

# 'Gigs with no Soul!' The Promoters Choking London's Independent Music Scene

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In London's oversaturated music scene, small independent artists are often taken advantage of through predatory pricing schemes and exclusivity clauses.

Dani Muñoz would like to get paid. On the 19th of September 2025, he and his band, The Eeps, headlined a gig at The Old Dispensary, an infamous Irish boozier and live music venue in Camberwell. Whilst the venue has hosted established acts like Fat White Family, Sleaze, and Black Bordello in the past, this particular show was not put on by the venue, but by an independent promoter called City Sound Session. Tickets were sold for £10 online, and Dani was initially promised at least 50% of each sale. But when the day of the show came, the promoter, Robert, was nowhere to be found. 'I called out for his name on stage', says Dani. 'That's when the sound guy yelled across the venue: "He was here for five minutes, but he's gone!"'

None of the bands playing that night were paid for their appearances. When Dani tried to contact Robert later on Instagram to receive payment, he was told they had not fulfilled a ten-ticket minimum sale

condition, and therefore wouldn't be paid. They were then quickly blocked, as was The Old Dispensary's handle.

The Courtauldian's investigation found that The Eeps had only been told about the ten-ticket minimum almost a month after initially agreeing to play for a 50-65% split in their favour. Robert of City Sound Session said the ten-ticket minimum had been a policy for years. 'The reason we have this requirement is to cover venue hire and, more importantly, production costs such as contracts, staff, and all other related expenses which are usually for £300-500.'

Yet, not all of these expenses were applicable on the 19th of September. Patrick, who runs The Old Dispensary, told The Courtauldian he wanted profits to go 'straight to the bands.' 'I asked for nothing, just the bar. And I paid for the sound person.' Moreover, Robert was the only staff member present at The Old Dispensary, and the only person The Courtauld-

ian and The Eeps heard from. ‘At the end of the days is very easy [sic] to attack the promoter that work hours [sic] often for free due to false informations [sic] provided by the bands.’, Robert wrote to us.

Stories of theft are commonplace in the independent music scene. More often promoters and venues are simply abusing the naivety of young bands. Spike, bassist in post-punk/hardcore band Skunkworm, remembers a recent gig in Guildford. ‘It was pretty packed’, he says, but ‘we hadn’t discussed payment beforehand... When we approached them after the show the venue got weird and passive aggressive and blamed it on us for never asking.’ Tickets cost £10, and Skunkworm were never paid.

Perhaps more concerningly, even when

bands aren’t overtly stolen from, the terms imposed onto them by major promoters are often unfair or even predatory. Last year, emerging pop singer Flo Wilkes won a competition with major London promoter Hot Vox to perform at Isle of Wight Festival. In order to win, Wilkes passed through three live rounds, winning via industry vote each time. For each round, another band also passes via audience vote, ‘which is basically who sells the most tickets.’

For each £12 ticket sold attributed to Wilkes through a personalised link, she received only £2, a sixth of the turnover. The sold-out semi-final, which was held in the 410 capacity 93 Feet East therefore generated around £4920 in revenue (not including bar spend). Yet, Wilkes and her band sold 75 tickets and made just £150

Speedial soundcheck at The Windmill, Brixton... Photo: Lexie Patterson



to share between the five of them.

‘It’s awful’, says Wilkes. ‘When I run my own headline shows, I get to pay my band [a four-piece backing] like £150 each, and that’s because I wasn’t giving money to a promoter.’

Live music is an integral part of London’s cultural capital. Last year, its grassroots music scene contributed £313m to the economy, hosting performances by more than 328,000 artists, according to the London Assembly. It’s clear that actors across the scene are suffering economically. According to the Night Time Industries Association (NTIA), one in four late-night venues in the UK have closed since 2020.

A contract obtained by The Courtauldian from major promoter Inpop and major booking agent More Live reveals an even more dire pricing scheme for artists. For each £11.75 ticket attributed to them, acts make a measly £1.17. Once the act has sold over 19 tickets, the payment structure is bracketed in a way that means that each ticket sold now brings £2.34. This is a common strategy used by promoters to force bands to bring a higher number of ‘fans’ (read friends) to their shows.

The pressure is real. The same contract warns that artists will receive sales feedback from an agent every week. ‘The promoter needs to see a steady flow of ticket sales [...]. If this cannot be seen, it may be necessary to postpone the artist’s performance’, it reads. This kind of pressure, frequently pushed on artists who are minors, is emblematic of the corporatisation of a field of art typically seen as easy-going. ‘I got a text from a friend saying “Sorry but can you come to a gig tomorrow, the promoter is being really

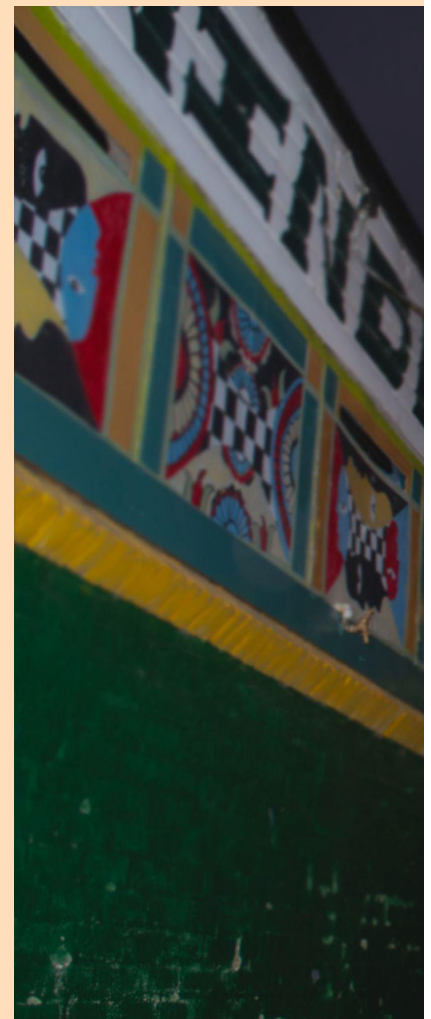
pushy with ticket sales”’, says Wilkes.

When asked about Inpop, Patrick laughs. As well as running The Old Dispensary, now blocked on Instagram by City Sound Session, he also drums in alt-rock two-piece Two Thieves: ‘They sent me, I think it was an 80-90 page legal document. I got dizzy trying to read it, and I basically just said no.’

At this grassroots level, most, if not all artists are not playing for the money. Bands simply want to play as often as possible in as many places as possible, to get their music and name heard in the scene. Unfortunately, even this aspiration is being impeded by promoters.

The same contract leaked to The Courtauldian, which was for a show scheduled the 1st of August 2025, demanded an exclusivity period starting the 16th of May 2025 and ending three weeks after the show in late August. At this rate, an artist could perform a maximum of four shows in a year.

Wilkes reads from a contract for one of her upcoming shows: ‘No shows to be played in this city four weeks either side of the show date unless agreed by us.



This is to help you!’ ‘I don’t think they quite understand how I ball’, she says of the ‘patronising’ contract.

For Millie Kirby, bass player in emerging post-punk bands Speedial, The Orchestra (For Now), and Big Red, ‘The problem is that the exclusivity is just to do with the venue making money. It doesn’t help the

ing it’), but it also might not even be worth that’... Doing two shit gigs is better than doing one shit gig!’

The gigs put on by these major promoters are, indeed, often shit. ‘You promise the promoter a lot without them really reciprocating much’, says Millie. Publicity for gigs doesn’t usually go beyond sharing

a generic poster - it is obvious from a quick look at any of the promotional companies mentioned in this piece that they all use the same template for each of their shows. In short, promoters are not really promoting. For Wilkes, exclusivity clauses stem from a place of insecurity for promoters, who know they are putting on low-quality nights and want to guarantee a high attendance. But at the end of the day, ‘If it’s a show that’s worth selling tickets for, then I’ll sell those fucking tickets, don’t you worry mate.’

Some venues are infamous for churning out low-quality shows, organised by major promoters: ‘it’s always at The Amersham Arms

[in New Cross], and it’s always the worst poster you’ve ever seen, and you have to sell a certain amount of tickets to play. It’s just a complete shitshow’, says Spike.



Speedial pose outside of The Windmill in Brixton...  
Photo: Lexie Patterson

bands, it helps the promoters.’ ‘There’s no guarantee of a good gig either’, adds Serena Garrod of Speedial. ‘It’s like “Oh you can’t do a gig for a month surround-

The same criticisms come up again and again for all the artists The Courtauldian interviewed. ‘There’s no coherency in the lineups,’ says Joe Killick of Speedial and Wing!, ‘It doesn’t work, they don’t all fit together,’ continues Speedial bandmate Monarch Vavrechka. ‘If you don’t put on bands that fit well together, the people just aren’t going to bother to stick around.’, says Kirby. ‘The people are there to see their mates, and after they’ve seen their mates, they’ll leave’, finishes Vavrechka.

This is the crux of the issue for many artists signed on for gigs with major promoters. Even if a gig in a 200 capacity venue has sold out, fans only stay for one artist, often a friend of theirs, so bands end up playing to an empty room whilst promoters still maximise ticket sales. Full lineups for gigs hosted by Inpop aren’t announced until all performers have sold their minimum quota for tickets. This means that most fans do not know the lineups before attending. And since releasing the full lineup isn’t a priority, promoters are at liberty to continue to put on incoherent, unbalanced lineups.

‘They’re just mashing a load of bands together and saying “There you go, you can come to that if you want.”’, says Kirby. ‘People want to go for a reason, and I feel like a lot of promoters aren’t giving a reason.’ Killick continues: ‘Whenever I see an Underground Sound [another major London promoter] gig poster, I’m just like, that has no soul!’

In a business where the chance of long-term financial success is slimmer than ever, soul and authenticity remain the most important factors for artists. On Halloween 2025, Spike’s DIY collective, The Shovel, put on a free show underneath a bridge on the M25, powered by

a generator. ‘We are going to lose money from doing this sort of stuff’, he says. The bands’ only profits depended on donations and the possibility of punters buying their merch. Yet, this arrangement is preferred by the bands performing, rather than play for a major promoter like Underground Sound.

‘I like to think it’s quite obvious that we’re doing it because we love it and we want to be doing it and it’s bands that we like. Because I’ve seen Rampressure [who played alongside Spike on Halloween] before and they absolutely blew my mind. And I’ve seen Gegenpress [who also played] and they were just unreal’, says Spike. ‘They know that we’re doing it because we’re coming at it from a genuine love of live music.’

Patrick, from The Old Dispensary, shares a similar story: ‘Usually we try to keep gigs free, we want to give people a chance to perform.’ As a fellow independent artist, Patrick empathises with the struggle of those playing live in London. ‘I don’t plan to make any money playing music. I love playing music. I think it’s very off-putting to get trapped in situations like this with promoters.’

For Spike, the solution to the suffering live music scene is simple: ‘There should be more government funding for these grassroots spaces... There’s a lot of venues that do still pay bands, and I think those are the ones that need that support. Venues like The Windmill [in Brixton], The George Tavern and all those that are well-respected and well-regarded just need to be more vocal about how much of a struggle it is to keep open those venues.’ As for major promoters, ‘There should be some sort of boycott of Underground Sound and all that lot.’

But, that's quite a hard thing to organise with bands that are just starting off.'

Putting on your own gig is a financial burden that many bands can't afford. 'Young bands, even A-level students, don't have the money to put on to book the venues themselves.', says Vavrechka. 'The cheapest is The Troubadour [in Earl's court], I think that's like 60 quid.'

£60 may seem a lot for a young band, but it shouldn't for a government scheme. It's misleading to say that all that is needed for grassroots success is a small financial push. However, it's important to note that the super bands of tomorrow are not

infinitely separated from major success, or from a successful start in the scene. It may be that they are just £60 away.

Underground Sound, and Hot Vox did not reply to a request to comment. Whilst contact was made with Inpop and City Sound Session, they did not follow up on a request for comment from The Courtauldian.



Patrick behind the bar at The Old Dispensary... Photo: Gus Donald

