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Subject: Live Music Inquiry Submission

Ms Mary Porter AM MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and
Territory and Municipal Services
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Dear Ms Porter

I would like to add a submission to the inquiry into live music into the ACT.

Canberra has had a long history of venue closures, noise complaints, money issues and the like which have seen the live music scene change through a phenomenal number of venues over the years. Jamison Inn, Gypsy Bar, The Rock Ape, Aree Bar, Church Bar, Toast, The Ground Floor, the old Civic Youth Centre, Sound Underground, The Green Room the list goes on. All these have bitten the dust as live music venues.

The Warehouse or The Jam Factory as it was being transformed into, was fast becoming the new hub of all ages music in the ACT. It was a rehearsal space that they started putting on shows on the weekend. It's an industrial area, nobody around, but the owner of the block of buildings decided that was against the conditions of the lease, party over kids. In what seems a fairly extreme move, many of the bands that were due to play there have been moved to Queanbeyan. Although it's just ten minutes further down the road, Queanbeyan is not even in the ACT, but will soon host international acts such as Shai Hulud.

The question we have to ask is, what made it come to this. Canberra has been criticised ever since it begun for its lack of entertainment options. As many of these shows were booked in already, other feasible places may have booked out. Another issue is funding for the other youth centres in the area. Funding at Tuggeranong and Weston Youth Centres has been cut drastically. This means they will now only offer to do two shows per month, leaving them booked out until September, even though there will not be regular events at these venues.

Let's go back in time a little while. I moved to Canberra in 2004, so I can't comment so much on what happened before then. The youth centres had a fairly strong scene running up until 2005. The old Civic Youth Centre had regular bands playing there, whilst Woden and Belconnen Youth Centres were quite active as well.

The Ground Floor, a pub in Belconnen, started out with some live music, mainly hardcore and metal bands playing each weekend. Eventually this extended to having Sunday afternoon all ages shows. Things were going strong up until "the man", this time represented by the Bodyworx chain of gyms stepped in. The gym bought the pub to expand their fitness facility, that was the end of the ground floor.

The bar at the University of Canberra became an option for larger all ages shows. Touring national bands started to make that a stop on the tour. The large fence separating the drinkers from the children ruined any sense of intimacy available, but a venue is a venue.

In 2005, Sound Underground opened up. This was a shop with all the potential in the world. Run by Brad from the Canberra band Pod People, it was not just a place where bands could play, but also a rehearsal space, a record store, even just a place to hang out, complete with pool table and table tennis.

What really happened, the full story I don't think anyone will ever know. After some great shows, sometimes sold out, poor management practices saw Sound Underground go into decline. A large festival, "Soundfest" was held at the end of 2006. Unfortunately for the bands, none of them received the money they had been promised to be paid. Before the festival, Sound Underground had closed its doors.

The hunt was on for a new all ages venue. The youth centres became available from time to time, but didn't seem like a regular option. The Civic Youth Centre seemed a great option when Miles Away and Break Even played together there, however the hire costs were ridiculously preventative to bands playing there. As a matter of fact, the bands themselves had to pay to play there in the end.

In early 2007, the Jamison Inn showed itself as a great option for a venue. The function room next door to the pub was set up for live music, which provided a place where people of all ages could come and watch a band, while those wanting to cure their thirst needed to just pop next door.

After numerous successful shows including Melbourne bands Carpathian and Mindsnare and international acts Terror and Agnostic Front, the Jamison Inn started becoming more and more hostile towards hosting hardcore and punk acts. This situation was not improved after an all in brawl at a Parkway Drive show. Things came to a head when Miles Away play in September 2007, They played most of their set with no PA, in the dark. The sound operators had cut the show short. The crowd still went crazy, this mainly a reaction to the nature of the sound operators.

Not so long after this, the Jamison was no longer working as a venue. It wasn't too long after that and some developers had bought the "Jamo" and it was facing being knocked down. Somebody else beat them to it when they burned the Inn to the ground.

The hunt was back on for an all ages venue. It wasn't, and still isn't uncommon for bands to play in someone's living room or backyard, as there are simply no other places for them to play. Tuggeranong Youth Centre has managed to play host to an incredible amount of great shows from leading international and interstate acts. As mentioned before though, funding has been cut and events aren't happening as regularly.

Bar 32 opened up a couple of years back, it has provided a venue for many touring acts. Being a bar though, it is not open to those under 18, meaning many of the people interested in turning up miss out on the show. Some of the bigger events have been held in venues such as the UC refectory, Woden Basketball

Stadium or Albert Hall, but once again, high costs making hiring these venues difficult. There is also no use holding an event for 80 people in a room that fits 800 or more.

The Jam Factory was looking like being the saviour, the place to be, but already, only a couple of months into its tenure as saviour, it's already over. It hosted a number of shows, a particular highlight was the final show of Canberra band Slowburn. After forming in 2006 and playing their first show at Sound Underground, they played most of the venues mentioned above and have been a consistent force in the Canberra music scene in the last few years.

The Queanbeyan experiment had a first up success with Confession playing a sold out show on Sunday at the Axis Youth Centre. The question though, is where do we go from here. Will Queanbeyan always be a feasible option? The bus services are limited and expensive and the town is notorious for various crimes.

At the moment the city is full of empty buildings. As the Canberra Centre has grown and grown, shops outside have closed. Instead of new buildings going in to replace them, many shops lie empty with numerous "for lease" signs on them. Sean Points, who has featured in numerous Canberra bands including Slowburn, Dirt Navigator, Condorcet and Jerkstore remember being underage and not being able to see bands coming to town. He said in an interview in the Capital Eyes zine "it seemed unfair that because of my age I couldn't see a particular band".

Take a tour of the city, once where there was Impact Records, Dick Smith Electronics, Dymocks Books, Cafe Macchiato, Bourbon Bar, The Akuna Club, all these spaces are currently vacant. A question I would like to ask is why can't at least some of these be converted to spaces where live music can be enjoyed by all.

Canberra could do well to look at the Renew Newcastle movement. From the information on their website:

Renew Newcastle has been established to find short and medium term uses for buildings in Newcastle's CBD that are currently vacant, disused, or awaiting redevelopment. Renew Newcastle aims to find artists, cultural projects and community groups to use and maintain these buildings until they become commercially viable or are redeveloped.

This movement isn't about providing long term solutions, but keeping spaces occupied. I was in Newcastle recently, I noticed a great difference between that visit and being there a few years back, when the city was a wasteland of empty spaces.

There are plenty of spaces available and there are numerous artist run arts hubs that Canberra residents could take a look at for inspiration. Two that I have visited recently are The Fort in Brisbane and Loophole in Melbourne. Both of these are DIY art spaces, run but a number of artists in many different mediums. Each space also provides an area for live performances.

Some people may look at the situation as no problem. Many people believe these aggressive styles of music should be run out of town. Little old ladies are not alone in this belief. Canberra's leading hardcore band, 4 Dead are banned from

almost every venue in town. Well they would be, if the venues still existed. The situation though, is not simply about music, it's about giving opportunities to the youth of today, not just for something to do, but for a chance to be involved.

Canberra is not the only place in Australia where live music is being forced out of town. A new law came into place in Melbourne in 2005 banning all ages music concerts from the city centre. The reason for this, was that somebody went crazy on drugs at a dance music event and stabbed somebody. Rock music had to suffer because of this.

As time goes on, more and more venues seem less and less open to the ideas of all ages music. Over the last few years, the all ages venues seem to be further and further out, places such as Seaford and Dandenong. Desperate times call for desperate measures, many all ages shows are "secret" shows in warehouses, rehearsal studios or jam rooms. This issue with these shows is that only a select few people get to see them. This is not music for the masses, but creates an elite classes of "haves" and "have-nots" within an already small scene.

What Canberra needs are some friendly venue owners to get together to help liven up the city centre. The ACT government runs the "Groovin' in Garema" program through the summer, with live bands playing in the open spaces around the city. These are generally jazz bands aimed at the public servants on their lunch breaks. These acts are doing nothing to occupy "the kids". Kel, owner of Brisbane DIY artspace The Fort recommends "get a group of supportive people together". She goes on to say "I think I've given myself plenty of extra grey hairs, I may have taken on a little too much".

If only I was rich, I could be one of these friendly venue owners. The problem over the years though, has been that friendly venue owners don't always have such friendly neighbours. The Waldorf has been a key complainer in the city centre, leading to the demise of Toast and regularly threatening the Transit Bar. In the suburbs, it may be the local residents that kick up a stink. However, these empty shops in the city centre are surrounded by nightclubs and other noise makers. I would see no problem with converting at least one of these empty spaces into some sort of live music venue. As a matter of fact, I think it would enhance the city centre.

Mr Daniel Boyle