

May 19, 2023

Dear Mayor Ballantyne,

We want to offer our heartfelt thanks to you for meeting with our group of performers and promoters at New Alliance Audio on Wednesday, May 10, 2023. It was an honor to speak with you about the challenges facing Somerville's cultural scene. We take very seriously the gravity of this topic and both the responsibility and opportunity to represent all the musicians, venue owners, organizers, and listeners in our city. Some of us took vacation hours or declined billable hours to share our thoughts. And a handful of us kept talking for hours after you left, discussing problems too big to let go.

We hope to make this meeting an item of public record, so we may both share our thoughts with our community and preserve this window in time for future generations to note, understand, and learn from yet another cautionary tale of the drastic impacts of gentrification. To that end, we're sending you our overview (below) of the topics we discussed, as well as some ideas and concerns we didn't have a chance to address while together.

But we also wanted to share a song. During our meeting, Jason Trefts pointed out that the band rehearsing above us was Come—a band that toured with Nirvana, Sonic Youth, and Dinosaur Jr. when those bands hit peak fame. Thalia Zedek, who in addition to Come has been in several other influential bands with seven solo albums besides, was playing in that room above us at that very moment when our group took pause to listen. Thalia's "[Fighting Season](#)" (from her solo album of the same name)—a song filled with grief and resistance, a song that's forthright and unflinching—is, in a sense, where we are now. We're at that last point where everything could change for the better or it could all go away for a very long time. We're at that point where we need to choose what's important to us.

For the legends we pass by in a back alley on our way into a nondescript building to meet in a decades-old recording studio hidden in a basement; for the musicians we enjoy for free at Porchfest (many who are struggling to find a way to make rent, an affordable place to practice, or an indoor stage in Greater Boston to perform on); for the local promoters who reach within their own wallets to pay the bands; for the venue owners who put everything they have into a space they don't own because they believe in independent and local music; for the people who go to shows and lay down a buck or twenty extra at the merch table because they've done the math and the numbers don't add up; for the young dreamers who are just starting out on their instruments; for the musicians who had no choice but to leave Somerville, yet still keep an eye on us,

hoping things will get better so they can return, because that's what you do when you fall in love with and care for a community...

For them all: Mayor Ballantyne, we're asking you to fight.

[Emily Arkin](#) • [Shepherdess](#) / Identical Cousins / [Julee Cruise Director](#) (former Somerville Arts Council board chair, founding organizer Girls Rock Campaign Boston, Longy School of Music)

[Benjamin Cuba](#) • Emerson College / [Midnight Motion](#)

[Ethan Dussault](#) • [New Alliance Audio](#)

[Sam Epstein](#) • [The Jungle Community Music Club](#)

[Melissa Gibbs](#) • [Mass Ave Music](#), co-owner / [Andrea Gillis Band](#) / [Band of their Own](#)

[Mike Gintz](#) • [Mute City](#) / [Hex Map](#)

[JJ Gonson](#) • [ONCE Somerville](#) / [Cuisine en Locale](#) / Vice President, [National Independent Venue Association \(NIVA\)](#), New England

[Marji Gere](#) • [Around Hear](#)

[Jenn Harrington](#)

[Ajda Snyder](#) • [Ajda the Turkish Queen](#)

[Jason Trefts](#) • [Illegally Blind](#)

[Nick Zampielo](#) • [New Alliance East](#)

NOTES AFTER OUR 5/10/2023 MEETING

While we're looking forward to learning about the City of Somerville's vision for the role of local music in the 5-year cultural development plan, we're equally interested in seeing Somerville's plans for the next 3-6 months. We need action now on several fronts.

CURRENT STATE OF GREATER BOSTON'S MUSIC SCENE

- Every part of the local music industry was hit especially hard by COVID.
- "Loud" music has less and less space.
- Numerous small to medium sized venues have shuttered. Many of the closed venues featured multiple stages/rooms to perform, serving acts of differing genres and of different sized crowds.
- New venues have opened since the pandemic, but they are large, owned by corporations, and rarely if ever book local acts. They do not replace any of the services that small to medium sized venues provide and are not run with local musicians in mind.

- Several of the remaining small, seemingly independent venues also feature mostly national or non-local acts or are booked by national corporate agencies. These monopolies are also not healthy for the local scene.
- Due to lack of available and affordable events space, there is less opportunity for a diverse variety of promoters to organize events, and it's harder than ever for less-experienced promoters—including those from underrepresented backgrounds—to break into the scene.
- Several local venues in the Greater Boston area have had #MeToo issues involving repeated workplace sexual harassment that have not been fully resolved, further compromising the already limited venue landscape.

SOME THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE MUSIC ECOSYSTEM

- Local musicians need affordable rehearsal space to incubate, create, refine, and prepare to record/perform. There is currently an acute crisis with the recently closed Sound Museum and hundreds of musicians being displaced from their practice spaces. These musicians are being forced to disband, leave the area, or wait it out without a space (which often forces musicians to sell their hard-earned, critical equipment, due to no longer having somewhere to store it).
- Local musicians need opportunities to perform on local stages.
- Local musicians need opportunities to perform with bands from other areas in order to have a chance to network and tour in the future.
- By thoughtfully facilitating and curating events, often on a volunteer basis, local event organizers play an important role in creating a thriving music scene and allow artists to focus on creating art.

3 THINGS TO DO NOW

- **Reinvent the Armory.** The City owns that building—a sizable spot with incredible potential—and it could easily be an even more amazing resource. Make the Armory the shining example of what all performance spaces in Somerville should be!
 - Make the Armory more modular, with the ability to segment the large room into smaller venues.
 - Be more transparent about room fees to broaden outreach to a variety of communities.
 - Encourage diversity in booking events.
- **Protect outdoor performance spaces.** Unfortunately, we have seen noise complaints from neighbors that have shut down unique events and spaces (e.g. the formerly vibrant Modular on the Spot at The Somerville Community Growing Center, Starlight Square in Central). In the interest of protecting outdoor performance space as well as addressing issues of equity, we would like to see

clear definitions about what the rules are, including timeframes for public events, decibel limits and who will measure them if complaints are made, etc. These rules should be accessible and shared with a variety of city departments, and organizers should be encouraged to have them on hand during performances.

- **Create a taskforce of experienced local promoters, sound engineers, and musicians** who can collaborate with city officials to create a better understanding of what is required for performance spaces—rehearsal as well as the expense of performances, the expense of musicians, and the time dedicated to them. They will be able to inform different minds how and why vibe is essential. Pay the task force, please.

BELIEVE IN A BIGGER VISION

- **Make 15,000-30,000 sq ft of music rehearsal spaces available** for affordable monthly rental; properly treated for sound with necessary amenities (e.g. good security for storing gear, an accessible load-in/load-out area, nearby parking—ideally reactivated/shared with surrounding establishments rather than built new, etc.). A more detailed list of rehearsal space needs can be found [here](#).
- **Push for music venues in each Somerville square**, ranging from 85–300 capacity in size.
- **Encourage developers to work with recording studios** for sound-isolated spaces that are more rent secure.
- **Update the ACE set aside program and FAB district rules.** Developers are currently unlikely to build *affordable* arts/music space in FAB districts due to lack of incentives in zoning code.
- **Last but not least: ensure affordable housing for all.** We can build a ton of cultural spaces, but we need people to work in them, play in them, and visit them. A cultural city thrives when those who make art and support the local arts scene can afford to do more than just visit.

CULTIVATE SPACE

- **Open up city-owned spaces for loud, DIY, all ages music events.** Make these spaces available for no-cost or low-cost so bands and technical professionals can get paid. See [242 Main in Burlington, Vermont](#) for an inspiring example.
- **Negotiate with owners of empty venues** (e.g. Bull McCabe's) to see if those spots can be utilized on a temporary basis while permanent tenants are being sought. If this is possible, write agreements to allow for programming to be planned without fear of cancellation.
- **Facilitate pop-up music events and long-term tenancy in vacant buildings** in the city. Provide incentives for landlords squatting on real estate to work with

community organizers and host events rather than neglect their property and leave it inactive while they wait for a big payday.

- **Create more public awareness in support of music in the city.** In the end, public spaces are for the public and are not extensions of nearby neighbors' backyards. Public spaces should be welcoming, useful, and activated. They should be defined as such on our city's website as well as on physical signage near those spaces.
- **Support free indoor cultural spaces.** With New England weather, we need more non-profit cultural spaces where people can congregate indoors. The Nave Annex (RIP) was a great example of this kind of space. At one point it was the only space in Davis Square, besides the library, where people could interact with the arts and not have to pay. Third Life Studio (RIP) in Union Square was another important space that hosted a diverse range of performances at low cost.
- **Build shelter for some outdoor spaces.** It would be ideal to have some outdoor performance spaces that are covered, so outdoor events don't always risk cancellation due to poor weather. Outdoor events are also safer and more COVID-resilient, so making them more weather-resistant is a positive accessibility and public health measure.
- **Conduct a yearly community-wide audit of underutilized private spaces,** both large and small, and find ways to activate them to support and reinvigorate the local music ecosystem. For instance:
 - Huge overbuilt parking lots attached to businesses that sit empty and unused when those businesses are closed, and are underutilized when those businesses are open (e.g. huge lots at Assembly Square, Beacon Street Star Market and Broadway CVS)
 - Buildings owned by private developers that have sat empty and undeveloped for years (e.g. the building that Starlab was displaced from on Somerville Ave)
 - Large idle spaces (e.g. the empty dept store space next to Target near Union Square, which could potentially be a fit for rehearsal and/or performance space)
- **Guarantee affordable leases in perpetuity.** When new spaces are built/repurposed for rehearsal or performance, guarantee affordable leases for creative use in perpetuity to avoid future displacement.

SUSTAIN EVENTS

- **Facilitate the incorporation of collectives** where local musicians and local music industry co-own spaces and gear. Provide support with events and PR to drive awareness of campaigns for projects such as shared rehearsal spaces. Matchmake collectives and/or individual artists with affordable live/work space,

both ownership and rental options. Consider a lottery, like how affordable housing is allotted, to ensure access to these resources is fair and available to everyone in the community.

- **Allow more flexible one-day permitting of loud events**, including longer music festivals, with a system to provide friendly notice to neighborhoods in advance. Porchfest is an extension of a long tradition of house shows, living room shows, and basement shows, which provide emerging artists a place to play and lead to thriving music scenes.
- **Increase funding for music grants at the local/city level and add arts council capacity to enable more rapid deployment.** Include grants for music presenters, bookers, and other music industry, with the focus on local individuals, non-profit organizations, and small businesses. Continue funding individual artists, ensembles, and educators.

SUPPORT INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES

- **Issue funds in the form of long-term subsidies, rather than one-time disaster funding, to sustain local performance venues** that struggle in a difficult economic climate yet are critical to the social fabric and generate positive economic impacts in the community.
- **Support indie businesses, new and old, whose owners live in and care about the area.** Independent businesses are generally supporters of all-things local. This is true of venues, but also true of other local business ventures (e.g. A Curated World hosting one-off shows; the still much missed Fringe collective who would open their space for gatherings). Big box stores and chains are too corporate to be a part of community building. Consider looking to the residential exemption property tax model as an example of tying financial incentives to residency or community.

INSPIRE YOUTH

- **Encourage all ages venues.** Make Somerville an area where young people have things to do so they can be inspired.
- **Help promote all ages events.**
 - Consider how the city's libraries and schools, in addition to the arts council, could help connect the community and especially youth to music events.
 - Work with the school board to see if there is a better system that can be created to inform parents and students of cultural opportunities that are not only city-run events.

STAND IN OPPOSITION TO SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARRASSMENT

- **Provide alternatives to the prominent venues in our city and neighboring cities that have faced multiple “Me Too” issues. Additionally, avoid supporting these establishments with City-related events or publicity.** The biggest contributor to the continued viability of these spaces—which have routinely flouted the safety of girls and women and continuously failed to improve their harmful practices—is the lack of alternatives. If the City continues to increase the supply of spaces (as it did by acquiring the Armory), it will begin to extract the scene from its current predicament, where there are few options available besides these venues. Not holding people in power—and those with money—accountable is a systemic problem of our society. The City’s actions here could greatly empower the local arts community in its efforts to provide safe, welcoming space to all.

NOTE OF THANKS

Many thanks to City Staff—Greg Jenkins, Rachel Strutt, Michael Rosenberg, Ben Demers, and Ted Fields—for facilitating our meeting.