

Let's Talk: Live Music in Oakland August 16, 2023

Attendees: Dominic Victoria, Lizabeth Grey, Gabrielle DeMarchi, Adam Seifert, Teireik Williams, Trisha Margiotti, Camille Dixon, Caleb Shook, Sam Gallagher, David Friedman, Gabby Payne, Anna MacKinnon, Jules Depro, Christian Umbach, Kiley Robinson, Mollie Crowe, Bret Kunash, Elizabeth Sidelnikov, Seth Berkin, Julie Hanify, Joey Troupe, Evelyn Rodgers, Krystal Obeng, Mark Riggio, Benjamin Orr, Chloe Simpson, Adam Valen, Zachary Thal, Katie Emmert, Brandon Gipko, Bella Lardin, Elena Zaitsoff, Eli, Lane

Dominic Victoria introduces himself. He is a rising senior at Pitt and has been a summer intern with OPDC. As a lifelong Pittsburgh resident, he is interested in the Pittsburgh music scene. He hopes to share the student perspective on the need for a venue in Oakland but use the meeting to hear from all stakeholders.

Dominic Victoria, OPDC intern

The goal tonight is to discuss ways to uplift live music in a way that benefits everyone in the neighborhood, beginning with background and then going into open discussion. Bret Kunash from the City of Pittsburgh's Office of Nighttime Economy is here to give additional insight.

Historically, Oakland has been a center for live music. Venues emerged largely in the mid-70s-early 80s and the 90s, concentrated almost exclusively in North Oakland and along the Fifth/Forbes corridor. Oakland has hosted a range of popular and alternative acts.

Venue closures began happening in quick succession at the turn of the millennium. Six venues in Oakland closed in a decade. Owners cited rent increases, cost of booking, landlord disputes, parking as issues. From 2002-2010, Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation jobs in Oakland halved from 1,000 to 500 and haven't recovered.

Today, no formal performance venue that offers consistent live music exists in Oakland. This is true about much of the East End. The nearest options for consistent all-ages venues are Bloomfield, Lawrenceville, the North Shore, and South Side.

The lack of music venues is a part of a bigger problem: there is little to do in Oakland. Nighttime entertainment consists almost entirely of bars, with zero non-bar options for Central/South. Historically, Oakland had options, including a bowling alley, playhouse, and movie theater.

This lack of nighttime entertainment gives students two options: bring a car and leave, or work with what they've got, throwing house shows and parties. These events concern some residents (noise, safety complaints) and aren't the best option, despite the incredible musical communities they nourish.

Overall, a formal performance space can increase quality of life for all of Oakland. Not only would it support Oakland musicians and increase options for positive, all-ages nightlife, but it would also decrease residential safety/noise concerns and decrease the perceived need for students to have cars, as there is less need to travel outside Oakland if a venue exists here.

The remainder of the meeting will discuss possible next steps towards achieving this. A working group has been an early thought, but open to whatever ideas people have.

Bret Kunash, City of Pittsburgh Office of Nighttime Economy

The Office of Nighttime Economy is a liaison for food, beverage, and entertainment businesses who operate after 5pm. Resources offered include safety training, consulting, navigating sound ordinances, and everything in between.

Bret comes from a music venue management and marketing/promotion background including time at Club Cafe, PromoWest, and music labels. Found his passion for live music in Oakland. His first concert experience was in Oakland at Club Laga, eventually playing in a punk band at the venue and at house shows. It seems like a travesty that Oakland lacks a venue—getting people in the door is hard, so hearing about packed informal shows suggests a need for a space.

There are some concerns about safety of house shows, his goal would be to help folks approach it in the best way possible, ideally, opening a real space, with student involvement.

Do you have any ideas to navigate and mitigate some of the issues of house venues?

Bret: Use your best judgment. I've been in these spaces in the past. As a city employee, there is a fine line on what can be done, but initial thoughts are things like Narcan, de-escalation, safety trainings.

How would students navigate police shutdowns?

Bret: These interactions are exactly what we're trying to prevent with a formal space.

At this point, open conversation begins. Affiliations of speakers are labeled when mentioned.

Gabby Pane, Pittsburgh Innovation District

Pittsburgh Innovation District is a non-profit in Oakland. Gabby manages events and place-making, and connected with a student, Eli, to scout the church at 401 Atwood as a possibility.

Mollie Crowe, Oakland Business Innovation District

House shows are a separate issue, there is not much we can do now. The problem can't be solved without infrastructure to support musicians who currently face lots of barriers. She has background in Youngstown music scene for a decade, worked with an independent venue during the pandemic. Transparency is important.

A meeting member talks about one house venue they were involved in that did not sell alcohol and was aware of risks. Run-ins with police went well when they were transparent.

Lizabeth Grey, OPDC

Resident perspective is important. The current set-up does not work for many long-term residents due to safety concerns. Would like to see it moved into the light to allow for all ages.

Eli, Post Genre

Post Genre is a team of 10-15 Oakland music and arts community members partnered with the Pittsburgh Innovation District with the goal of trying to share Oakland's scene. The scene is something to be proud of, most of the people involved are invested in the community, aware that it doesn't belong to them. Post Genre has been trying for the last year to find a venue. The Atwood church is an option but the landlord's demands are too much to take on by their group. Looking into alternate locations, with the end goal still being the church, which has been redon. Could be a shared community space. How can we focus on seeing this be realized?

Bella Lardin, WPTS

Pitt's radio station has discussed trying to get Pitt to fund a venue run by these students. Is reaching out to Pitt a possibility? Either way, this is a passionate group of people.

Anna MacKinnon from Off-Campus Living remarks that this would likely be very challenging. She hasn't even been able to get space for an office.

Kiley Robinson, Mr. Roboto Project (on the board, but not speaking for them)

Roboto is a non-profit venue in Bloomfield, but they've had trouble getting students to them. Want to find a way to collaborate with other groups, especially students (WPTS, Greek Life). More widespread communication via meetings like this are important.

Dominic agrees, that was exactly the goal for this meeting, throw the line out and see who bites. There's a lot of people here with the same interests here that aren't working together. Liz agrees, remarking that it applies to other things: grocery stores, bowling alley. Mollie adds that the way to go about it is to work with non-profits, rather than relying on large corporations.

Adam Valen would like to see a space with development resources for students like WPTS.

After a question about Cultural Trust funding, Bret mentions that ARPA funds were recently at risk of being cut but were not in the end.

Caleb Shook, Pitt student

Getting trapped on one site or one idea is limiting. There is nothing to attract people to Oakland and nothing to do. Lawrenceville, as an example, has a couple of venues and a bowling alley. *Eli recognizes that the Atwood church isn't going to be an option in the short term. PID and Post Genre is checking other spots. Hopefully this conversation can keep going.*

Teireik Williams, performing artist and Oakland resident/OPDC Board

Booking has been a problem—festivals, venues, whatever. Pittsburgh is a musical city, but everyone is doing their own thing. As a small city, we'll benefit from working together.

Bella mentions Pitt does Block Parties, but a lot of students don't know about them. Maybe getting some bands to play at the Block Parties could be a good way to integrate them.

Ty remarks that it can be a hassle to get permits, so many just don't. The system is not working.

Eli adds that Post Genre and another member of the call are putting on a block party on Bigelow with the goal of letting people know about Oakland's music scene. Not formally announced but permit is prepared and is happening September 15th. All proceeds are going to the bands and production crew. Ty's event coming up on September 3rd has vendors, would love to share the list.

A suggestion was made that before an attempt is made to get a space together, there needs to be a unified platform for communication. Dominic agrees, everyone's goal is to produce a formal performance space. OPDC has offered to handle the second aspect and will send out emails to schedule another conversation. Emails are collected in the chat.

Liz and Anna remind everyone to tell people you know about the block parties. Pitt is sending out mailers to everyone in Oakland, canvassing.

Chloe Simpson

Working on a documentary about Pittsburgh music history. If wanted, they'd be happy to use the film as a means of promoting the push for a venue. Jared Cline of OPDC says they are willing to promote the documentary when it is released.

Dominic closed the meeting and thanks everyone for coming, citing excellent turnout. More communication to come.