping our cities and technologies, but also the shift in human behaviour and social norms.

Humans Are Changing

While the COVID-19 pandemic is often cited as an explanation for many societal shifts, it undeniably altered people's relationship to their homes, to their neighbourhoods, but also to noise. Long periods spent at home fostered more insular habits, stronger attachment to private space, and lower tolerance for disturbance. When live music resumed, many people appeared more sensitive to noise and less willing to compromise, making coexistence with music venues tangibly more tense.

> Tomi Häkkinen reflects: "We couldn't just turn off the music, that would bankrupt any club. In meetings with the hotel's management, they didn't understand the business we're in. They thought we could simply lower the volume. But if people can't hear the music, no one will pay €12 to enter a club. We were seen as the problem, as troublemakers, and no one really tried to resolve the situation."

This dynamic is not limited to urban centres. In rural areas, cultural activities can also be perceived as disruptive. As Ella Overkleeft from Rural Radicals points out, noise itself is often less of an issue in rural contexts, but other nuisances emerge, such as transport, parking, or the lack of infrastructure to process waste.

Conflicts are also more seasonal and can exacerbate tensions between generations, or between year-round residents and temporary visitors. In Douarnenez, a working-class port town in Finistère (France), a vibrant rock scene that emerged in the 1980s with support from popular education policies is now perceived as threatened as the town's identity shifts under tourism and gentrification. Once known for a prolific local rock culture, giving rise to dozens of bands and earning the nickname "*Manchester breton*", Douarnenez's port has increasingly drawn young artists and urban newcomers, while rising numbers of wealthy second-home owners have prompted a push for quieter, calmer living that some fear undermines the town's musical heritage and popular culture. Local musicians and residents highlight how maritime traditions, *festoù-noz*, workers' songs and social revolt have historically fuelled local rock, but they now worry about maintaining this identity amid changing demographics and pressures on cultural expression.

For decades, live music and nightlife activities have carried a persistent stigma. For those who are not part of club or live music culture, these spaces are rarely perceived positively, despite extensive research demonstrating the benefits of music, dancing, and collective cultural experiences for individual well-being and social cohesion.

Yet music venues can be powerful allies in addressing future challenges and strengthening social life. In southern Europe in particular, climate change is likely to push more social life into the night, as daytime temperatures become increasingly difficult.

This raises a key question:

How can the live music community make itself heard? How can live music representatives advocate for a better-informed perception of venues and clubs by policymakers and decision-makers, and ensure that cultural activity is understood as a public good rather than a disturbance?

In 2023, the iconic Fuse Club in Brussels was forced to close following one noise complaint, despite its long-standing presence and cultural importance. The closure triggered strong public mobilisation, including a petition signed by more than 60,000 people.

Signals suggest that people will live increasingly close to one another, while cultural practices become more individualised. Coexistence is therefore not merely a technical issue of noise management, but a broader social question.

The following section explores how arguments can be framed to engage policymakers on these issues.

RECOGNITION OF NIGHTTIME ECONOMY AND ACTIVITIES

Public space itself can be reimagined through culture, as demonstrated in Nicosia, where a public park is turned into a dancefloor once a month. In rural areas too, vacant buildings can be transformed into creative spaces, acting as catalysts for broader regeneration.

"I see that cities are still very strongly planned from a daytime perspective." Night-time is often reduced to bars and entertainment, yet it is also a period of work, mobility, care, and social interaction for a wide range of people.

Simone d'Antonio notes: "Most of our partners are medium-sized cities, such as Malaga in Spain, Genoa in Italy, Piraeus in Greece, Varna in Bulgaria or cities like Zadar in Croatia and Budva where the nightlife is more seasonal. In these contexts, raising awareness and opening debate around night-time policy is essential, we have to create 'a need'".

Several guiding principles emerge to start a strategy. First, night-time policy must be separated from the topic of safety. While safety is important, it is only one dimension of night-time life. Second, the right to the city at night must be recognised for everyone, not only for young people or specific groups traditionally associated with nightlife. Third, the economic dimension must be made visible. Understanding how many people work at night, and how many families depend on night-time activity, helps translate cultural value into measurable impact for policy makers.

Night time policy can be promoted by private or public initiative.

By 2024, more than 60 cities worldwide had appointed a "night mayor", "night czar", "nighttime director" or similar official responsible for nightlife governance.

In Helsinki, the Night Mayor position only lasted a year and a half but private initiatives are rising again through the Night Shift Finland. It is all about creating a momentum, and use this momentum. Most of the initiatives listed in this report were raised in the municipality because there was a political will, which sometimes does not last long because of political shift and other priorities related to various crisis.

In terms of governance models, Cities After Dark is a network of ten cities working specifically on night-time perspectives. Paris established a Night Council in 2014 and now has over a decade of experience coordinating night-time policy across all arrondissements. In Barcelona, the creation of a Night Commissioner, a Night Office, and a

Night Council brings together around 100 representatives from neighbourhood associations, LGBTQIA+ organisations, anti-racism groups, night-time businesses, and political parties. This governance model is unique in its scale and inclusiveness.

A number of specialised associations, foundations and consultancies now operate at the intersection of music policy, urban planning and night-time governance. Organisations such as VibeLab, and more recently the Nighttime Foundation focus on supporting cities in developing balanced night-time strategies through applied research and workshops. Sound Diplomacy works internationally with cities on "Music Cities" strategies, economic impact assessments and cultural ecosystem planning. At local level, hybrid advocacy bodies such as Clubcommission Berlin combine sector representation with urban policy engagement. Together, these actors reflect the professionalisation of night-time and music-city governance, where cultural activity is increasingly addressed as a structural urban policy issue.

These initiatives show how creative policies can introduce innovation into political mandates and contribute to more vibrant, inclusive cities.

LIVE MUSIC VENUES AND CLUBS AS CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

"One of the things that is growing a lot in our URBACT network is the sensitivity towards these venues that are in danger of disappearing. And it's not just about music venues, but it's also about LGBTQIA+ bars and places where the LGBTQIA+ community can reunite" explains Simone d'Antonio.

> DTM was a legendary gay club for the queer community and beyond in the city centre of Helsinki. Yet, despite its cultural importance, it did not withstand the combined pressures of planning decisions and tourism strategies.

Within local music scenes, a recurring tension exists between remaining underground and becoming visible. Many actors legitimately wish to keep their spaces open and free, and fear that increased visibility may lead to normalisation or institutionalisation. However, as seen earlier, visibility is often a prerequisite for being recognised in planning processes. In many cases, the first and most legitimate argument a venue can make is simply to state that it seeks to continue doing what it has been doing lawfully for a long time.

Live music venues and clubs have historically functioned as laboratories of culture, where new music genres emerge, evolve, and are tested long before they are recognised by mainstream institutions.

From jazz and punk to electronic and techno music, many forms were first developed in small, independent venues. Techno is a clear example: once confined to underground clubs, it is now regularly featured in fashion shows, museum exhibition openings, and major cultural events. This trajectory illustrates how venues act as incubators of artistic innovation, feeding wider cultural ecosystems and influencing other sectors well beyond nightlife. Recognising and protecting these spaces therefore means safeguarding the very sources of cultural renewal.

Venues are cultural infrastructures embedded in local communities. They function as spaces of artistic experimentation, career development for emerging artists, and regular access points to culture in everyday life. Like theatres or cultural centres, many venues curate programmes, support local scenes, uphold social responsibility standards, and contribute to employment and neighbourhood vitality. When authorities formally acknowledge this cultural role, through inclusion in cultural policy frameworks, eligibility for arts funding, adapted regulatory treatment, and participation in structured dialogue, venues gain legitimacy within planning and licensing processes. This recognition strengthens their position in the face of complaints by framing them not as disturbances to be managed, but as essential contributors to the cultural, social and democratic fabric of the city.

PROTECTING LIVE MUSIC HERITAGE

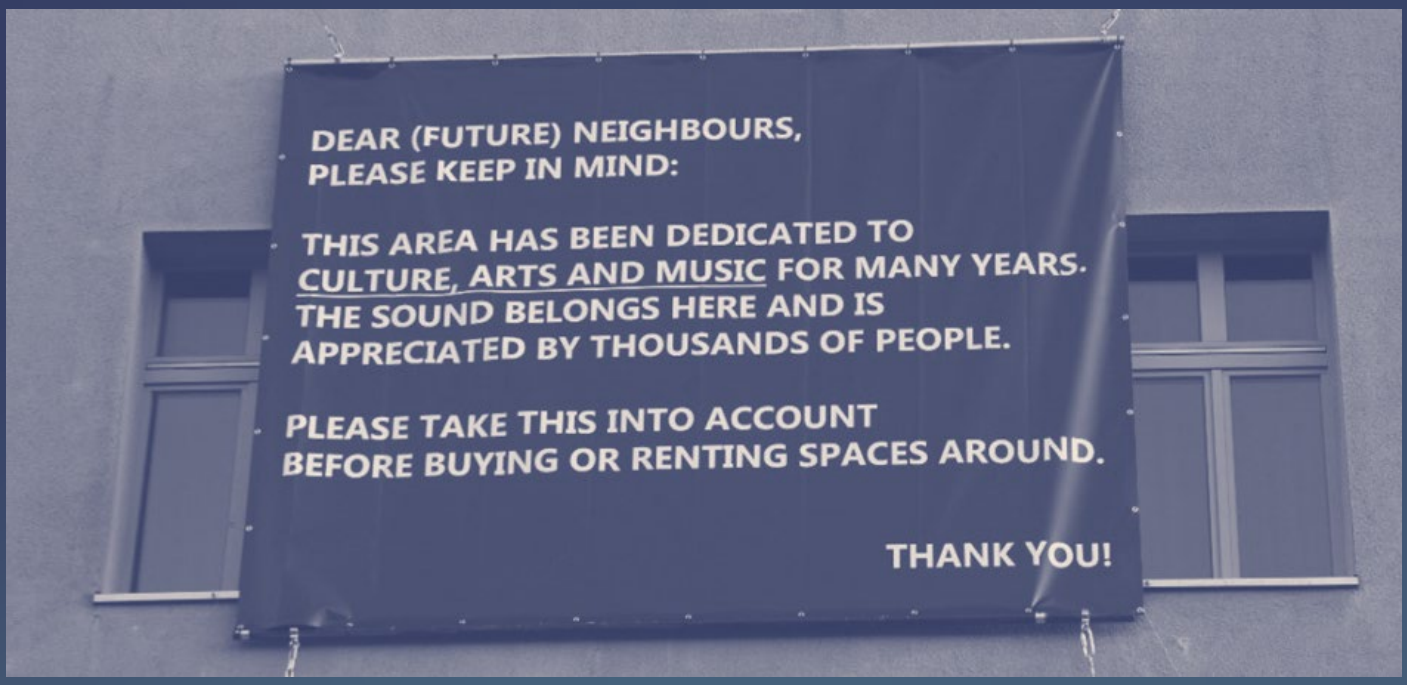
In addition, could the notion of heritage in live music offer some futher arguments in that matter? As Matthias Rauch explains, heritage within the Creative Cities framework is not primarily about the past. It is equally about future ambitions. What has already been achieved? What role has music played in urban development and sustainability? And where does a city want to be in 10, 20, or 30 years?

At first, when engaging with local stakeholders, the historical value of these stories is not always immediately recognised. Yet these are precisely the stories that deserve to be shared and embraced across Europe.

The recognition of techno music as cultural heritage by UNESCO represents an important symbolic step in cultural policy. Similarly, the recognition of venues such as Berghain as cultural spaces in Berlin marks a shift in perception. However, symbolic acknowledgement does not necessarily lead to institutional recognition. In many cases, these cultural expressions are borrowed rather than celebrated or supported. This situation is regretted, as many of these venues and artistic forms remain marginalised and are still subject, in some cases, to repression or disproportionate regulation across Europe. At the same time, some actors within these scenes deliberately maintain a certain distance from institutional frameworks in order to preserve artistic freedom and autonomy. Navigating this tension requires recognising the value of these spaces without forcing them into rigid institutional models. Therefore, policies should aim to protect the diversity of cultural expressions and ensure that no form of culture is hierarchically valued over another.

At European level, heritage is understood as human-centred. It is about the diversity of voices and the stories they carry. The European Heritage Label (EHL), introduced in 2011, seeks to reinforce a shared understanding of European heritage connected to common values. Gabrielle Bernoville, former Creative Europe Programme officer at the European Commission explains: while heritage policy remains a national competence, European institutions and Member States are increasingly interested in what is referred to as "living heritage" or Intangible Heritage. This includes performing arts and live music as part of collective memory, living practices, and transmission processes.

Cultural heritage can also influence urban planning and real estate dynamics. For example, it is not possible to pursue a meaningful green transition without addressing built heritage and the challenge of adapting historic buildings to contemporary uses.

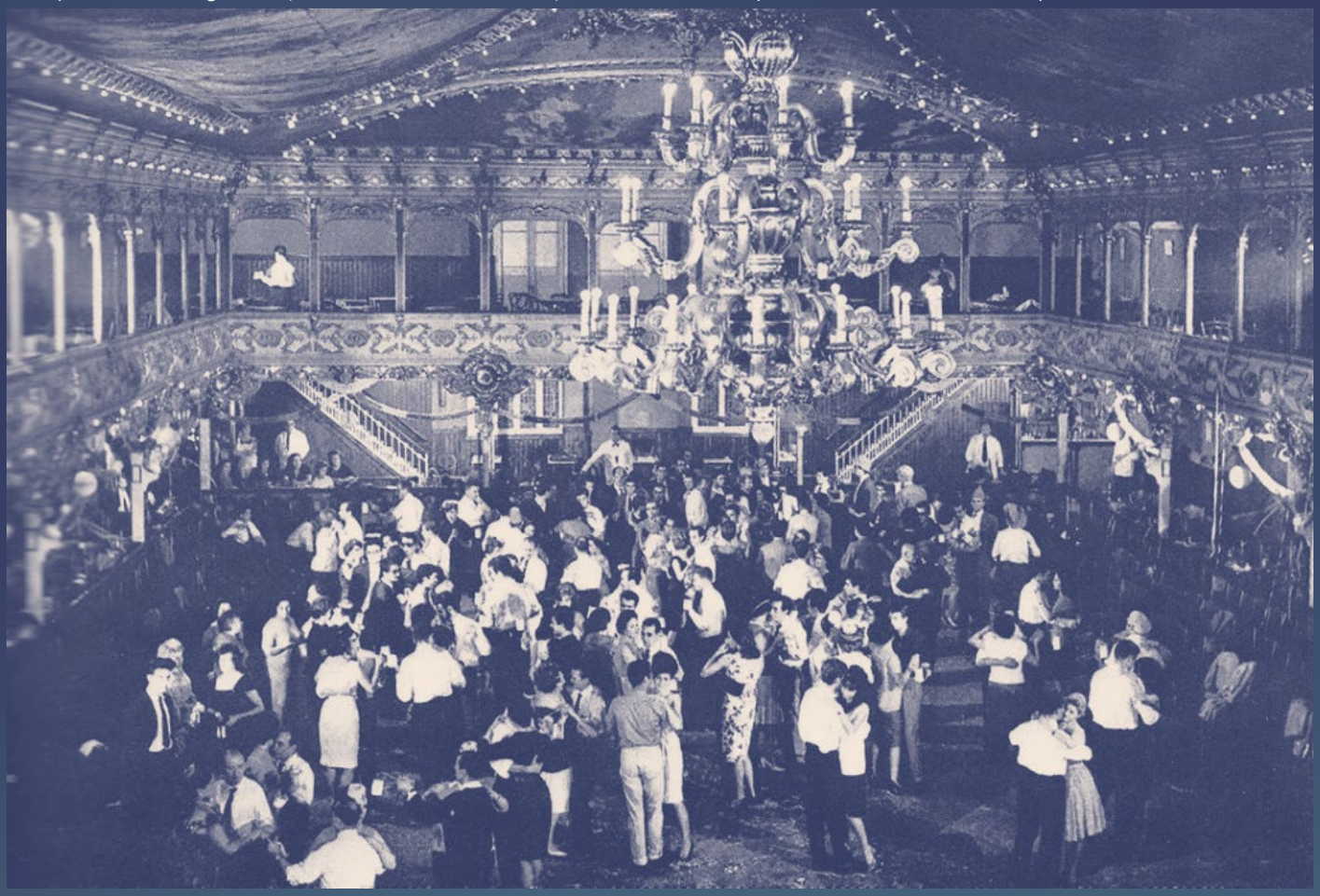


Labelling heritage is not an end in itself, but an engagement to serve, protect, and safeguard an expression of collective culture. A label only has value if it is useful to specific communities. It functions as a form of long-term contract between institutions and communities.

Within the European Heritage Label approach, designation marks the beginning of a process focused on capacity-building, visibility, and the reinforcement of local actors. Unlike other heritage frameworks, the emphasis is not on prestige or monumental aesthetics, but on empowering living practices and "third spaces" where people gather, participate, and transmit memories and values.

Gabrielle Bernoville summarises: "We are increasingly moving away from the idea of heritage as something museum-like or dusty. Heritage belongs to people. It is enjoyed, cherished, and passed on by communities to future generations."

Europe's oldest nightclub, Barcelona's La Paloma, the historic baroque ballroom which first opened in 1903



CONCLUSION

Noise conflicts and venues closures are not inevitable outcomes of urban life. They are a sign of changing cities, and that governance frameworks must evolve accordingly. Noise disputes, when addressed early and collectively, can become opportunities to strengthen dialogue and clarify responsabilities.

Live music venues are part of the social and cultural infrastructure of European cities. They contribute to employment, artistic development, community building, and the vitality of neighbourhoods after daytime activities cease. Their presence reflects a city's openness, diversity, and capacity to accommodate different ways of living. Recognising this role does not mean ignoring residents' concerns but designing balanced solutions that protect both cultural activity and quality of life.

Across Europe, practical tools already exist where political will and structured dialogue are present: coordinated planning, mediation mechanisms, updated sound management practices, funding for insulation, protection zones, and night-time governance structures are multiple possible solutions.

The future of live music in cities depends less on avoiding conflict and more on organising it constructively. With proactive planning, shared responsibility, and institutional recognition, music venues can continue to operate as spaces of creativity, social gathering, living heritage and guarantee cultural continuity within evolving urban environments.

This report is primarily intended as a practical advocacy tool for Live DMA members, supporting dialogue with local policymakers and authorities. While it reflects predominantly European, and largely Western, perspectives and case studies, we are attentive to how these dynamics unfold in other regions and are keen to understand how its arguments resonate across different European contexts and beyond, including other continents.

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METHODOLOGY

This document is based on a qualitative research approach combining expert interviews, following discussins with the Live DMA members and previous work conducted on the challenges faced by music venues in European cities. In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from different backgrounds, including representatives of public administrations, experts involved in urban planning and night-time governance, representatives of cultural networks or NGOs, venue operators, and acoustic specialists. These conversations provided first-hand insights into the mechanisms that lead to noise conflicts and venue closures, as well as examples of policies and practices developed in different cities.

The content presented in this document reflects the testimonies and perspectives collected during these interviews and exchanges. While the sources of information have been verified where possible, the report relies partly on personal accounts and professional experiences. For this reason, the author cannot guarantee the absolute accuracy of every detail shared but has sought to present the information faithfully and transparently as it was conveyed.

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