

I.M.P's venue ownership: positive, negative, or somewhere in between?

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Abstract

Music venues are often an important part of a community both culturally and financially. In this paper, I explore the effect independent venues have on their stakeholders vs. the effects of I.M.P. venues, which is a series of concert halls and clubs all owned by one company. To pursue this answer, I pull from my own experience attending both I.M.P. and independent venues, and dissect conversation I have had with other stakeholders of both types of venues. I also analyze scholarly sources that look at the effects of different types of venues from a sociological perspective. I finally pull directly from the websites of I.M.P. and independent venues to analyze the way that they speak about their own services. This is an important topic to investigate because, in my own experience, the quality of a music venue can directly influence how a community functions, can help artists grow their platforms, and can have vastly different audience experiences.

In the DMV area, the live music scene has been considered by many to be a cornerstone of local culture, bringing together diverse communities and being the place where many famous artists found their beginnings. But, in recent years, a single entity has gained considerable control over this landscape. I.M.P, the influential promoter behind venues like the 9:30 Club, the Lincoln

Theatre, and The Anthem. The Anthem, located at The Wharf in Washington, D.C., is perhaps I.M.P.'s crown jewel, boasting impressive acoustics, advanced lighting systems, and the capacity to host some of the biggest names in music.

After my own trip to The Anthem, I was left at a crossroads. I did enjoy the venue, finding the location combined with the high-end equipment and production of the venue to be enjoyable. I was there to see the L.A.-based rapper Vince Staples. For the style of the show I thought the venue was well suited, the simple layout allowed for a large floor of standing tickets to all have a worthwhile auditory and visual experience, and the simplicity of the venue brought more attention towards the performance on stage. After the show, when talking to another resident on my floor who works at the venue, I was informed of I.M.P and their control over much of the DC music scene. This new information led me to the question, does the dominance of I.M.P on D.C. music venues compromise the authenticity and unique cultural contributions of independent venues?

To explore this, we need to compare I.M.P's offerings to those of smaller, independently operated venues and examine the specific challenges faced by independent spaces in today's competitive and even monopolistic markets. Through the analysis of interviews with employees and attendees and a comparison of the experiences each type of venue provides, this essay investigates whether I.M.P's control ultimately helps or hinders the cultural value of the DMV's live music scene.

I.M.P. was founded in the early 1980s by Seth Hurwitz and one of his high school teachers but has since grown into a major player in the live music industry (I.M.P, History). Initially, I.M.P began as a promoter, organizing concerts and collaborating with local venues to book acts in D.C. Admittedly, the description provided by the history section of I.M.P.'s website

makes the company seem fairly grounded and art-focused. It talks about how, as a kid, Hurwitz, “and [his teacher] Rich bonded over their shared love of music and decided to book shows wherever they could. Seth worked out of his bedroom in his parents’ home, and together with Rich, launched I.M.P.” (I.M.P.). This does point towards the fact that I.M.P. may come from a genuine love for music and not a purely profit-driven goal. But, over the years, I.M.P has steadily expanded its operations and now directly manages several of the region’s most high-profile venues. Each of these venues offers distinct features; The Anthem, for example, is known for its state-of-the-art facilities and capacity to accommodate thousands of fans, while the 9:30 Club has a more intimate setting and a rich history as a cultural hub for music lovers in D.C. So while it makes sense that a venue like The Anthem, which was built in 2017, would feel very corporate and lacking in character, a venue like the historic 9:30 Club may point towards the fact that I.M.P. is preserving unique D.C. music culture.

I.M.P’s venues are celebrated for their quality, and the organization has garnered a reputation for maintaining high standards across all its operations. However, the company’s prominence in the DMV area raises concerns about the impact of such consolidation on the diversity and accessibility of live music options. When a single promoter or company holds a dominant position in the market, there’s the risk that it could monopolize not only ticket sales but also limit the range of artists and genres represented.

Independent music venues are often the heart and soul of a community’s music scene, providing platforms for artists who are just starting out, fostering closer artist-audience relationships, and enabling fans to experience live music in unique, personal ways. Main Street Crossing, a small venue based in Tomball, Texas, created a list of reasons to support your local small venue on their website, citing reasons such as, “They provide a more intimate experience,”

“They are essential for emerging music artists and bands,” and “Corporate buyouts detract from community culture and character” (Main Street Crossing). This supports the idea that, unlike large, corporately owned venues, independent venues often have the flexibility to showcase a diverse range of artists, giving lesser-known performers a space to build an audience and establish a name for themselves. I believe this is a significant cultural benefit, as small venues play an essential role in sustaining the grassroots music culture that larger venues might overlook in favor of established, high-revenue acts.

Moreover, small venues often serve as incubators for innovation, allowing artists to experiment with new sounds and styles. According to Adam Behr, Matt Brennan, and Martin Cloonan's 2014 publication, “The Cultural Value of Live Music from the Pub to the Stadium: Getting Beyond the Numbers” these venues contribute not only to the local economy but also to the cultural landscape by supporting genres and artists that might not have mass-market appeal. Dave Gaydon, the Head of Music at one of the venues Behr researched, said, “My remit is, I have to make money in order to be diverse. To give me the freedom to be diverse, I have to do ‘x’ amount of commercial shows that will deliver enough profit to be diverse” (Behr, “Cultural Value of Live Music” 11). While smaller venues run by people like Gaydon try their best to bring diversity to their audiences while still making profits, larger venues are purely profit-driven, meaning the less popular acts do not get booked because they bring less commercial success. I believe the diversity brought into clubs like Gaydon’s enriches the music community, fostering an environment where fans can discover new artists and appreciate the talent within their community. Additionally, by keeping ticket prices more affordable and offering a range of genres and performers, independent venues make live music more accessible to audiences of all backgrounds, reinforcing their role as integral parts of their local culture.

The idea of diversity in performances extends to the variety of acts that each type of venue showcases. Independent venues often support niche genres and experimental performances that might not be financially viable for larger, corporate-owned venues. This is critical for cultural diversity within the music scene, as it allows audiences to experience genres outside the mainstream and gives space to artists who might otherwise be overlooked in a profit-driven market dominated by larger players like I.M.P.

The physical differences between I.M.P.-operated venues and independent ones are striking, not only in terms of scale and amenities but also in the type of experience they offer. Venues like The Anthem provide a concert-going experience that is highly polished and professional, with advanced sound systems, large-capacity spaces, and services designed to cater to large crowds. While this ensures a top-tier experience for fans of major artists, it also creates a sense of formality and distance, sometimes detracting from the more personal, intimate feel that music fans seek. When I was watching Vince Staples in the Anthem, even though it was an enjoyable show, I did feel a level of disconnect between me in the middle section of the floor and the performers on stage, and I can only imagine that people further back than I was had an even more disconnected experience. When the show feels like a completely pre-rehearsed performance of songs with little input from the audience, aside from occasional yelling and cheering, the impact that performance leaves on an audience may not be as strong as a more personal connection felt at a smaller venue.

On the other hand, independent venues provide a different kind of experience, often with smaller capacities that allow for closer proximity to the artists and a more direct, visceral connection with the music. In Behr's study, "Live Concert Performance: An Ecological Approach," he talks about a small venue called King Tut's, stating, "some of the audience members we

interviewed talked of loyalty to King Tut's and descriptions of the venue included 'intimate,' 'permanent,' 'professional,' and 'friendly.'" (Behr, Ecological Approach 9). This supports the idea that smaller venues enhance audience engagement, providing an environment where fans feel more connected to the performance and to each other. In independent venues, artists can interact more directly with the audience, creating a unique bond that larger venues simply can't replicate. This dynamic is crucial for new and emerging artists who rely on intimate settings to build their fan bases and engage deeply with their audiences.

I can personally attest to this idea; to this day, some of my favorite concerts I attended were at smaller venues when I was able to directly interact and even on occasion speak with the artists who were performing. I remember seeing one of my favorite underground rap groups, Armand Hammer, on a small stage above a historical movie theater in Summerville, Massachusetts, around November of 2023. After the show I was able to briefly speak with the rapper Elucid, who is one half of the Armand Hammer duo. From what I remember of the conversation, I got to hear Elucid's opinion on the music of U.K.-based rapper Little Simz, and he explained to me how many of the recordings of the songs on Armand Hammer's 2022 album actually predate the recording and release of their 2021 project. This intimate personal experience with an artist that I enjoy is a feeling that no fancy equipment or massive venue can replicate. This type of experience is much more real and grounded. Experiences like that one are born from the cultural settings that independent venues provide.

Running an independent music venue comes with its own set of challenges, many of which have intensified due to recent economic pressures. Rising costs, ranging from rent and utilities to artist fees, have put a financial strain on small venue owners, making it harder for them to keep ticket prices affordable and maintain profitability. According to CNBC's article on

the economic struggles of small venues, inflation has further compounded these issues, with independent venue owners struggling to cover their expenses without passing on costs to their customers. In an interview conducted by CNBC, venue owner Andre Perry said, “You’re taking a cultural practice and pushing it into the marketplace, and I think there’s some tension there. Doesn’t mean it’s bad or that it’s broken, it’s just, we got to really work hard to make it sustainable for all the people involved” (Coleman). This pushing of a cultural practice into the marketplace creates a difficult balancing act; venues need to attract audiences by offering affordable shows, but they also need to cover operational expenses in an increasingly expensive market.

In addition to economic pressures, small venues also face competitive challenges. The success of large venues that use companies like Live Nation and Ticketmaster has severely hurt the ability of smaller independent venues to survive. According to an article by Bruce Houghton of *Hypebot*, “When someone pays \$250 – \$500 to see a shed, arena or stadium show, it’s 10 to 20 less \$25 tickets they can afford at their local music club” (Houghton). These new systems that allow for and even encourage people to buy up and resell tickets make consumers less likely to pay to see a smaller artist at an independent venue when so much of their money is already going towards the wildly expensive Live Nation shows. We also know this issue is not from a decrease in overall concert attendance; in the past year concert attendance has grown by 20%, and the global live music business is booming (Houghton). This leads me to believe the reason for the struggle of independent venues is purely due to the large companies that have created a monopoly over all the online sale of concert tickets, which has created artificial price increases because of ticket resellers who are trying to profit from fans’ desire to see popular artists. This

hurts smaller venues that either host more underground artists or are not part of the Ticketmaster system at all.

When these venues are being hit with the post-COVID effects like higher rent and an increased cost of goods, combined with these customers who have less money to spend on smaller shows because their money is being put towards expensive resale tickets, the damage to their ability to stay afloat is often too much. Houghton brings up the statistic that, “Back in Australia, attendance at small-to-medium-sized music venues has fallen 60%, patrons are drinking 70% less, rent prices are up 34.7%, and insurance premiums jumped up to 500%” (Houghton). This continues to support my point that when your income is decreasing while your cost is increasing, every business has a breaking point, which we see many independent venues meet. At that point it is just pure economics; independent venues need income to survive. Furthermore, the rise of corporate-owned venues has contributed to a decrease in the number of independent venues nationwide. When small venues can’t compete, they close, and the community loses a valuable cultural asset. This is not only a loss for artists but also for local audiences who depend on these venues as spaces to connect with music in more meaningful ways.

The reduction in the number of independent music venues doesn’t just impact artists and venue owners; it has significant repercussions for consumers as well. As independent venues close or are outcompeted, fans are left with fewer choices, particularly if they prefer smaller, more intimate concerts. With fewer independent spaces available, ticket prices for live music events tend to rise, as consumers are limited to venues controlled by companies with the power to set prices without significant competition. As Coleman’s points out in her CNBC article, “with inflated operating costs, some [independent venue] owners are struggling to keep ticket prices

affordable for audiences” (Coleman). This supports the fact that monopolistic control over ticket sales and bookings leads to higher ticket prices and fewer accessible events for fans. When only a few large players, like I.M.P, dominates the market, they can set ticket prices higher and capture larger portions of the revenue, often at the expense of the fans. This trend is not only anti-consumer but also anti-community, as it shifts the focus from creating accessible, meaningful musical experiences to maximizing profits.

This shift also limits opportunities for fans to discover new artists. Without the accessibility and diversity of independent venues, audiences are left with fewer chances to engage with emerging talent or explore genres outside the mainstream. The DMV area’s music scene, once characterized by its variety and inclusivity, risks becoming more limited in sound, catering predominantly to popular, high-grossing acts and leaving fewer spaces for alternative voices.

Despite all these drawbacks, I would like to acknowledge that the I.M.P. company has allowed many of DC’s most famous venues to stay open, like the 9:30 Club, which has been, “named the Top Club by Rolling Stone, Billboard and Pollstar, renowned as the premier place to see and hear cutting edge live music of all varieties” (I.M.P., LinkedIn). This club is so infamous and high quality that many large artists like Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton, Al Green, Willie Nelson and James Brown have performed there, and they have hosted some of the biggest modern-day stars like Adele, Drake, and Justin Timberlake. Being able to bring artists like these into an intimate club setting is a significant cultural addition to the DMV community that many independent venues may just not have a strong enough pull to do. On top of that, I.M.P does also support the local economies of the areas they operate in by providing many jobs and internship opportunities (I.M.P., LinkedIn). All of this is to say that while the points about independent

venues being a greater positive stand, I.M.P. venues and opportunities are still better than the alternative of having none.

So, while I.M.P. isn't going anywhere, the fragile coexistence between its venues and the independent spaces that remain must be vigilantly protected. If we, as supporters of art, fail to champion independent venues, they may not survive, and with them, we could lose vital platforms for emerging voices, authentic cultural experiences, and affordable access to live performances. The future of our music scene depends on it.

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