

This comment piece was written for the ILMC's (International Live Music Conference) magazine 'IQ'. I was asked to write 450 words on a subject of my choosing. After three re-writes to make it appear less confrontational, I submitted it for publication and was told that before it could be published it would have to be 'approved' by some of the live industry's most senior figures, because IQ considered it to be very controversial. It was published in December 2007. Its intention was to force the industry to see the whole picture, to look at the grass-roots level and understand the problems we face in a country which is one of the world's most culturally influential and financially successful in terms of its music exports, yet refuses to support itself from the ground up, while propping up the 'high arts' such as opera and ballet.

More than four years later, very little has changed.

"The UK live music scene is more buoyant than I can ever remember it." If I hear one more person utter those words in the press, I'm going to bounce an SM58 microphone off their heads. The live music scene might be buoyant at the O2, Wembley and Glastonbury but from where I'm standing (a 275 capacity venue in London) it's rotten to the core, has been for years and will continue to be for the foreseeable future because no-one gives enough of a shit to do anything about it. It's like looking at Chelsea and Manchester United and proclaiming that football is in good shape? You think? You've looked at the Scottish Third Division lately? Let's get some home-truths out of the way first, for those of you still living in some kind of delusional world where Britain rules the (air)waves. We have some of the world's finest bands yet we house them in some of the world's worst venues with the surliest sound engineers, rudest bar staff, most disinterested venue managers and intimidating doormen. We treat artists and audiences as if we don't want them in our buildings and this we do in the name of entertainment. We should be ashamed of ourselves.

Our small venue circuit is globally derided. Small venues are crumbling. Investment from public or private sources is almost non-existent. There are, of course, many clubs on these isles which fly in the face of this sort of pessimism; homes for good music run by those who care and nurture, and employ excellent staff and train them well, respected and loved by audiences who attend and artists who perform. But they are the exception. This isn't some golden age of live music. There are too many bands, too many shows, too many pubs throwing up tinny PAs in the back room. We can't cope. The audience is being split, the promoters are being asked to front tours for bands who shouldn't actually be touring if they stopped to think for a minute because the financial model at this level makes no sense. Agents ask for more than a band is worth. Promoters struggle to make any money, or break even, or just limit their losses and so the next show they do becomes harder to pull off. Clubs are finding it more difficult to sell tickets for many of their shows. The music industry either has next to no understanding of how difficult it is for small venues, or it does, and couldn't care less.

Mobile phone operators, brewers and fashion brands wrap their logos around anything wearing skinny jeans and battered Converse. Vodafone; supporting live music! T-Mobile: supporting live music! Crap. Support, by definition, comes from below. It's a foundation upon which an entity can be nurtured and developed. You can't put Editors on at Proud Galleries and call it a 'guerilla gig'. You can't invent a new live music award show and claim you're supporting live music. What you could do is take a small percentage of the profits from your ludicrous roaming call charges, and plough it into the small venue infrastructure, funding sound desks, mics, XLR cables, multi-cores, parcans, monitoring systems and the like. And what would you get for it? Your logo on flyers and posters? Some branding on the walls or staff t-shirts? Nope. Nothing. Nothing at all. No branding. No marketing opportunity. No audience to exploit. You'd just get a warm glow of satisfaction from knowing that you actually supported live music (though I confess I don't envy you the task of explaining it to your shareholders).

So live music is the new cash cow and now we see the major labels scrambling around, thrashing and flailing to reposition themselves as 'music companies' after belatedly realising that they need a new cow to milk. And god knows they'll milk this one until its teats are cracked and bleeding and venues are closing down around their ears, and they're wondering where they can showcase another aural barrage of creatively bankrupt, derivative indie-rock-by-numbers. Let notice be served: live music in the UK is - in many respects - completely and utterly fucked.

Andy Inglis, December 2007