COVID Nights: Crisis and Street-level Institutions in Montreal and Beyond

Feature Article

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Abstract

It is within a context of crisis, work and scene culture that this text takes an entry point to address ongoing challenges EDM scenes face in Montreal, Quebec. Particular attention is paid to the city's politics of the night and some of its street-level institutions and venues including Never Apart (NVA), an EDM-focused LGBTQ+ non-profit organization. Giving attention to street-level institutions is especially pressing right now as many cities attempt to rearticulate the tenuous futures of their nighttime cultures. As discussions develop beyond the pandemic, it is vital that a broad range of sustainable cultural expressions are brought to the fore, including EDM events and parties. Local initiatives, along with more robust and equitable systems of exchange and patronage at a cultural level, provide some of the best options for imagining a post-pandemic future for EDM scenes.

Keywords: EDMC, Montreal, music scenes, street-level institutions, urban night

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Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture 13(1): 54–68
ISSN 1947-5403 ©2021 Dancecult http://dj.dancecult.net
https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2021.13.01.04
dancecult
JOURNAL OF ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as ongoing protests from Los Angeles, to Beirut, Santiago and beyond, has laid bare and amplified many of the growing structural socio-economic inequalities of over forty years of sustained neoliberalism and its regional permutations. It has also revealed the ways in which our systems of governance and public institutions are ill-equipped to handle such largescale crises, thereby bringing much of the foundational modes of capitalist production and consumption to a halt. Perhaps the sharpest articulation of this sentiment came from Marxist geographer David Harvey in the early months of the pandemic, when he wrote: "much of the cutting-edge model of contemporary capitalist consumerism is inoperable under present conditions.... COVID-19 is underpinning not a wild fluctuation but an almighty crash in the heart of the form of consumerism that dominates in the most affluent countries" (2020). This theoretical underpinning of neoliberalism provides a better understanding for the fallout and near collapse of the current gig economy where "a vast army of workers", from service industry professionals to care givers, as Harvey put it, have lost their employment with little to no means of support (2020). Included in this are many of the actors—DJs, producers, promoters, designers, technicians, etc.—that comprise electronic dance music (EDM) scenes. Even before the pandemic, as many of us are acutely aware, scores of scene actors were living with very little resources, social support, health benefits and limited prospects for secure, long-term employment. In short, the real problem here is not a virus drying up a gig economy; the real problem is the gig economy itself. Adding to these challenges, as scholarly studies of dance music make clear, EDM scenes can be highly competitive vis-à-vis access to resources, work, gigs, and opportunities (Farrugia 2012: 115–40; Fikentscher 2000: 51; Reitsamer 2011: 34–5); they often valorize the subcultural heroics of the hustle that necessitates building scenes as sites of urban resistance and renewal (Lawrence 2004).

It is within this context of crisis, work, and scene culture that this text takes an opportunity to address some of the ongoing challenges EDM scenes face in Montreal, Quebec. It builds upon the abovementioned scholarship while delving into broader musicological discourses (James 2015; Moore 2014: 35–8) and arts-based studies pertaining to an ever-present neoliberal current within a variety of cultural production contexts (Harvie 2013: 12–15; Win 2014: 3). Montreal, which maintains an almost mythical status as the cultural centre of Canada, is well-known both inside and outside of the country for its robust musical culture and economy. Throughout the city's long-developed EDM history, it established itself as the second biggest disco market in North America in the late 1970s, behind New York, and as one of the biggest producers of 12-inch vinyl dance music singles, particularly of Eurodisco and Italo-disco (Straw 2008: 118–19). More recently, as I have written, it became a beacon of electroclash at the turn of the millennium by way of DJ Mini's *Overdose*, a weekly party night that ran for over seven years (2002–2009) at Parking Nightclub in the city's Gay Village (Madden 2016: 38–44). It also became a beacon by way of Turbo Recordings and the records of DJ/producer Tiga—namely Tiga's and Zyntherius' co-produced cover of Corey Hart's 1980s hit "Sunglasses at Night". This text brings these histories in contact with the present through a discussion of Montreal's politics of the night

and some of its street-level institutions and venues including Never Apart (NVA), an EDM-focused LGBTQ+ non-profit organization. Giving attention to street-level institutions is especially pressing right now, considering that so many cities throughout the world are attempting to rearticulate their nighttime culture. The futures of these institutions within this culture remain tenuous, at best. So as discussions of the urban night develop beyond the pandemic, it is vital that a broad range of sustainable cultural expressions are brought to the fore, including EDM events and parties. Such local initiatives—along with more robust and equitable systems of exchange and patronage at a broad cultural level including the continued development of online platforms like Bandcamp—and greater support for universal basic income for all workers provide some of the best options in imagining a post-pandemic future for EDM scenes.

COVID Nights In Montreal

When I began writing this text in January 2021, a snapshot from my former place of residence, Montreal, presented an all too familiar picture of the pandemic: an "exploding number of COVID-19 cases in the province and the extreme stress it's placing on the healthcare system" (Fahmy 2021). This led to the initiation of a Quebec-wide curfew that lasted through the winter months. These measures also came with increased police presence and community surveillance of nighttime activity; those who broke the curfew potentially faced fines of $6000 CAD.[1] Montreal was not alone in approaching day and night with stark oppositional and competing policy initiatives, whereby the liveliness of packed skating rinks and parks of daylight hours was followed by the extended reach of state powers after dark. As Will Straw emphasized, "the culture of the night was largely forgotten in the 'new urban planner' initiatives of the Montreal pandemic summer, where the days were bright, bustling and crowded, but quickly turned calm and empty with the arrival of the night" (2021).[2] EDM parties, raves, and afterhours events did not entirely come to a halt during the pandemic, as many locales continuing to organize illegal club nights as well as what have been dubbed "plague raves" (Hanford 2020). But along with many other urban centres, Montreal largely transformed its night into a city of desolate spaces marked by the heavy presence of police, municipal workers, and their machines: buses, street cleaners, snow-removal machinery, and so on. Furthermore, the substantial growth of online forms of cultural expression that has flourished since the beginning of the pandemic—from concerts to workshops, gallery tours and Zoom talks—contributed to diminishing the status and significance of the night. As Straw put it, online culture has again "severed the intimate connection between nocturnal cultural expression and other characteristics of the night," especially as it relates to genres and forms that are typically associated with the night like electronic music (2021).[3] This ongoing situation presents several challenges to those who rely on EDM scenes for their livelihood as so much of this labour requires close proximity of bodies, heavy travel for gigs, and easy access to the economic and cultural life of the night.

Montreal's particular situation vis-à-vis COVID-19 came at a crucial time in its development of new possibilities in relation to the nighttime economy and culture. Like

many cities, including New York, Tokyo, Toronto, Valparaiso, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin and Toronto, Montreal recently established a new administrative position called the Noise and Night Commissioner (*le Commissaire du bruit et de la nuit*), the city's version of a night mayor. According to Andreina and Gelders, by the end of 2018 more than forty cites had created Night Mayors, which are also referred to as "managers" and "czars" as well as other designations; they "are individuals selected by cities to act as a liaison between nightlife establishments, citizens and local governments" (2020: 3–4). While local variations abound, these positions are predominantly created in order to address nocturnal "hardware" (the spatial and built environment of the night); "software" (the policies and regulations governing the night); and to mediate and promote "consensus among the wide variety of actors involved in nocturnal governance" (Andreina and Gelders 2020: 4). In Montreal, while the specifics of this new position remain fuzzy, it is worth mentioning that such initiatives have been coupled with the sustained efforts of activists, EDM scene actors, and a range of stakeholders, including the non-profit organization NVA, urging the City of Montreal to enact policy measures in line with other cities that better support the safety and expansion of night culture (Straw 2021). Of particular importance, a Montreal Night Council (*Conseil de nuit*) comprised of twelve members from a range of local organizations and institutions was created in the early months of the pandemic by MTL 24/24: a non-profit organization whose mandate is to enhance and promote the development of the city's nightlife economy.

As post-pandemic discussions of the nighttime economy advance, they must encompass a variety of sustainable cultural expressions, including EDM events and parties, rather than following the approach of the heavy panic-driven restrictions that were directed at rave culture in the late 1990s (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 146–57; Marsh 2006: 424). To this end, for many years various scene actors and stakeholders in Montreal have been lobbying the province's alcohol and gaming board for a permanent extension of alcohol consumption hours to 6:00 AM (Riga 2014). At the moment, it is illegal to sell alcohol after 3:00 AM, which limits the number and kinds of activities that can thrive and the economic sustainability of the culture of the night. During the pandemic, bars, clubs and cultural institutions had to close earlier than normal, even during the city's temporary opening in the summer of 2020. These discussions and initiatives, as well, must develop more inclusive approaches to semi-legal and private spaces, from which so much of the musical culture of the city, in particular EDM, emerges. The need for more EDM-friendly spaces (e.g. lofts and warehouses) that do not get regularly harassed by police and are not precariously tied to the whims of gentrification and the economic interests of property developers is a common theme from my research of various EDM scenes throughout the last twenty years.

With Montreal and other cities developing their post-pandemic transitions, it is crucial that an array of stakeholders – from community groups and organizations to municipalities and scene actors – foreground the economic and social realities of labour in EDM scenes and the nighttime cultural sector more generally. DJs and producers generally work for per-item

sales of their music and merchandise or through per-gig payment, which significantly impedes the possibilities for long-term employment and commitment to music scenes. Adding to these challenges, venues and clubs with essential and long-lasting ties to EDM scenes were closing in urban centres even before the pandemic, largely due to gentrification, increasing rents and the growing contested atmosphere of nighttime sensory politics. As Andreina and Gelders detail, for example, fifty-eight percent of LGBTQ+ venues in London (as well as many of the city's nightclubs and entertainment spaces, including the famed Fabric) shut down in a ten-year period. Fabric had its license revoked in 2016, albeit temporarily, before the night czar was appointed (Andreina and Gelders 2020: 7). In London as in Montreal, working as a DJ or producer within the orbits of local culture typically entails seeking out additional forms of employment as a way to guarantee a sustainable living.

In Canada, the already challenging labour conditions of EDM scenes were amplified by the pandemic with so much economic and cultural activity drying up. Many scene actors were unable to receive the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which provided financial support to Canadians directly affected by COVID-19, as their particular modes of precariousness very often fell outside the program's eligibility requirements. Given this situation and the ongoing need to address long-lasting social and economic injustices, both in- and outside EDM scenes, it should come as no surprise that initiatives like universal basic income, with its mission to "equip Canadians with evidence-based narratives that basic income is good for the economy", are starting to gain mainstream attention and build support in Canada (see https://www.ubiworks.ca). For DJs, producers and other musical creators, this could potentially remove, at least in part, the heavy reliance on per-item sales and per-gig remuneration that structures music scenes by changing the source of Canadians' financial stability to a system that brings a certain standardized level of income to all workers.

The pandemic has also laid bare and exasperated many of the structural inequalities of streaming platforms such as the heavily capitalized Apple Music and Spotify. Their revenue sharing for artists is minimal at best, with potential profits largely reserved for the record industry's major labels, transnational media conglomerates, and the private equity firms that have "enacted leveraged buyouts in every sector of the cultural industries", in an effort to "monetize content catalogues across streaming platforms", as Andrew Dewaard argues (Forthcoming). As a result of this ongoing exploitative imbalance in the music industry and its streaming platforms, artists are turning to outlets like Bandcamp, which distributes a fairer share of royalties to musicians. The relationship between artists and Bandcamp intensified during the pandemic, primarily due to Bandcamp Fridays, which was launched in March when the company announced plans to wave its usual 15% take on digital sales, and 10% on physical sales throughout 2020 on the first Friday of each month, thereby directing 100% of sales to artists. By the end of September, the program had channeled almost $100 million to artists with as little as a two-day turnaround, adding to the more than $584 million since 2008. Initially established solely as a digital music site, the company has since expanded into merchandising, vinyl, CDs, cassettes, and T-shirts; in the past year alone, it

has sold 5 million digital albums, 2 million tracks, 1 million vinyl records, 600 000 CDs, 300 000 cassettes, and 250 000 T-shirts (Roberts 2020).

It is too soon to tell whether Bandcamp's current success will lead to any long-term changes in the industry or to the proliferation of other like-minded revenue sharing platforms, especially as the full extent of the damage caused by COVID-19 to local scenes and scene sustaining institutions remains contested and undefined. It is also unclear just how many DJs, producers and EDM scene actors will permanently pivot away from music scenes to seek a sustainable living elsewhere. Current reports from Britain are troubling in terms of the future health and sustainability of nightclubs and in terms of the sheer volume of musicians who are considering leaving the music industry (Hunter 2020 and Beaumont-Thomas 2020). EDM scenes in Montreal and Canada face similar prospects for the future unless there is a commitment to a more inclusive and equitable approach to musical labour in moving forward with its COVID-relief schemes. These programs need to be expanded in order to ensure that smaller performance venues and nightclubs have futures in the culture of the night and the musical economy.

It is important to point out that small music venues remain understudied, especially in relation to musical labour and the broader circuits of the music industry (Grenier and Lussier: 2013). In the context of Montreal, small music venues (*petit[s] lieu[x] d'arts et de spectacles*) are typically defined as having a capacity of fewer than 350 people. As Grenier and Lussier argue, they generally "fly under the radar of those public institutions responsible for documenting, by means of various statistics and monitoring activities" (2013: 174). Much like London, some of Montreal's most important nightclubs and music venues have faced similar pressures in the face of increasing noise abatement and rezoning measures. This attention to small venues seems even more crucial given that cities around the world are rearticulating and addressing the urban nighttime culture and economy as musical creators continue to rely on revenue from their paid gigs.

Acknowledging the importance and vitality of small music venues, nightclubs and other street-level institutions unlocks several pressing questions at the heart of the existence and sustainability of music scenes. Straw's foundational Bourdieusian definition of a musical scene as "that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" helps this article pose some questions (1991: 373). For instance: if there is indeed an EDM scene, or many scenes within Montreal, does it have everything it needs to remain one? Does it have the places where people talk about music? Does it have the places for live music? Does it have the necessary forms of support? Or is it operating in a big deficit vis-à-vis all of these things? How many scene actors can be supported? Is there an overabundance of labour supply? This set of questions guides the next section as it delves into the history of NVA, its relationship to the broader dynamics of electronic dance music culture (henceforth EDMC) in Montreal, and in relation to what is needed in order to maintain more sustainable local EDM scenes.

Neoliberalism, Montreal and NVA

The sustained impulse within EDM and popular music discourses to celebrate music scenes for their heroic Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos of music-making is steadily giving way to broader neoliberal understandings of music cultures and the material conditions of scene actors. This is especially the case since EDM advanced as a global phenomenon and since various modes of DIY culture became ubiquitous features of the music industry. With respect to the first point, scholarly studies such as Sarah Thornton's 1995 *Club Cultures* and Tim Lawrence's 2004 *Love Saves the Day* have detailed the way EDM scenes have developed through a recursive opposition to the mainstream, whether real or imaginary, as a locus to draw their affective power, bodily politics, and "subcultural capital", and as subaltern sites of urban resistance, pleasure, and utopianism. Dance music scenes have defined and valorized themselves internally through their commitments to an underground ideology. This includes an ambivalent anti-corporate rhetoric that has intensified since the birth of rave culture, in part due to democratic narratives of dancefloors, music production and music distribution. And as David Hesmondhalgh tells us, these scenes have been structured by a "very great degree of segregation between white dance music culture and black music institutions (sound systems, shabeens and blues parties)" (1997: 175–76). This was true before and after the golden age of raves (1988–90), despite widespread and often celebratory reports to the contrary. More recently, research has addressed the various ways EDMC articulates social distinctions through attention to gender and power dynamics (Farrugia 2012: 17–34; Madden 2012: 36–9), its devotion to subtle temporal changes to BPMs, what Steve Goodman (2004) refers to as "Speed Tribes", and through its adherence to particular approaches to performance and instrumentation (Butler 2014: 25–64).

The turn to neoliberalism to frame studies of EDM stems in large part from the ever-increasing economic insecurities, unstable labour conditions and larger market forces directing DJs, producers and other scene actors to embrace flexibility and innovation—both of which are key features of neoliberal capitalism—while building and maintaining their careers through self-entrepreneurship. For many DJs and producers, as I have detailed this regularly entails adopting a variety of both creative and entrepreneurial roles, from social media manager, booking agent and promoter to designer, mentor and performer (Madden 2016: 40). A combination of all these roles constitutes the requisite skill set for potentially developing a successful local or international professional career. Where access to social assistance programs is limited, flexibility and innovation can involve reconsidering the styles of music one performs in order to remain in contact with the rapidly shifting cycles of EDM, continuously investing in new music-making techniques and instruments, taking on different kinds of gigs (e.g. corporate events and parties), as well as different forms of non-musical work. According to Robin James, a spirit of hyper competitiveness, with its emphasis on individual correctives to overcome crises and structural injustices, is framed by the discourse of resilience, which is a distinct aesthetic and ethical feature of neoliberal capitalism. For James, resilience forms "the new means of production" in that "crisis and

trauma are actually necessary, desirable phenomena—you can't bounce back without first falling" (2015: 4). Perhaps resilience has become the perfect neoliberal affect of our times, displaced from its original context as an empowering resource for survival to an emotional one-size-fits-all remedy that justifies continued oppression, violence, risk and uncertainty.[4]

Neoliberalism is the political economic turn since the 1970s. As David Harvey writes, "human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (2007: 22). Harvey posits that "the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (2007: 22). Scholarship in this area is emerging across a variety of cultural production and musical contexts. It addresses the ever-creeping emphasis on entrepreneurial training and pedagogies in the world of classical music since the economic crash of 2008 (Moore 2016: 38); how the idealization in the artistic and creative industries of the entrepreneurial artist mirrors neoliberal priorities like privatization, free trade and devaluation of social services (Harvie 2013: 62–6; Win 2014: 3); and women EDM DJs who face disproportionate obstacles when it comes to making a living because of the impacts of neoliberalism (Gavanas and Reitsamer 2016: 3).

The material changes brought on by neoliberal capitalism play out in specific ways in the circuits of EDM in Montreal and in relation to the operational conditions of street-level institutions. In part, this is due to specific contextual conditions that contribute to the city's and province's distinctness in terms of its music scenes and cultural sector. In Quebec, there is a strong tradition of public support for the arts. The federal and provincial governments provide funding for various aspects of the music industries, making it an anomalous North American marketplace. The City of Montreal provides certain programs for the arts as well. Many Montreal EDM artists and prominent cultural institutions, such as the Pop Montreal International Music Festival and Mutek (an annual festival dedicated to digital creativity and electronic music), rely on public funding from all levels of government for their survival.[5] These non-profits could not operate from year-to-year without this support which primarily comes in the form of grants, employment partnerships and tax benefits.

Montreal maintains a substantial labour supply for the creative industries. As Stolarick and Florida describe, in the early 2000s the city emerged second in North America in terms of the percentage of people operating in the "super-creative core" which includes: "computers, mathematics, architecture, engineering, life sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, education, training, library, arts, design entertainment, and media" (2006: 1802). Furthermore, the province is distinct in terms of its position vis-à-vis the global music industry. Since the international industry's collapse in the late 1970s resulted in the majors and their Canadian affiliates severing ties to Quebec and Canadian content, there has been an intensified move to local, independent music-making. A void was promptly filled by Quebec, or *Québécois*, independent labels, which by 1986 controlled close to 85 per cent

of popular music production (Grenier 1993: 211). More recent figures suggest that this number currently sits closer to 95 per cent.

It is within this context of a predominantly independent local music-making culture that in 2015 NVA—a 12 000 square feet gallery, music production, and creative space in the Mile Ex neighbourhood of Montreal—opened its doors. It acts as a central intermediary between local EDM artists, LGBTQ+ communities and the broader circuits of national and international dance music. The organization does this by producing a range of activities: on- and offsite EDM events and parties, workshops and skill sharing engagements, public talks. It publishes a monthly online magazine that features both local and international talent. The space even houses nearly 10 000 vinyl records that were collected between 1985 and 2005 by a DJ named Jean-Michel Cauvin, a.k.a. Nivoc. Nivoc was a resident of Montreal's most well-known afterhours club, Sona, which was started by the aforementioned DJ/producer Tiga and remained open from 1996 until 2004. The "About" section of their website describes how, through these activities and more, NVA's mission is "to educate on equality, the environment and conscious living, while celebrating both established and emerging artists. The platform is geared towards igniting positive change and unity through culture". Their events have brought many popular and up-and-coming international EDM artists in contact with Montreal's scenes, have partnered with other local organizations such as the abovementioned Pop Montreal and Mutek, and have entertained corporate partners including Red Bull Music Academy.

NVA's creative, educational and community engagement programs are primarily steered by a three-person committee of full-time directors: its founder, executive director and curatorial, communications coordinator. Their yearly operating budget almost entirely comes from an endowment provided by their founder, a software tech entrepreneur, with additional funding provided through local and provincial governmental grants, as well as intermittent contributions by their events partners, both corporate and non-profit. The curatorial, communications coordinator position was formerly established as a music directorship when NVA opened in 2015, with responsibilities including guiding, managing, and curating its EDM-centred music programming and partnerships. However, as the organization was forced to halt and then move away from their dance music and educational events due to the pandemic, a new more expansive curatorial role was created in January 2021, with the previous music director leaving her post. The former music director is also a DJ and producer under the moniker Softcoresoft, and like many working within local music scenes, has permanently stopped her musical activities as a source of generating primary or even tertiary income because of the pandemic. The new curatorial position is mainly charged with developing the organization's current and future cultural programing, which as it stands, is heavily geared towards online talks, gallery exhibitions, and tours of the space. For instance, their February 2021 online magazine and exhibitions were dedicated to celebrating "Black Heritage month", with very little attention devoted to their usual musically-oriented focus.

While there are no specific plans for returning to pre-pandemic EDM programming, it is important to point out that much like other street-level institutions in- and outside Montreal, NVA has encountered many operational challenges in its history. Even before the pandemic, it was confronted by the city's highly contested nighttime sensory politics and their enforcement. Some of Montreal's most vital cultural institutions and small music venues, such as the well-known *Société des Arts Technologiques* (SAT) and the smaller *Divan Orange*, have faced severe fines for noise violations. The latter was eventually forced to close in 2018 after thirteen years in operation and more than 10,000 shows (Kelly 2015). More recently, Bar le Ritz, a small music venue also in Mile Ex that opened in 2008, started receiving fines when the neighbourhood was rezoned from commercial to residential in 2017. The venue's owners even contested these violations in court proceedings during the pandemic (Karwacki 2020). It is also important to note that fines for noise violations have steadily increased throughout the years, as Grenier and Lussier stress in their 2013 study of small music venues in Montreal.

As previously mentioned, NVA's brick-and-mortar space was opened in 2015 in the progressively gentrifying area known as Mile-Ex, which is just to the north of the Mile End neighourhood and to the west of Little Italy. Like many urban centres facing intense gentrification, it is now perhaps best known for condominiums and the many cultural workers inhabiting the area, as well as a high-density retail, restaurant, bar and café culture. The American fashion magazine *Vogue* took notice of the neighourhood, once calling it "the most interesting area in town" (Burshtein 2016). For the first couple of years of its existence, NVA produced many regular monthly EDM-focused events and parties onsite, in part, to take advantage of the centre's indoor-outdoor construction and its many amenities, including a salt-water pool, multiple sound systems, and a private, enclosed terrace. These events often showcased a mix of local and international DJs and producers, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ scenes. As condominium construction and the number of residential dwellings expanded in the area, NVA received a rising number of noise complaints and encounters with the police, and, as a result, the non-profit halted all onsite parties, thereby putting an end to this vital event space and resource for both up-and-coming and established LGBTQ+ musicians and creatives. The organization continued programming events at offsite locations; however, this forced them to find new locations, which often come with heavy rental and security fees, and develop relationships with collaborators—property owners, event and service industry staff—for every event. It also led to a drastic cutting in the number of events it produced from year-to-year. This is a common situation for promotors and EDM organizers; it is difficult to find reliable spaces that can be used on a regular basis within the circuits of downtown neighbourhoods, thereby limiting the ability of small-scale institutions to build and contribute to local cultural scenes.

Much like other cultural non-profits, NVA is limited financially in the ways it can support EDM artists and freelancers who contribute to its monthly online magazine. The centre's foundational budget is mostly allocated to operational costs and full-time salaried employees. This includes the executive director and the curatorial communications coordinator, an

operations manager, an administrative manager, a graphic/web designer, videographers and so on. The non-profit only supports artists and cultural workers on a project-to-project or per-gig basis, rather than with a more long-term and sustainable approach. On the one hand, the organization is similar to record and management companies that employ staff on a full- or part-time basis while delivering intermittent small percentages and payments to the artists with whom they work. On the other hand, it is important to point out that NVA's defining terms of success are not fully centred on particular economic relationships with the cultural industries and the people who produce those industries.

As a non-profit and community-oriented project, and while acknowledging these as complex and contested notions all their own, the centre is attempting to establish long-lasting commitments to Montreal and the many LGBTQ+ scenes and spaces it comes in contact with, represents and is a part of. In this way, it is unlike many record companies and management firms. The organization does not define its success in terms of the market and sales metrics or in terms of its connectivity to the global music industry. It operates under entirely different valuations of culture and music as more than economic and popular, as vital textures forming local lifeworlds and scenes. NVA focuses on developing sustainable local relationships with people and institutions and local manifestations of culture instead of suturing itself to the international corporate music industry and its circuits. This places NVA in line with other local institutions like community and campus radio stations. It also aligns NVA with the musical activities of church life, where music is an opportunity for learning, spiritual enrichment and resistance, as although these sites are not typically visible within musical scenes and EDMC frameworks.

Conclusion

While certainly not an exhaustive study of street-level dynamics as they relate to the broader circuits of Montreal's EDM scenes, this analysis brings into focus some of the important tensions that local scene-building and scene-sustaining institutions face in the current musical and cultural economy. These tensions have been amplified to such an extent during the pandemic that the future of some important institutions is now called into question. In Montreal, like in many cities, street-level institutions faced pressures from residential neighbours and authorities before the pandemic as a consequence of municipal policy measures, urban renewal projects and increasing gentrification. These sought to snuff out a broad range of sensory expressions that are emblematic of nighttime urban vitality, from bright lights to food smells to dance music sounds. In addition to $400 million in provincial funding for the arts in the 2020–21 fiscal year, an anomaly in the context of North America, the City of Montreal and the provincial government of Quebec have put forth detailed plans for financial assistance programs for certain kinds of cultural venues and promoters totaling $50 million (Kelly 2020). Nonetheless, the economic fallout and effects of this crisis will linger for many years to come. There are signs of this already, such as the sheer number of venues that have closed and the many workers permanently moving away from the cultural sector. Music venues play a vital role in local music scenes in that they provide meeting points, circulation, and space for a range of cultural activities, and in their

commitments to diversifying the terms and measures of success for long-lasting cultural scenes. These institutions create circulatory networks, whether human or otherwise, for people and musical practices. For these reasons and many more, street-level institutions—including local shops, bars and clubs—merit more attention in studies of EDM and in studies of music scenes more generally.

The move to maintaining sustainable post-pandemic EDM scenes in Montreal and beyond requires local governments and stakeholders—musicians, cultural workers, activists, etc.—to actively develop an imagined future that includes street-level spaces as necessary and vital parts of cultural and economic life. In the face of neoliberal capitalism (Hall 2011: 10–1), it also necessitates that the cultural left and the political left create more linkages of solidarity by way of advancing initiatives like universal basic income and supporting a broader range of inclusive social programs. In the United States, for instance, this might entail collective grassroots support of Medicare for All and increasing minimum wage. For musical workers in EDM scenes, namely DJs and producers, turning away from exploitative relationships with global corporate platforms like Apple Music and Spotify in favor of more locally-oriented and viable initiatives such as Bandcamp is a necessary first-step in transitioning to a more equitable musical economy.[6] Under such a model, the revenue generated through sales primarily goes to the musicians and producers rather than the intermediaries. Taken together, these are not the remedies for all systemic ills, to be sure. Yet they do provide scalable templates and models for imagining a healthier future for musical scenes and the cultural vitality of cities.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank everyone at *Dancecult*, Graham St John and the reviewers for such timely and generous feedback.

Notes

1 On the first night, 84 tickets were given out for curfew infractions, many in the range of $1550 CAD (Saba 2021).

2 The original text in French is as follows: "*Cependant, la culture de la nuit a été largement oubliée dans les initiatives « nouvel urbaniste » de l'été pandémique de Montréal, où les journées étaient lumineuses, animées et pleines de monde, mais rapidement devenue calme et vide avec l'arrivée de la nuit*".

3 The original text in French is as follows: "*La culture en ligne, quand il s'agissait de genres et de formes que nous associons à la nuit (comme la musique électronique) a rompu le lien intime entre l'expression culturelle nocturne et d'autres caractéristiques de la nuit*".

4 See Katz, who posits that resilience, which is defined as "the individual or systematic ability to cope with, adapt to or bounce back from adversity", was initially a revelatory concept in ecology and in childhood studies, in particular (2020: 53).

5 The Pop Montreal International Music Festival has been running annually in Montreal since 2002 and was initially created by Daniel Seligman, Noelle Sorbara and Peter Rowan.

6 On the commercial viability of Bandcamp, see for instance, Kieran Devlin's "The rise and rise of Bandcamp".

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