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"A Fellow-Traveler Thing"

On Bar Staff Perceptions in a Grassroots Music Venue

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intricate processes shaping the day-to-day operations of a grassroots live music venue in central London. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and 16 semi-structured interviews with management and bar staff, it situates the study against the backdrop of widespread venue closures during the UK's cost-of-living crisis. The analysis highlights how bartenders both shape the Venue's heritage and culture and are themselves shaped by it as young creatives. It explores how bar staff relate to the Venue's legacy and ensuing nostalgia, building on it to form new narratives and community offshoots. Examining the cohesion formed through working together, it also considers operational dynamics, the role of management in fostering culture, and the circulation of a tacit collective ethos of "passion over profit," which permeates both the Venue's foundations and the professional trajectories of its staff. Findings show that while the bar's heritage is actively maintained by current workers, financial and social pressures threaten the viability of such spaces. Yet, the Venue remains a vital stepping stone, enabling young creatives to build networks, accrue social and cultural capital, and develop skills that extend beyond bartending - often serving as a launchpad into creative careers. In line with Oldenburg's notion of the Third Place, the Venue fosters spontaneity, community, and continuity, expanding the horizons of bartenders who often return as regulars. Ultimately, the study illustrates the enduring role of grassroots cultural spaces as both a home and a platform for creative life, arguing not only for their preservation but for the urgent need to expand their number.

INTRODUCTION

> *I don't think there was ever really anything cynical about any of the things that led to [the Label]; there was no networking or social climbing. It's always been a fellow-traveller thing. - The Label Founder, 2018*

The struggles of independent venues in London and across the UK are well-documented (Peterson, 2024; Bratt, 2024; Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2024; De-loyde et al., 2023; Dex, 2024; Lomax, 2023; Doherty, 2024; Trendell, 2025; Wray, 2024), with reports dating back to the 2008 crash. Following the cost-of-living crisis that peaked in 2022 (House of Commons, 2024), 16% of grassroots venues closed in 2023 alone - 125 in total - with a further 40 no longer classed as grassroots (McLaughlin,

2025). Nightclubs have also declined sharply, falling from 3,000 two decades ago to just 851 in 2024 (Bratt, 2014).

In response, artists and government forums have emphasised the vital role of independent music venues in sustaining diversity within the UK's music industry and cultural sector, with positive impacts on businesses, communities, and economies locally and nationally (Doherty, 2024; Peterson, 2024; House of Commons, 2024). Described as the foundation of the British music industry (Peterson, 2024), they are integral to London's live music ecology and providing low-stakes opportunities for emerging bands and DJs to experiment and develop identities (Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2024).

Interestingly, neither news nor academic articles focus on bartender perspectives or on how bar staff co-construct cultural spaces, despite their integral role in a venue's culture and operation (Warhurst et al., 2000; Whiting, 2024). Instead, attention falls mainly on the communities these venues sustain, and especially on well-known artists who emerge from them, framing venues as transitional (Paschos, 2023; Bennett & Rogers, 2016).

This paper challenges the trend of focusing on venues known for producing notorious talent - often framed as "transitional" (Paschos, 2023) - by instead addressing a gap in research and media through the perspectives of bar staff who run them day-to-day. This aligns with research on "aesthetic labour," which shows how hospitality workers, often dismissed as 'low-skilled,' actively shape culture and atmosphere and thus sustain a venue's identity (Warhurst et al., 2023).

Independent venues face sharper struggles in central London, particularly in Soho/Oxford Circus, where this study is based. Once known for seedy subcultures and adult entertainment, Soho is now dominated by commercial chains that, while resilient to nightlife decline, erode cultural missions by streamlining how atmosphere is produced (Pratt, 2008; Warren, 2023; Carah et al., 2020). Hospitality workers, often on precarious zero-hour contracts with no guaranteed hours (Wood & Burchell, 2014),

experience the UK's highest turnover rate - 37.6% within a year in 2024 (Watson, 2024). Exacerbating this are the cost-of-living crisis and a broader decline in youth nightlife engagement, partly attributed to the lasting effects of Covid lockdowns (Bratt, 2016; Dunworth, 2025).

This study is unique in its focus. Through interviews with bar staff at a small (150-capacity) independent music venue in Central London, it breaks open the experiences of young, creative bartenders, bartender alumni, and management living in London of a specific era - namely to the end of the last British lockdown in March 2021 to the end of 2023. Looking at a specific cohort of bar staff to paint a picture of the richness of experience yielded by working, communing and experimenting in a cultural space. The Venue, located in Oxford Circus - one of London's most commercial areas (Warren, 2023) - spans two floors: a cocktail bar with DJs on the first, and a basement nightclub and live music space below.

The community surrounding The Venue includes both long-term regulars and new visitors, many of whom have personal connections to the space without bar staff knowing them - meeting partners, forming friendships, or having life-changing conversations. For this paper, the community encompasses the Label and its associates, regular DJs and their friends, the bar team's friends, musicians, occasional audiences from other venues, regular promoters, a music-focused publishing imprint, neighbouring restaurant staff, a group delivering talks on the history of stones in the UK, and long-term regulars who have become "part of the furniture" (non-exhaustive).

This paper asks: How do bar staff in an independent grassroots music venue in central London perceive and shape the cultural space they inhabit, and how does the Venue in turn shape their professional, creative, and social lives? And to what extent does the Venue's independence enable these mutually formative processes?

First, the paper outlines the Venue's values, inherited from the founding Label and passed on to current bar staff. It identifies three eras, defined through interview responses, and examines how staff

engage with multi-generational and varied forms of nostalgia to shape the space themselves. Next, drawing on Oldenburg's concept of the *Third Place* (1989), it considers how the Venue sustains a community and sense of "family," generating professional and social opportunities for staff. Finally, it turns to the day-to-day operations of the bar and how these are shaped by its broader culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review spans interdisciplinary scholarship from sociology; media, communication, and cultural studies; ethnomusicology; social history; anthropology and hospitality studies.

On Nostalgia

Broader discussions of the impact of telecommunications and social media on cultural production - and its resulting 'nostalgification' - sit within cultural studies. Mark Fisher's concept of "hauntology" describes how Western society is haunted by the ghosts of unrealised innovation, reflecting a sense that little truly new is being produced (2014a). He argues that cuts to social welfare under Thatcherite and post-2008 austerity policies, along with rising university tuition fees, have increased precarity for artists, who are no longer indirectly funded by the state to create (McRobbie, 2011; Fisher, 2014b).

This, as a result, has stunted the production of new music genres - and cultural production more broadly, with the 2010s and 2020s characterised by an uneasy asynchronicity in which popular culture repeatedly references a past, often indeterminate, decade (Fisher, 2014a). Fisher argues that youth are simultaneously weighed down by the past, amplified via social media and handheld devices, and pressured by a sense that there is never enough time (ibid.). This effect is compounded by the constant rush and competitiveness of urban life (Pinonceley & Washington-Ihieme, 2019).

Psychological literature also suggests that the constant exposure to global news, combined with awareness of climate change (Gao *et al.*, 2025; Koder *et al.*, 2023; Patrick *et al.*, 2022; White *et al.*, 2023),

may lead today's youth to feel less optimistic than past generations about the future, prompting a turn toward the past.

In alignment, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that popular cultural production - and the commodification of nostalgia, where "nothing feels retro because everything is" (Fisher, 2014b) - has created "the assembly-line character of the culture industry" (1997, p. 163). Mining the past with formulaic methods is simpler and cheaper when resources are limited, compared with a more exploratory approach to cultural production (Vuger, 2023).

More recent work on nostalgia in cultural production includes Dario Vuger's *Introducing Nostalgia Movements* (2023). Compiling contributions from 18 artists and scholars, it highlights key features of contemporary culture, with recurring attention to Yugoslavia and everyday life, and examines how these are shaped by nostalgia (*ibid*.).

While critiquing the turn to nostalgia in political discourse - especially within right-wing nationalism, with its links to populism and fascism - Pierarosa (2024) argues that nostalgia can also offer possibility, enabling us to learn from the past to inform the present and future. She draws on Hartman's concept of critical fabulation (2021), through which the past is re-examined, and dreamt upon to inform current histories.

Existing literature identifies music venues as sites of nostalgia, which in turn foster ideas of place, memory, and belonging (Whiting, 2021). Drawing on Pierarosa (2024) and Whiting (2021), and considering the Venue's long-term heritage and narratives, this paper centres on how its heritage is sustained, perceived by the wider community, and whether its appropriation by younger generations challenges Fisher and Adorno's critiques of cultural production, centring on mainstream spheres rather than subculture.

On Independent Venues

The formulaic nature of cultural production (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997) can be compared to conglomerate-owner commercial venues, which, operating at scale, have increasingly priced independent venues out of central urban areas (Flew, 2012; Greater London Authority, 2020). Literature shows that hospitality conglomerates prioritise market logic over community, often eroding cultural missions and creating "soulless" spaces. Low staff retention - the shortest in the UK (Watson, 2024) - and precarious zero-hour contracts (Wood & Burchell, 2014) further undermine team cohesion and venue culture.

In contrast, literature on independent music venues - though limited - suggests their flexible community structures, often prioritised over market logic (Whiting, 2021), provide informal opportunities for creative contribution, mainly by platforming emerging artists (Peterson, 2024). Such environments are also better suited to sustaining wider community engagement (Paschos, 2023; Carah et al., 2023; Chatterton, 2002), yet little research addresses how this extends to staff culture, aside from Whiting's mention of staff shaping the venue's atmosphere, alongside musicians and regulars (2021). This leads one to hypothesise that maintaining a tight-knit community and strong cultural meaning would influence staff experiences, perhaps drawing them into a Venue's social fabric.

More broadly, literature on independent venues is largely news-based (Bratt, 2024; McLaughlin, 2025; Peterson, 2024; Trendell, 2025; Wray, 2025), though government reports (House of Commons, 2024; Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2024) also address venue closures and struggles due to post-COVID shifts in nightlife engagement and limited state support in the face of larger developers' encroachment.

Academic attention has been limited, focusing on social history (Allen, 2016; Kenny, 2022; Kronenburg, 2022) and the role of venues in community formation and local heritage, often highlighting successful artists who began in independent spaces (Kuchar, 2020; Paschos, 2023;

McLaughlin, 2025; Whiting, 2021). Few studies focus specifically on London or post-COVID nightlife shifts in independent ecologies (Lomax, 2023), perhaps due to the acute gentrification and commercialisation of cultural spaces there (London City Hall, n.d.) or limited funding for research on independent music venues which are structurally less profitable (Paschos, 2023; Whiting, 2021).

As noted above, a key gap across news, academic, and government sources is the absence of bartender perspectives. Aside from Whiting (2021), who highlights how time spent as bar staff can help form networks for future creative careers, little research considers the role of bar staff in shaping the cultural and social dynamics of independent music venues. This absence may reflect the broader devaluation of service work in Western societies, often regarded as low-skill or transitory despite its central role in sustaining cultural spaces (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Standing, 2011; Wacquant, 2004; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

Given the lack of research on bartender experiences in independent venues, it was essential to engage directly with those involved, "rather than researching them as an external other" (Jackson, 2014, p. 1670), necessitating a focus on subjective perceptions through empirical research.

Hospitality and Creative Labour Studies

Particularly relevant for workers in cultural spaces is literature on hospitality industries that addresses what Warhurst et al. term "aesthetic labour" - the reliance of employers on "the embodied capacities and attributes of those to be employed" (2000, p.1). Warhurst et al. highlight the role bartenders play in shaping commercial environments through their engagement with customers and physical presentation. Further hospitality and labour literature (e.g. Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) highlights the cultural devaluation of service-sector jobs despite their importance in sustaining experience-driven economies. Post-Covid changes in consumer behaviour, such as increased consumption of alcohol-free drinks (De-Loyde et al., 2019; Gordon-Wilson, 2021;

Morrone et al., 2024; Tabari et al., 2025), have also been considered, though rarely in independent music venues specifically, aside from coverage in the news (Bratt, 2024).

Also relevant is literature on creative labour in urban centres, as service work is often relied on by aspiring creatives (McRobbie, 2011). Gill and Pratt (2008) coined the term "precarious privilege" to describe how many young creatives in developed economies are drawn into insecure work. Precarity is often romanticised as an "adventure" or necessary "hustle," framed as "passion work," which obscures poor working conditions and limits opportunities for resistance, as young creatives may work for free or under exploitative conditions that erode work-life boundaries (McDonald et al., 2020; McRobbie, 2018). This dynamic also excludes creatives who cannot afford unpaid work or poorly-paid jobs to access networks and advance in the field (ibid.).

On Community & Subculture

As outlined above, independent music venues are crucial in fostering local, often creative communities (Cobido *et al*., 2016; House of Commons, 2024; Whiting, 2021; Wray, 2025). Existing literature defines a community as a group with diverse characteristics, bound by common interests, experiences, or location - online or offline - rooted in shared attachment and identity, fostering a relational space of trust, mutuality, and safety (Jackson, 2014; MacQueen *et al*., 2001; Tonnies, 2012). The significance of roles - varying social positions played, constructed, and negotiated by members as they shape communities - is also considered in existing sociological and anthropological literature (Davis & Moore, 1945; Jackson, 2014), further emphasising a need for empirical research to elucidate how a cultural (and relational) space is co-constructed by its workers.

Oldenburg's concept of a Third Place (1989) describes "those gathering places where community is most alive and people are most themselves" (p. 44). It offers a useful framework for exploring perceptions of community, highlighting accessible spaces where individuals can expand their personalities beyond work and domestic spheres. Contextual differences are notable - Oldenburg focuses on the US in the 1980s and 1990s (ibid.), leading to some inevitable contrasts with

contemporary contexts (Bogue & Ouillon, 2023; Ducheneaut et al., 2004). Additionally, his framework is not empirically informed (Hickman, 2010) and overlooks the role of bar staff, privileging regulars over those managing the venue day-to-day (Oldenburg, 1989). Despite these limitations, the concept remains valuable for identifying the characteristics that enable the co-construction of social infrastructure (Bogue & Ouillon, 2023) giving way to lively community, organic connections, and for contrasting with the Venue in focus (Ducheneaut *et al.,* 2004; Hickman, 2010; Soukup, 2006).

Further, literature on Third Places has expanded in recent years, largely focusing on the rise of 'new' Third Places online, with most studies examining virtual social spaces (Bogue & Ouillon, 2023; Ducheneaut et al., 2004; Hickman, 2010; Soukup, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006).

Sociological and anthropological literature on community has further highlighted individuals' need to belong, a key feature of positive wellbeing (Jackson, 2014). Belonging can be multi-scalar and fragmented (Amin, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006), holding varying meanings and experiences at national, or more restricted scales (Ho, 2009; Jackson, 2014; Shachar, 2014).

Whiting (2021) highlights how creative communities - formed around a love for music (Bennett & Rodgers, 2016) are integral to accumulating social and cultural capital. Formally defined by Bourdieu, cultural capital is knowledge specific to a cultural field (Bourdieu, 1984, p.4; Whiting, 2021) and can be "embodied (internalised and intangible), objectified (cultural products) and institutionalised (accredited)" (Whiting, 2021, p.564), convertible into financial capital, as well as social capital, or "who you know" (Bourdieu, 1984; Whiting, 2021). Whiting distinguishes sub-cultural from cultural capital, arguing that sub-cultural capital is particularly relevant to grassroots live music venues, as it holds significance only within 'alternative' cultural fields and affects the styles that musicians engage with within a space, influencing their social networks (2021). This contrasts with cultural capital, which can be leveraged for success in 'legitimate' fields (Threadgold, 2015, p.54). Indeed, disinterest in the mainstream is common among workers in independent music scenes, meaning that what counts as cultural capital in mainstream contexts may generate a deficit in sub-cultural settings (ibid.).

While Oldenburg's concept of a Third Place is useful for understanding the Venue's expansive nature and for enabling comparison (1989), it is too limited to frame the entire paper. It does not capture themes highlighted by other disciplines, such as the role of nostalgia in long-standing venues or the sense of pride derived from association with one in subcultural contexts (Threadgold, 2015).

Given the novelty of this research topic within independent venues, the study was designed as an exploratory ethnography, drawing on cultural studies, hospitality studies, and sociology. Following Abu-Lughod (1994), who warns against forcing field data into pre-existing theory - particularly when a subject is understudied - it was considered premature to frame the entire project under a single concept. Instead, a flexible, interdisciplinary approach was maintained to capture the complexity and nuance of bar staff perspectives and the Venue's cultural fabric (Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

As Geertz also argues, in advocating for "thick description" in ethnography while warning against over-theorising data too early (1973), this paper will put interdisciplinary scholarship from sociology; media, communication, and cultural studies; ethnomusicology; social history; anthropology and hospitality studies in dialogue to address the gap highlighted above regarding the role played by bar staff in shaping a culture space, namely a grassroots independent music venue in central London.

Thus, this paper asks: How do bar staff in an independent, grassroots music venue in central London perceive and shape the cultural space they inhabit and how does the venue in turn shape their professional, creative and social lives? There is a sub-question inherent to this, which is: And to what extent does the independent nature of the Venue enable these mutually formative processes?

METHODOLOGIES

Methodological Literature Review

Literature was reviewed across sociology; media, communication, and cultural studies; ethnomusicology; social history; and hospitality studies. Initial searches were conducted on Google Scholar using terms such as *"nostalgia cultural production," "independent venues London," "creative labour London,"* and *"service work dynamics."* Preliminary reading had also been undertaken in other modules, namely MC4M1 *Methods of Research in Media and Communications* and MC423 *Global Media Industries.* In the former, I conducted a pilot study for this research project, focusing on labour dynamics in creative fields through the experiences of emerging photographers. In the latter, I was introduced to the works of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) as well as to seminal thinkers central to framing this project, including Mark Fisher (2014) and Bourdieu (1999). Further searches were conducted using online databases such as Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and the LSE Library website. These allowed me to expand my review by identifying relevant papers and following up on their bibliographies.

Selection criteria included the document's age, nature, and language. Academic texts published before the 2010s were generally limited to theoretical or conceptual framings. This was particularly relevant for news articles and government reports, all of which were selected from the post-Covid-19 period in the 2020s, with the exception of one London City Hall policy brief, which was undated but referenced the pandemic, situating it within the desired timeframe. Since my research focused on perceptions of life in London, I assumed that most relevant materials would be anglophone. While acknowledging a potential limitation in my selection -namely, bias in judging which articles were most relevant or insightful - I mitigated this by prioritising widely-referenced works and exploring their bibliographies.

Given the scarcity of literature on this specific topic, it was important for the research to challenge traditional academic methods that prioritise generalisable findings and broad 'objectivity' (Libanary & Hamel, 2017), often at the expense of complex, situated knowledge and lived experience (Abu-Lughod, 1994). Accordingly, the study opted for depth over breadth, employing semi-structured

interviews (Geertz, 1973) within a single independent venue, using a sample of 16 participants to explore the topic in detail.

The Interview Process

I conducted 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with bar staff at The Venue, as well as with the programmer/part-owner, the General Manager, and a representative from the Label that had founded the Venue, whose perspective was considered crucial. While the interviews lasted only for one to one and a half hours - arguably not in-depth by some standards (Johnson, 2001) - my prior three-year experience working at the Venue as bar staff established a level of trust and proximity with participants, enabling nuanced discussions within a single session. Where follow-ups were deemed valuable, such as with the Venue's programmer, additional interviews were conducted.

Selecting the Sample

Two selection criteria were applied. First, participants had to have worked at the bar during the two years following Covid-19 - a period recalled by all as one of unique team cohesion. Second, they needed to feel connected to the Venue's broader community. Most participants had joined The Venue between two and four years ago, with Leonard and Zanzibar joining eight years ago, and Jon and Piffle joining 20 years ago. Ages ranged from 24 to 28, with Leonard in his early thirties, Jon in his forties, and Piffle in his fifties. All maintained a creative practice and sought work in creative fields. Respondents were primarily British, with the exceptions of Mark (Greek) and Zanzibar (Lithuanian); only two had been born and raised in London.

Of course, this sampling approach has limitations. Cleaning and security staff - though essential to the Venue's day-to-day operations - were not included. This exclusion reflects broader perceptions of who is considered part of the community (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008). While some security staff have become integrated into the community over time, a clear distinction remains between them and bar

staff, as security typically work outside the Venue, whereas bar staff work side-by-side indoors. Cleaners operate during closing hours, thus had limited contact with the community considered.

Another limitation is the scope of this MSc dissertation, which constrained the ability to speak with broader community members. Their perspectives on the community from the outside would have been valuable, but expanding criteria risked unmanageable snowball sampling and subjective selection, making it academically unsound. Short-term staff who never returned were also excluded. Additionally, one staff member with eight years at the Venue, described by others as "part of the furniture," was unresponsive and their decision to decline participation was respected. Similarly, the Assistant Manager, Annabelle, who provided crucial insights in a group discussion, could not participate in a one-on-one interview for personal reasons, limiting understanding of the Venue's day-to-day operations and challenges.

Thus, purposive sampling was employed to capture nuanced and complex accounts of this group's perceptions (Denscombe, 2017; Ploner, 2017). This paper does not aim to be representative of all grassroots music venues, as the part-owner noted, "no two venues are the same." Its strength lies in illustrating how broader socio-economic and cultural phenomena shape the intricate workings of culture, community, and operations within a single Venue, highlighting a perspective largely absent from academic and journalistic discourse: that of the operational team and the value they derive from grassroots spaces. Understanding the Venue as co-constructed by its operational team provides insight into the potential of grassroots venues, offering a fresh perspective on the independent music landscape, which is currently under threat (Peterson, 2024).

Interviewees were invited to choose their own pseudonyms to humanise the study and reflect the community's vivacity (Hartman, 2021). Some selected their own, while others asked me to assign one. Ronaldo has no Italian origins, and Zanzibar is not Tanzanian. All participants work, or have worked, as bar staff, with the positions of non-bar staff specified when introduced. Further measures were taken to maintain the Venue's anonymity: the Venue is referred to simply as "the Venue"; the

operator partnered with the bar from its opening until 2021 as "the First Operator"; the operator from 2021 to 2025 as "the Old Operator"; and the current operator as "the New Operator." The Label associated with the Venue is referred to throughout as "the Label."

Where celebrity names could lead to identifying the Venue, they were omitted. Others who were not so closely related to The Venue's history were maintained, to contextualise the Venue's legacy and reputation (Moore, 2012).

Conducting Interviews

Initially, interviews were encouraged to take place at the Venue during or before opening hours, with the expectation that being in the space would evoke stronger sentiments (Denscombe, 2017). In practice, however, this often led to interruptions from staff, bands or soundchecks, and seemed to make interviewees more self-conscious. As the process continued, interviews were instead conducted at home via video call, which appeared to produce richer data, as participants felt more at ease to think aloud and discuss the Venue's difficulties (McNamara, 2024).

Interviews were scheduled for one hour, though often exceeded this with participants' consent. Topic guides were prepared in advance (see Annex) but were treated as loose prompts or starting points for conversation (Klein et al., 2019; Rathbun, 2008). As this research was exploratory - the first of its kind to focus specifically on bartender perspectives in independent music venues - I sought to limit my subjectivity in framing the discussion (Jackson, 2014).

My pre-established friendship with respondents and my emotional attachment to the Venue was one of the main features - or anomalies - of the interview process. Recognising that my prior knowledge of them could both inform and influence my questioning (Klein *et al.,* 2018), questions were broad, and silences maintained, to allow space to shape findings and potentially contradict existing literature (Rathbun, 2008). I found that sharing my personal experience often facilitated a more fruitful

exchange, particularly on sensitive topics (Klein et al., 2018), although I made it clear that this perspective was mine and could be freely contested (ibid.).

Following Linabary and Hamel's (2017) call for researchers to 'own' their subjectivity, I acknowledged the co-constructed nature of interviews, explicitly referencing our friendship to minimise the researcher effect (McNamara, 2004) rather than creating an artificial distance that could inhibit participants (Rathbun, 2009). By embracing this closeness, I was able to leverage pre-established trust to gain richer insights (Allmark et al., 2009) and design a tailored topic guide informed by prior knowledge of their experiences.

With participants' prior consent, interviews were audio-recorded on a dictaphone to minimise risks associated with cloud-based storage and ensure confidentiality. This approach allowed me to take notes for follow-up questions, remain fully attentive, and maintain engaged body language, such as eye contact, throughout (Rathbun, 2008). I also found that explicitly stating, before the interview "officially" began, "I'll start the recording now" heightened the interviewer effect (McNamara, 2004). Reminding participants via text before video calls that the conversation would be recorded further facilitated fluid discussions. Additionally, keeping the recording on until participants had fully hung up proved valuable, as post-interview small talk often contained important insights.

I obtained ethical clearance through my university's Research Ethics Submission System prior to starting interviews.

Beyond signing the department-approved information and consent sheet (see Annexe), ethical practice was upheld throughout the interview through the use of process consent (Allmark et al., 2009). At the outset, I reiterated the participant's right to skip any questions, request clarification, take breaks, or withdraw from the interview at any stage.

I also reflected on my positionality as both interviewer and artist, remaining attentive to my social identity markers - such as age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness - throughout the research process (Denscombe, 2017; Linabary & Hamel, 2017).

Generating Findings

Otter.ai was used to transcribe the recordings, with participants' prior consent and the option to opt out. As McNamara (2024) notes, AI-powered transcription raises ethical concerns around data confidentiality and jurisdiction, particularly when third-party platforms are involved (Linabary & Hamel, 2017). Given that this study did not address highly sensitive topics and informed consent was obtained (see Annex), I deemed its use appropriate. The audio recordings were subsequently reviewed, and the auto-generated transcripts edited to reconstruct and correct phrasing as needed. This process was conducted at my discretion and may have introduced some bias (Denscombe, 2017). Interview recordings and transcripts were stored in an access-controlled drive.

I used NVivo to analyse the interviews, enabling structured coding and systematic comparison across datasets (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014). I followed Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Byrne, 2021), familiarising myself with the transcripts during transcription, then conducting a second reading. Using NVivo, I generated representative codes such as 'lock-ins', 'pride', and 'nostalgia', relevant to the research question (Byrne, 2021), which evolved throughout the process (Rathbun, 2008). I then examined patterns among codes to identify broader themes, recognising that some codes were sub-codes (e.g., 'Getting paid for creative work' fell under 'Opportunity and networking') (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process produced three overarching themes: 'Community', 'Legacy', and 'Running the Venue', after discarding codes irrelevant to the research question (Byrne, 2021). I then defined and refined these themes as the main axes of my findings and discussion, clarifying what each represented and how it addressed the research question (ibid.).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Spud Infinity: A Morphing Cultural Space

Independence and Ethos

Founded by The Label in 1999 following a series of successful London club nights, the Venue's ethos was shaped by the Label's, Label worker Kitty stressed, adding that the Label had no single genre .

A "fiercely-independent", Kitty and Jon said, community-centred ethos were integral to both the Label and Venue. With this, came openness to the events the Venue hosted. Events programmer and Venue's part-owner Jon, and assistant manager Annabelle, emphasised that the bar's longevity came from resisting trends, evocative of resisting cultural homogenisation by encouraging a diversity of events hosted (Peterson, 2024); from talks on the magic of stones to DnB club nights. General Manager Leonard noted that this was reflected in the music played upstairs by DJ's and staff.

Piffle, the Venue's sound engineer for 20 years, explained that it hosted bands predating strict label screening, allowing for more interesting acts and resisting what Adorno and Horkheimer term the "assembly-line character of the industry" (1997: 163) - the homogenising tendency to produce cultural content for marketable trends (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Jon recalled that when the Old Operator first partnered with the bar, they had introduced what he called "more mainstream shows [...] of TikTok artists". He described the result as "a venue full of 19 year olds. No one's drinking," reflecting both his appreciation for The Venue's multigenerational, often older audience and his resistance to more mainstream shows negotiated with the Old Operator.

He also recalled a weekly 2010s night that drew queues around the block. While profitable, he noted that it increasingly dominated the Venue's identity in ways that were not always desirable, as the Venue became known mainly for this night. This tension highlights how resistance to more

mainstream events is inseparable from the challenge of balancing financial survival with remaining true to the venue's internal and inherited values (Whiting, 2021).

Nevertheless, Ronaldo - a bartender and former touring musician once signed to The Label - had recently joined a major label (as an assistant, not artist) when we spoke. He admitted feeling embarrassed when telling people in his independent music community, underscoring the strong commitment to protecting independent environments, where, "the rewards of the field are credibility and authenticity rather than financial gain" (Threadgold, 2015: 58).

Alongside support from the operator, this openness and fluidity were enabled by what Jon described as "a responsibility to be [...] normal"; engaging with people humanly and encouraging people to put on nights for the first time, integral to the bar's development (Peterson, 2024).

Thus, the diversity fostered by The Venue's varied programming - made possible by its small size, independence, and lack of a single marketable message - has enabled it to survive by attracting varied audiences and interest groups. It has also remained connected to subculture through resistance to commercial branding and events (Frith, 2012; Kuchar, 2020; Whiting, 2021). As explored below, openness to grassroots processes has also enabled barstaff to shape the environment.

Multi-Scalar Nostalgia

From its opening until about a year before the Covid-19 pandemic, The Venue was supported by The First Operator. During this period, it hosted what Samuel described as "legendary parties". Zanzibar recalled "tab 230" - the bar tab for The Label and its associates - reaching £200.00–300.00 "every other night." The era also drew the Label's Associates, industry heads, artists and "old school ravers" in their late twenties and thirties.

In November 2019, the Save the Venue crowdfunding campaign was launched by The Venue and The Label after the First Operator was offered "quite a lot of money" to sell the lease. Through

merchandise sales, fundraising events featuring artists such as Fatboy Slim (who had played early gigs there), the campaign raised roughly £270,000.00 - enough for a lease down payment. They partnered with The Old Operator, just before the pandemic hit. Throughout the pandemic, the online site The Venue Gathering featured daily articles, playlists, and nightly virtual drinks. The Old Operator also financed a refurbishment of the downstairs club and installed new sound systems on both floors.

Coinciding with the arrival of most of the bar team central to this study, the refurbishment gave the venue renewed energy, Leonard, Piffle and Zanzibar said.

This second era was marked by staff "lock-ins" - late-night gatherings after closing, where staff friends and community attachés could finally smoke indoors and buy drinks at cost. Samuel and Kitty described the upstairs bar's windowless wood-panelled architecture as feeling like "a submarine or a womb"; "You'll be here for a night and suddenly it's like three o'clock in the morning." Music, a constant emotional bond (Bennet & Rogers, 2016), was carefully curated: Wedge and Terrence explained the politics of playlisting, who skipped whose queue and the set order taught to new staff, to avoid "awful music [...] like, Black Eyed Peas and cheesy 2010s music".

When asked what made the two years after Covid so special, all pointed to the post-lockdown momentum to gather and celebrate combined with the mix of older regulars and a harmonious bar team. As Woody noted, this made for great, intergenerational parties.

In the wake of the cost of living crisis, which peaked in late 2022 (House of Commons, 2024), things shifted at The Venue. Henry said that some core bar staff left to pursue careers elsewhere, replaced by irregular staff, making it harder to form close bonds - a recurring issue in bartending and low-retention roles in the UK, with an estimated 37.6% leaving within a year, the highest turnover rate in the country (Watson, 2024). Ann, Samuel, Woody and Rudi, who had since stopped bartending, spoke

to it being an unsustainable lifestyle, partying so often. Others highlighted the late nights and irregular shifts.

Terrence and Wedge remarked, "'I think we're the last of, like, a good thing while it lasted," referring to the free drinks and parties. Previous assistant manager Woody, also said they had to leave because of burn-out, mainly because he'd facilitated countless lock-ins, a lifestyle which had impacted his relationship with his partner and overall wellbeing; suggesting that Annabelle, who took over from him, may have limited lock-in privileges to preserve herself in her role. Rudi, Annabelle, and Ann also noted changes in youth nightlife behaviour (Bratt, 2024), with "people being skint," meaning the bar was generally less busy.

All noted Leonard's desire to "settle down," that people were generally getting older, and that partying less was not inherently negative nor did it reduce social connections. For The Label, whose staff had also grown slightly older, visits became less frequent, with some working from home (Bratt, 2016).

During the interview period, the Venue also transitioned to The New Operator, discussed below.

Subjective Nostalgia

> *What is that drives what's special about [The Venue]?*
>
> *Legacy.*
>
> *Legacy?*
>
> *Yeah Legacy, something like that. I think if you built it today with the same people, it still wouldn't be the same - AH it would be. I guess it's the people, not the legacy.*

Jasper's response evokes multi-scalar nostalgia. While all interviewees affirmed that people felt nostalgic for different eras, in The Venue's management and ownership narratives, the emphasis on recent developments was less clear.

Wedge remarked,

> *What is the Venue Gathering other than a bunch of nostalgic people? For me, a Venue Gathering is the staff putting on an event every month that showcases what they like.*

Wedge has not worked regularly at the venue for two years, and similar sentiments were voiced by Woody, the former assistant manager. This illustrates how alumni staff remain embedded in the community and retain a sense of ownership (Oldenburg, 2023) through their past contributions. It also highlights a tension with the narrative that The Venue's glory years belong to earlier times and a generation now in their fifties.

When asked about it, Jon resisted "peddling nostalgia", arguing it can be easily sold, but does not create an interesting cultural space (Fisher, 2014b; Vuger, 2023). Leonard observed that promoters and customers enjoy hearing about big names that played and memorable parties, as it contributes to the Venue's cultural capital, which can be converted into financial capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Ronaldo and Leonard both emphasised the Venue as a space which marked the milestones in community-members' lives.

Staff expressed nostalgia for the time they had co-constructed, though not separate from the Venue's broader legacy. Mark said he was "proud of what we've built," reflecting on how earlier legacy informed their desire to maintain The Venue as a relevant cultural space. Selma, a more recent team member, had early-on learnt about The Venue's history from other staff, noting that "the first question anyone asked me was what band I was in," showing continuity in fostering a creative culture. This aligns with Pierarosa's argument that nostalgia can be an imaginative process: while uncritical glorification of the past is a pitfall, nostalgia can also enable current generations to build something new (2024).

A Community

A Third Place

Oldenburg's concept of a Third Place (1989) offers a framework for understanding spaces separate from home or work where people can be themselves.

Oldenburg defines a Third Place as a neutral ground, separate from home and work, where 'none are required to play host' (1989). This presents a contradiction at The Venue, where bartenders' sense of attachment comes precisely from playing host. Oldenburg also posits that Third places are levelers, dissolving social hierarchy, and allow colleagues to know each other more fully than at work (ibid). While Samuel spoke to comradeship between bartenders, to a silent language developed during busy shifts, bonds extended beyond working hours too, as Samuel met his girlfriend there and now lives with Henry and Annabelle. Ronaldo said he'd made "lifelong friends". The Venue, while host to a community, transcends the work/Third Place division as posited by Oldenburg as it blurs the line between bartender, customer, flatmate and partner. Although paradoxically, this also points to it being a leveler in which bartenders are considered as part of the fabric of the community surrounding The Venue.

The quality of neutral ground is tied to the Third Place as a leveler: as an inclusive space accessible in central London, The Venue fosters interactions across social groups. However, as reflected in interviewees' remarks on declining attendance, this is impeded by the rising cost-of-living, which price some people out of nightlife (House of Commons, 2024), suggesting a threat to the broader ability for community to be fostered by cultural spaces. Annabelle explained frustration at raising pint prices to £7.00 (some still £6.80), resisted until rising overheads made it unavoidable. In conversation with Rudi and Ann, they highlighted this as a vicious cycle: as costs increase, attendance falls, prompting further price rises (Bai & Han, 2022). Economic conditions thus limit the Venue's ability to function as a Third Place. Although as Ann said, previous bar staff still get discounts on drinks, continuing to draw them to the bar.

The bar's "anti-cool" and "everyone welcome" ethos aligns with its role as a leveler. Oldenburg (1989: 34) also argues that a Third Place acts as a leveler, where "the charm and flavour of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts," echoing Simmel's concept of "pure sociability," in which people gather simply for the joy of being together (1949). Staff described The Venue as a place where they could be themselves in ways they had not elsewhere. Bartenders who had moved on, such as Wedge and Rudi, noted the difficulty of transitioning to other jobs and feeling they had to conceal aspects of themselves they could express at The Venue. This underscores the importance of such spaces during transitions to adulthood - a period widely recognised as challenging for wellbeing (Ascenso et al., 2016) - and suggests that, here, leisure and work blend meaningfully.

"Conversation is the main activity," writes Oldenburg (1989: 49). Indeed, Leonard reflected on the bar's open layout that encouraged conversations between staff and customers, often about music. Zanzibar, Mark, and Terrence similarly said that engaging in discussions about music or art was central to belonging to the community.

Also essential to A Third Place is Accessibility and Accommodation (Oldenburg, 1989). Open during traditionally non-working hours to form a sphere separate from work (ibid.), bartenders noted the difficulty of late-night shifts. Accessibility also comes from always having "someone you know" there, even in unplanned visits, which keeps former staff returning. While Oldenburg emphasises that Third Places should be local, The Venue, located in Oxford Circus, is about an hour from most team members' homes in South London. And although post-Covid working-from-home patterns have affected the venue (Bratt, 2024), the distance underscores the strong pull The Venue exerts on its community.

Regulars are another essential feature of a Third Place (Oldenburg, 1989). Notably, alumni bar staff often continue returning to The Venue after leaving, with all stating, "No one ever really leaves the

[Venue]." While Oldenburg argues that regulars are key to making a place "come alive" (1989, p. 55); Leonard and Woody emphasise that the bar's layout facilitates interaction between staff and customers, making it a priority for managers to "keep bartenders happy," on the logic that happy staff keep customers happy. Whiting (2021) notes that musicians and audiences are drawn to these spaces because they identify with the staff, performers, and broader social environment, highlighting how staff shape the atmosphere and maintain long-term community ties.

Oldenburg (1989) emphasises that a Low Profile is essential to a Third Place, linked to its roles as a Leveler and Neutral Ground. While The Venue values grassroots principles and a management ethos of making everyone feel welcome, its community is also shaped by pride in its history. Several staff recalled first impressions of the bar as "cool," which initially made them feel slightly out of place. Selma explained:

> *I still think it's cool, but in a more legitimate way now, having actually gotten to know the people [...] it's run really well by people who care about the staff, so that is cool in a legitimate way to me.*

This sense of belonging to something unique fosters staff confidence and sense of possibility (Pierarosa, 2024), forging a stronger community consolidated by pride in their contribution (Hernandez et al., 2017).

Finally, Oldenburg (1997) described a Third Place as a "home away from home," (p. 59). Evoking Seamon's (1982) concept of home as a place that roots and rejuvenates, Woody reflected, "I can always just come in here and just take a deep breath." Wedge, who did not grow up in the UK, described The Venue as the most stable physical space in their life during their turbulent twenties (Ascenso et al., 2016), adding, "I'm closer to [The Venue] than I'm to my family." Echoing earlier observations about staff feeling encouraged to be themselves, this sense of ease and belonging - along with the feeling of possession and control without formal ownership - aligns closely with Seamon's conception of home, and existing literature on community more broadly (Jackson, 2014; MacQueen et al., 2001), influences staff views on The Venue's future and its nostalgic significance. Interviews further aligned with

literature on belonging: while it was not always attainable in the city, or across all eras and pockets of the community, the Venue - and its bar team - provided a sense of home and belonging, highlighting the multi-scalar and fragmented nature of belonging (Amin, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

A key difference from Oldenburg's framework is the clear separation between work, home, and the Third Place. Oldenburg's concept may be idealistic rather than prescriptive (Hickman, 2010) as it's inevitable that community ties link to professional opportunities, particularly in creative environments (McRobbie, 2011). The Venue begets a blending of domestic and work spheres: Zanzibar and Mark lived together, as did Ann, Samuel, Henry, and Annabelle; and bar work often opened professional opportunities in creative careers. The community's influence permeated staff members' lives - Ann reflected,

> *It ended up taking over my life in a way that I hadn't expected. I kind of thought it was going to be more of a supplement to other stuff. And then [...] the roles kind of reversed.*

The next section thus examines how professional opportunities intersect with the Third Place and its designation as family.

A "Family" and Network

All interviewees, except Jon, described the bar team as a "family." Jon nonetheless emphasised the cohort's uniqueness and the team's role in shaping The Venue.

Literature on workplace "family" highlights how close bonds can erode work-life boundaries, particularly in creative industries, often instrumentalised to extract unpaid hours (McRobbie, 2016; Wilmott, 1993). In these contexts, "hustling" is frequently conflated with "passion" and romanticised for employer benefit (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hoedemaekers, 2017; Kunda, 2009; McRobbie, 2018; Wilmott, 1993).

However, the term was primarily used to describe the sense of community and confidence fostered by the bartender role, alongside perks such as flexible hours and lock-ins, which enabled life-altering bonds.

The term referred to the bar team, rather than the broader community. Becoming part of this group involved "doing your time" behind the bar, tied to the idea that "no one really leaves The Venue." Beyond forming close bonds through intense shifts, staff experienced a dynamic of mutual exchange, contributing to and shaping the running of the Venue. Rudi and Wedge noted that, despite no longer needing to bartend for financial reasons, they would step into shifts if extra help was needed. Family also meant acceptance: as Selma said, she was taken "at face value [...] there's a mutual understanding between staff that, if you've got the job, you're all right." Once someone had worked the bar, they could return, see familiar faces and enjoy a regulars' discount, and the occasional free lock-in drink, still feeling like a part of the team. This reveals a tacit understanding of the role bar staff play within the Venue during their time working there; challenging the wider undervaluation of service labour in Western society, often perceived as low-skill or transitory, despite its central role in sustaining and shaping cultural spaces (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

However, Mark explained never wanting to leave the bar team, "it's like a secret club [...] I think that's really what seals it.", semi-joking that even if he won the lottery he would still work there three or four times a week, highlighting the dynamic that comes with being part of the current bar team. Nevertheless, everyone else said it was important to know when to move on, with Henry speaking to socially-constructed shame that came - particularly in family gatherings - with working on a bar for so long,

Barstaff cohesion culminated in Mêlée, a monthly, free live music event presenting bands and DJ's co-curated by the Venue's barteam, including alumni. First organised by Rudi, who promoted it herself for nearly a year, the night is now run in turns by staff, either individually or in pairs, reflecting the space's 'give it a go' ethos. Bar staff often perform or DJ themselves, inviting friends or emerging

artists from across the city. Posters, designed by Ann, led to an exhibition in the upstairs bar, where Selma read a piece she'd written likening the series to a ship with all hands on deck, and another staff photographer's portraits of team members were displayed upstairs.

Rudi and Ann mentioned the project in job applications. Ann earned £50.00 per poster - "terrible pay," she noted - but the experience built her portfolio and she had creative freedom, which she valued over profit, reflecting how small venues often prioritise production over financial gain (Whiting, 2021). Wedge enjoyed organising the nights as a creative outlet absent from their NHS role. Many remarked on how most nights had been consistently busy and brought a new, younger crowd into the space. The bar team's specialised knowledge and enactment of the Venue's values works to attract customers and foster engagement in music-making, nurturing belonging, and expanding networks (Whiting, 2022).

Beyond Mêlée, staff uncovered other sources of creative work through the broader community. Henry learnt live sound engineering from Piffle, who has trained other bar staff over the years. He noted this work was better paid than bar shifts and something hoped to pursue full time. Ann now designs most of the Venue's in-house posters, earning £200.00-£250.00 each. She spoke to the difficulty of requesting higher pay partly because she knew "they're struggling to keep the doors open" and wanted "to still be a part of something and to support it," but also noting that she'll often receive free drinks and a warm welcome in exchange.

Perhaps more indirectly - but no less crucial - the bar community, paired with the bartender's sense of inviting people into their home (as Mark, Rudi, and others noted), had equipped them with an understanding of how to socialise in cultural environments, which Terrence, a music video director, emphasised as crucial, and not something taught at university.

Connections were of course shaped by class, he reflected: some had inherited connections and financial support in London, whereas Terrence had moved there for university and worked to

support his practice, highlighting structural inequities in the city's creative sector (Pinoncely & Washington-Ihieme, 2019). Nonetheless, The Venue provided him - and, as corroborated by other respondents - a space to develop social and subcultural capital (Bourdieu; Whiting, 2021), gaining paid work through initial projects like filming parties and projecting visuals. Terrence explained how filming The Venue's annual street party for £200.00 led to a commercial gig making four Instagram reels for £1,400.00, arranged through a community connection. While not his ideal work, it covered his rent for two months.

Shooting a music video for Leonard's band, Terrence was paid with a second-hand coffee machine and an unlimited drinks card at the bar. Another project - doing projections for a monthly DJ at the Venue - was unpaid or perhaps a small token £50,00 - but he was satisfied that she had paid his drinks that night and given him magic mushroom droplets. He also filmed a music video for the Venue's previous event booker; and was repaid with a Glastonbury backstage pass (not including the basic entry ticket). Terrence noted that some unpaid jobs he took on in the past he wouldn't do now, reflecting a gradual transition to more consistently paid freelance work (McRobbie, 2018). These informal forms of payment exemplify mutual exchange communities (Mould et al., 2022), reinforcing the ethos that "everyone helps each other out" (Doherty, 2024).

This aligns with Oldenburg's idea that Third Places, as levelers, invite comparison and expand possibilities. Ann explained that she would never have considered working as a freelance designer without seeing others do it at The Venue. Similarly, Selma felt more confident introducing herself as a writer when surrounded by creatives, illustrating how cultural spaces help young people "meet and build their identity" (Kuchar, 2020). A reading she did at a Venue-hosted event caught the attention of The Label's publishing head, who offered to edit her work - potentially turning it into a book. Although this work was unpaid, Selma rationalised it as an opportunity to receive guidance, with the possibility of a future advance. She also noted, half-jokingly, that she worried the publishing arm might be less interested if she stopped bartending, given the job's role as an informal point of entry. Thus, The Venue helped young creative bartenders form organic connections, improving their

positioning within London's highly competitive and network-driven creative environment (Pinonceley & Washington-Ihieme, 2019).

While Simmel's (1949) concept of "pure sociability," cited by Oldenburg as central to a Third Place (Hickman, 2010), frames social interaction as valuable in itself, the overlap between personal and work spheres in creative fields - highlighted by interviewees and existing literature (Kuchar, 2020; Hoedemaekers, 2017; McRobbie, 2011) - suggests that Oldenburg's framework needs expanding to capture cultural spaces. Yet, an element of "pure sociability" persists in grassroots environments, where youth form genuine connections that can organically lead to further, often non-lucrative, creative opportunities.

A cynical reading might suggest the Venue exploits its close ties with former bar staff, but this would be reductive. None of the staff reported feeling cheated by the lack of formal payment, and framing it as exploitation would misrepresent their perceptions, which are the focus of this paper. Such a critique would also misplace blame, given the precarity of independent creative environments (Fisher, 2014b; Peterson, 2024). Given industry precarity and the Venue's mix of paid shifts and small creative fees, (Bratt, 2024; McRobbie, 2011) this remains the best viable option.. The liminality and flexibility of such spaces, combined with a culture of care fostered by their independence and collective effort, means that roles often entered as temporary can unexpectedly become formative - helping young people advance to more secure, better-paid work (Paschos, 2023) and develop their identities as creatives (Ascenso et al., 2016).

Running the Show

The Operational Team

As explored above, 'the family' was understood as distinct from the broader community. Community members were perceived as a "certain kind of person," but the bar team had stricter criteria. For instance, a recent hire was described as seeming "a bit overwhelmed by [the Venue]," and another

past hire was noted by Terrence as "a perfect example, someone who's really nice and a sound guy… but he just didn't fit [the Venue]… there is this sort of intangible thing." Despite the intangibility, interviews revealed consistent traits (MacQueen et al., 2001): interest in art and culture, and, as Terrence noted, being "somewhat charismatic." Yet, he acknowledged that some long-serving bartenders were not conventionally charismatic, but were integrated into the community, underscoring the importance of social cohesion. Interestingly, only Leonard mentioned bartending skill, perhaps assumed by others.

Leonard also emphasised that hiring was often through friends of friends - Terrence, for example, was hired through Rudi, who was hired through Wedge - but he noted the occasional need to bring in outsiders to prevent cliques and ensure the bar remained enjoyable, particularly given the low wages. Reflecting on his own interview, Leonard recalled leaving confident he'd been offered the job because his musical tastes aligned with the General Manager's, and he had relevant experience, whereas other candidates' "vibe" and ethos did not match the bar. Understanding and embodying the bar's ethos, particularly its music-centred approach, reflects what Warhurst et al. (2000) identify as the often undervalued but crucial role of aesthetic labour. Thus, bartenders' contributions - shaped by the bar's architecture and culture - were essential not only to its community and atmosphere but also to maintaining the Venue's grassroots identity. This dynamic also reinforced ongoing engagement, as members continued to support the Venue as a grassroots community and, over time, contributed to its network through their own creative work (Whiting, 2022).

Passion over profit

The idea that the Venue ran on passion over profit repeatedly emerged, often expressed as "it's more than just a job." Jon noted that none of the owners had "made any money out of [The Venue] for five years or more," maintaining independent ownership through other jobs. "So it's just a labor of love, yeah?" he said, reflecting on independently owned spaces:

> *There's usually someone at the center of it that just wants it to be there [...] I think ours is just a dogged determination that it should be here.*

This ethos was mirrored by barstaff, such as Rudi and Terrence, who, despite working in music video production and directing, were disinterested in transitioning to advertising for greater financial gain (Threadgold, 2015).

Though the romanticisation of low wages is documented (McRobbie, 2018), staff described choosing creative freedom over financial stability. This does not excuse low wages but highlights their choice to value doing work they love above immediate financial gain.

Leonard noted that perks - such as guestlist access, free festival tickets, and lock-ins - helped offset the low wages and precarity of zero-hour contracts (Wood & Burchell, 2014). Zanzibar, Ronaldo and Mark added their jobs were secure even when taking weeks off for touring, unusually honouring the flexibility of zero-hour contracts in the employee's favour (ibid.) Zanzibar and Piffle explained that they were able to use the Venue for recording, rehearsing, or playing Dungeons and Dragons when it was closed - opportunities rarely afforded by other venues, particularly in central London.

Leonard framed this both as a management strategy and a form of mutual exchange: accommodating staff schedules and doing favours encouraged others to cover shifts when needed and fostered long-term attachment to the Venue (Wilmott, 1993), countering the typically high turnover among Central London barstaff (Watson, 2024). The Venue's flexible community structure and opportunities for creative contribution supported sustained engagement, promoted respect for management, and gave staff a sense of responsibility and meaning - benefits rarely found in more rigid venues (Carah et al., 2020).

When asked whether the community aspects of mutual exchange or the flexibility afforded made managing the space more difficult, Leonard explained,

> I don't think you can keep people who are creative and fun […] and aspire to do bigger things in those jobs if there's not a level of compromise and flexibility.

This in turn fosters a sense of care for the Venue, highlighting the prioritisation of community ties and mutual exchange over a rigid but lower-maintenance shift rota. Thus, the prioritisation of passion over profit permeated the community, extending from management to current staff and alumni alike.

Making a profit in a live music venue, and the Future

While the above reflects the idea that grassroots and independent venues view profit as a secondary, instrumental goal - secondary to their broader roles as community and cultural spaces (Whiting, 2022; Kuchar, 2020; Bennett & Peterson, 2004) - both Jon and Leonard emphasized that generating revenue remains necessary to sustain the Venue. Music venues, are harder to profit than, for example, restaurants. Unlike restaurants, which rely on a steady flow of customers, music venues host finite audiences for specific shows, only buying two or three drinks each (Bratt, 2024). This further highlights the tension between cultural spaces - whose primary function is to host performances but rely on drink sales - and profit-driven venues, where the main draw is drinking, making revenue less dependent on supplementary activities.

A report by the House of Commons found that, pre-Covid, average spend per person on drinks in grassroots music venues was around £29.00, dropping to £12.00 in recent years (2024). Changes in consumer behaviour, including the rise of alcohol-free drinks, have further reduced the Venue's profits (De Loyde et al., 2024). At the same time, overhead costs - such as utilities, licensing, staffing, and insurance have increased (Bratt, 2024), challenging profitability, Jon explained. Working-from-home patterns since Covid have also impacted the Venue (Bratt; 2024); as Jon and Annabelle noted, with remote work, Fridays now feel "like another Thursday." Additionally, rises in social anxiety post-Covid and broader generational shifts in youth engagement with nightlife have further contributed to declining attendance (ibid.; CMCS; 2024), along with the broader cost-of-living crisis (House of Commons, 2024) rendering some Third Places financially inaccessible (Oldenburg, 1989).

Leonard also raised the issue of noise complaints - a common challenge for nightlife venues (Bratt, 2024). While such complaints had always existed, he explained that they worsened after a particular resident moved into the area post-covid, leading to customer losses due to the enforced one-in, one-out smoking policy after 10 p.m. Nonetheless, he noted positive encounters with council members who themselves held a sentimental attachment to the space.

Although independently owned, the Venue has been managed by operators since its opening. Both Jon and Leonard emphasised a positive, reciprocal learning relationship with the operator, where their input enabled processes such as streamlined calendars, while the Venue, in turn, taught them to engage with regular promoters in a more "human" way, Jon explained. However, this positive portrayal may also reflect a vested interest in presenting the Operator favourably, because of a power dynamic.

Operators, contracted by Venue Ltd (the Owner's group) manage the Venue's finances, staffing, business strategy, and promotion (Addleshaw Goddard, 2017). According to Jon, the Old Operator retained a 5% ownership share in the Venue which was preserved even after their partnership with Venue Ltd ended, in exchange for waiving the refurbishment debt owed to them by the group.

Leonard said the Venue hadn't profited in roughly ten years. Operators nonetheless sought to incorporate it into their portfolio, gaining subcultural capital - which at their scale worked more generally as cultural capital as patrons of distinctive cultural spaces (Bourdieu, 1984), whereby association with respected cultural landmarks accrue value beyond immediate financial return (Rex et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as Jon and Leonard emphasised, the operators sought to eventually convert this cultural capital into economic capital, introducing new strategies.

Thus, Leonard is formally employed by the New Operator, but stressed that his long-standing relationship with The Social Ltd affords him a unique position, alleviating pressure that may be

placed on him as General Manager to meet revenue targets, for example. Because the Social Ltd trusts him to maintain the centrality of music, community and ethos over profit-making for its own sake - typical of grassroots music venues (Paschos, 2023; Whiting, 2021) - he can act as an intermediary between the New Operator and the owner's group. Rooted in cultural alignment (Jackson, 2014), his contribution is thus perceived as key to securing the Venue's long-term success.

Barstaff held less favourable views of the Old Operator. Jasper, Zanzibar, and Ann, who had worked part-time in the Operator's marketing division for a few years through her proximity with the Venue, explained that the decoupling was beneficial, as the Operator had lost interest in the Venue's focus on music, "It was just more about sales, more about promoting," she said.

The switch in operators also had an impact on culture and staff lock-ins. and Annabelle explained a recent tightening in weeks leading up to the switch to the New Operator regarding free drinks and staff discounts. An overheard conversation after an interview suggested staff resistance: while their discount had shifted from 50% to 30%, one remarked, "If someone from the head office comes in, they get free drinks all night!", to which another responded "That is a piss-take!".

Jasper criticised executives from the New Operator who demanded a discount without explaining their connection to the Venue. This frustration highlights the sense of guardianship that barstaff have. Jasper said, "I'd be worried that the family aspect, the charm of [The Venue] would go", reflecting trends in which Venues are acquired by conglomerates and reshaped solely for profit, often losing their distinctive character (Wray, 2025). However, Jon and Leonard emphasised that the owner of The New Operator was a "music-head" who valued the Venue's cultural heritage and pledged to honour it. This raises questions about whether the New Operator is aware of barstaff's strong sense of ownership and their role in sustaining the Venue's community, and whether senior management acknowledges or discusses this in their interactions with them.

The New Operator has acquired a 25% ownership stake through the partnership. Jon said that this made them the largest individual owner of the Venue, but when asked if this made them nervous, they explained that the original owner group still held the majority stake, so as long as there was agreement on the Venue's direction, the stake wasn't cause for concern. However, separately during their interview, Jon was also made aware that Mark had said he would continue working at the Venue even if he won the lottery, to which Jon responded, "I'd be buying it […] Keep it safe." While speculative, this remark suggests a pragmatic approach to ensuring the Venue's longevity, rather than nurturing frustration based in idealism (Dex, 2024).

Looking ahead, Jon mentioned possible expansion across the UK and even to New York. Leonard was more reserved about their next steps and long-term role as manager, though Zanzibar said that Leonard saw potential in extending the Venue's brand, possibly overseeing international expansion. The extent to which Leonard and The Social Ltd will be able to preserve the Venue's ethos while navigating the commodification required for such growth remains an open question.

FURTHER DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Analysing the intricate social, cultural, and operational processes within a single grassroots music venue in central London, this paper has firstly argued for a contested and varied nostalgia within the space, demonstrating how intergenerational crossings of creatives enable the appropriation of values within a cultural setting. It has also shown that the grassroots, exploratory values held by the Venue - and enabled by its heritage and independence - create a low-stakes environment in which culture can be shaped and reshaped (Peterson, 2024). Crucially, it is the absence of a clear marketing agenda (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; Carah et al., 2023; Chatterton, 2002), and the positioning of profit as a means to sustain culture rather than as an end in itself (Whiting, 2021), which enables an open and exploratory approach to integrating younger talent into the shaping and maintenance of the Venue.

Hosting the negotiation of identities (Paschos, 2023), as well as "social and generational memories" (Byrne et al., 2003: 58-59), the strength of the cultural memory embedded in the space is passed down to staff as they join, producing new stories and bonds that build on the past (DeCesari & Rigney, 2014), and highlighting the nature of community spaces as relational (Jackson, 2014). In this way, The Venue's nostalgia differs from Fisher's critique of the omnipresence of "retro" in modern cultural production which can create uneasy asynchronicity (2013b; Vuger, 2023). The Venue's nostalgia for its early days is anchored in a specific time and, while appreciated, is sometimes resisted by staff who hold nostalgia for the time they co-constructed and value the present. This sense of continuation and building on The Venue's legacy reflects Sturken's concept of cultural memory as "a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (1997, p.1). Though not marking History with a capital H, bartenders felt integral to The Venue's ongoing history.

Secondly, underscored by a community of mutual exchange and shaped through a grassroots approach to cultural production, the paper argued that the Venue operates - albeit with certain differences to Oldenburg's initial framework - as a Third Place, as social infrastructure (Bogue & Ouillon, 2023) fostering a creative community. Yet, its role as a Third Place is contested by the current cost-of-living crisis, which renders nightlife increasingly financially inaccessible (ibid.; Wray, 2025). This produces a vicious cycle: as overheads rise and attendance falls, venues are compelled to raise drink prices, which in turn further limits accessibility (House of Commons, 2024).

Discounts and free drinks thus help sustain the community, whose members increasingly contribute to the Venue's wider cultural and artistic life - often financed through informal means - even as bar staff gradually transition into better-paid work (McRobbie, 2011). The Venue was particularly vital as a stepping stone in providing young creatives with opportunities to accumulate social and subcultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Whiting, 2021), to promote themselves, and to network within a grassroots environment that fostered organically emerging, low-stakes opportunities (Paschos, 2023; Peterson, 2024). All highlighted the value of its creative networks as a learning experience (ibid.). I argue that this underscores the broader value of grassroots venues: they enable young people, often

working hourly bar jobs, to develop their identities as creatives, while learning social cues in a collectively shaped environment where they feel accepted as themselves (Oldenburg, 1989).

Tied to this are the broader consequences of the disappearance of grassroots music venues (Peterson, 2024). The previous section highlighted how the Venue's grassroots nature enabled exploratory processes and what staff described as the quality of being "taken by surprise": none of the bar team had anticipated the Venue becoming so pivotal in their lives. Against a backdrop of rising social anxiety and declining youth engagement in nightlife (Dykzhoorn et al., 2025; Dunworth, 2025), this recalls Oldenburg's central argument about the essential role of Third Places as distinct from work and domestic spheres. Although in this case study those spheres inevitably overlapped (McRobbie, 2024), it was the Venue's capacity to foster organic connections that proved crucial (Peterson, 2024). As Piffle put it,

> *You stay in and watch Netflix, nothing terrible is going to happen, but also you're never going to have an amazing night out where, "Holy fuck! We met that amazing person."*

By contrast, in more commercial venues - where marketing strategies dominate and profit generation erodes cultural mission (Carah et al., 2020; Chatterton, 2002; Koren, 2023) - the possibility of spontaneous connections is diminished. With young people increasingly disengaged from nightlife, their social lives risk becoming confined to prescriptive domestic and professional spheres, threatening the potential for innovation, spontaneity, and resistance (Fisher, 2014).

Thirdly, this paper examined the narrative within the Venue's culture that prioritised community and passion over profit. While Jon and Leonard acknowledged that profit remained an objective, it was treated instrumentally - valued primarily as a means to sustain the Venue's cultural reach and long-term viability. This ethos permeated the space from its owners through to alumni bar staff, reflecting a collective prioritisation of accruing cultural capital over financial capital (Whiting, 2021). This paper also considered the growing ownership stakes and influence of operators partnered with the Venue. It would have been beneficial to examine the Venue's finances in greater detail; however, this information was not readily divulged by management. Further research into this area would be

valuable, both to clarify financial limitations and to explore potential solutions, and management may be willing to cooperate if they saw actionable feedback for the running of the Venue. Such research is not only needed but urgent if the accessibility - and existence - of Third Places that sustain cultural diversity in society is to be preserved (Peterson, 2024). As Whiting notes, "Music scenes need cultural spaces around which to congregate" (2021, p. 570).

Of course, this paper raises further questions about the compatibility of profit and grassroots community projects in today's economic climate, and whether this is even possible in central London, where independent cultural actors have increasingly been priced out (Flew, 2012; Greater London Authority, 2020). Indeed, Soho, once known for its seedy subcultures and adult entertainment, has now become dominated by commercial chains (Pratt, 2008; Warren, 2023). Jon, however, seemed optimistic - noting that subcultural spaces were still opening across the area. Leonard made an interesting distinction between the Venue struggling financially, which it was, but not otherwise. Both expressed cautious optimism.

Thus, this paper demonstrates not only why such venues need to be supported and preserved but also argues that more are needed. In a landscape where independent venues are under threat, Jon and Leonard's optimism points to what these spaces could become if bartender contributions were more formally recognised within independent hospitality. Instead of focusing solely on closures, it is worth considering how these venues can be better supported to continue the essential work they do - nurturing and empowering young creatives in an organic way, and providing homes away from home for twenty-somethings seeking community.

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