

How Young Musicians are Fitting into the Mold of Independent Live Music Venues

By Kelly Darroch

Mere hours after finishing his sixth-period calculus exam, Ralston Turcotte is already 75 miles up the coast in Isla Vista, gearing up to play a live set to a crowd of college students on a Friday night. The following day, he's in the studio rehearsing before he takes another two-and-a-half-hour drive down the coast with his bandmates to perform at the iconic San Diego venue, SOMA.

That same night, 18-year-old singer-songwriter Sequoia Branson had just posted a reminder that she's hours away from headlining a free show sponsored by *LAist* at the LA College of Music in Pasadena.



Ralston Turcotte performing in a DIY venue. Photo taken by Anthony Locascio.

Both 18-year-olds have the same goal in mind: to share their music with others, yet they have each cultivated their preferred method of doing so. This is no easy feat in the constantly evolving landscape of live music, even in LA with its opportunistic reputation.

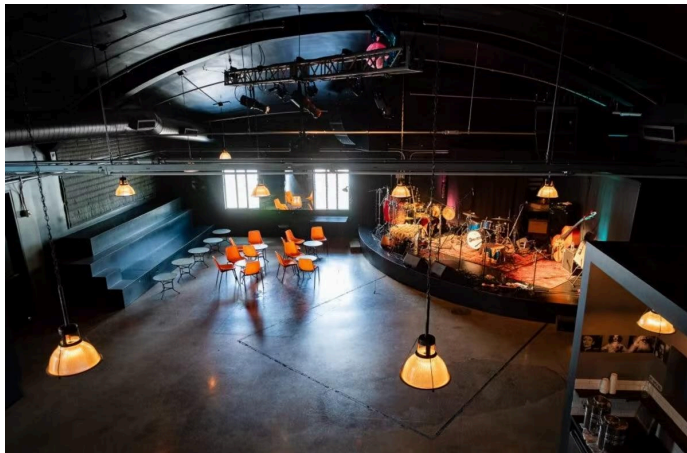
Now, any young musician in LA can attest to having attended or played at a scroungy, local, backyard DIY show; perhaps those are some of their fondest memories. But as any aspiring musician attempts to develop their career, the desire to play larger stages develops as well.

For musicians under 21, the options for playing established, independently owned venues in LA can be limited and complicated. This is neither the fault of musicians nor of venue owners, but rather the unforgiving, competitive nature of the LiveNation-dominated live music industry.

Los Angeles is riddled with independent music venues; they are the heart and soul of music in the city, and they have been for decades. Yet, the majority of them are just scraping by to make ends meet. In fact, a study conducted by the [National Independent Venue Association \(NIVA\)](#) found that 64% of indie venues operated without profitability in 2024. These stages across the nation generated \$153.1 billion in total economic output in 2024, and yet they are barely keeping their doors open.

Venues do not make the majority of profits from ticket sales, but rather from alcohol sales at the bar. Because of this, several of the more popular venues generally cater to a 21+ audience.

Zebulon, located in LA's Elysian Valley—also known as Frogtown—has become a hub over the past decade for local and touring acts. Its popularity also stems from the environment and culture they have cultivated with their large outdoor patio space. It's not necessarily the music that's bringing in the profit; it's the roughly 300 bodies who are building the community and purchasing highly-priced cocktails.



Zebulon LA interior. Photo acquired from venue website.

Despite their positive reputation, they too struggle to pay rent and their employees without compromising the integrity of their space. According to Burgers Rana, Zebulon's Production Manager for the last two years, the goal is not just to fill the calendar, but rather to curate the best programs possible for music lovers across the board. One way they do this is by having a team of people programming as opposed to one person. "Just this week we had a Welsh singer-songwriter, we had Iranian psych-rock last night, and then we're having Austin punk tonight," said Rana.

While Zebulon is largely a 21+ venue, this philosophy trickles down in the interest of providing a space for an underage audience as well, whether those are youth School of Rock shows or the occasional all-ages night show.

One of their most compelling aspects is their frequent free concerts. By opening up their space to the community free of cost, they're able to grow said community while simultaneously making it more accessible and desirable to spend over \$10 on a drink. According to both Rana and the Lodge Room's general manager, Stephen Kaplan, as an independent venue, low ticket prices are generally more beneficial for their business because it incentivizes drinking.

The Lodge Room in Highland Park is in a somewhat unique position compared to other venues. As an independent venue, they face a handful of challenges; however, rent is not one of them.

Stephen Kaplan has been the general manager at the Lodge Room since 2021, a venue situated in one of the trendiest LA neighborhoods. With their beautiful interior, they're not just offering a show; they're offering a visual experience. The mission at Lodge Room is to create a space that values the artists and the audience, and one way they do this is by allowing reentry.

"We look at ourselves more similarly to a museum than we do to another venue," said Kaplan.



Lodge Room interior. Photo acquired from venue website.

The venue itself still only makes the majority of its profit from alcohol sales, so they make sure to have a balance of shows of an older audience (50s+) who tend to drink more in a bar setting than younger generations.

While you may see a handful of local musicians at Lodge Room, you won't often see musicians in high school. Kaplan estimates that approximately four high school bands play per year. "I think it's important to cut your teeth before you get to a place like Lodge," said Kaplan.

One of these rare musicians who played the Lodge Room while in high school is Riley Schmedeman and his LA-based rock band, Swandive. Starting from playing at DIY venues in his freshman year, he eventually proved to their booker that they had garnered a large audience and would do the same for their venue, even with an audience under 21.

"It was just about the wording of your email and not being like, 'We're going to try our best to bring in this many people,' it's like, 'We will bring in this many people because this show matters to us, so we're going to bring in at least 250 or 300,'" said Schmedeman.



Swandive performing at Lodge Room for the fourth time. Photo taken by Mia Dawson.

Since the summer before Schmedeman's senior year of high school in 2022, Swandive has played Lodge Room four times. He even recalled a comment from one of Lodge Room's staff members saying something along the lines of, "We can't wait for you guys to all turn 21 when your shows start making some real money." This goes to show that a handful of indie venues like Lodge Room and Zebulon have aimed to preserve the mutual relationship between artist and venue.

"While it is important and necessary for a business to make money, I think that there's also something to be said about if you nourish and encourage a community, then the community starts to grow, and you reap those rewards tenfold down the line," said Rana.

Lodge Room see themselves as a unique spot in the LA live music industry, and they intend on keeping it that way even 50 years down the line, and refuses to compromise that mission to keep its doors open.

“We are not concerned by our alleged competition like the Troubadour or Teregram or Sid the Cat,” said Kaplan. “The enemy has always been and is always LiveNation, and we would close before we sold [to them].”

Michelle Zalabak, Professor of Music Industry at UCLA and Financial Manager at Warner Music Group, elaborated on one major threat of LiveNation to indie venues. If an artist is signed to a label that partners with LiveNation, they will typically book venues owned by them. “The problem with that is that those indie venues aren’t going to be on that list,” said Zalabak.

The monopoly of LiveNation is an especially hot topic in the live music industry currently, due to the settlement they reached with the DOJ on March 9 in their antitrust lawsuit with the U.S. Justice Department, 39 states, and the District of Columbia. Many, including Judge Arun Subramanian, were displeased that the settlement did not break up LiveNation and Ticketmaster, which was the primary goal of the plaintiffs.

Zalabak further described how the crux of the lawsuit aimed to attack what she described as LiveNation’s flywheel business model, or one that emphasizes continuous momentum and customer-driven growth, which Zalabak stated was “monopolistic by nature.” According to Zalabak, the terms of the new agreement give a 50% cap on how many tickets can be sold by other ticketing services, but there is no minimum guarantee that they are required to adhere to.

“LiveNation has also previously run afoul by breaching their agreement with the federal government when their merger with Ticketmaster was approved, so I don’t imagine any of the plaintiffs will be taking them at their word,” said Zalabak.

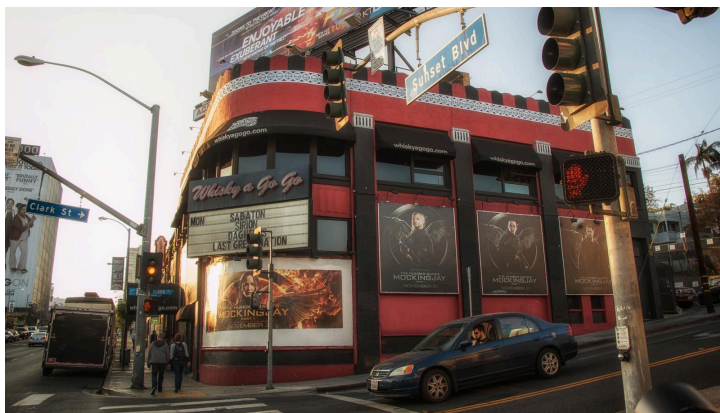
Bobby Borg, a USC Music Industry Professor and music business author, speculated on whether this settlement would bring any effective change to the industry. While he believes that it could work and potentially give people an opportunity, or rather the “perceived look of opportunity,” he thinks there is a probable chance that venues will continue to use Ticketmaster if they have already built a strong relationship.

“Are they automatically not going to pay allegiance to LiveNation anymore and use somebody else in fear that maybe they might hurt their relationship with LiveNation?” said Borg.

Kevin Lyman, another USC Music Industry Professor and the founder of Vans Warped Tour, held a more cynical outlook on the settlement and potential for change: “No, absolutely not, they’re very, very superficial,” said Lyman.

LiveNation also has a history of buying up independent venue spaces, one of the most notable in LA being The Echo, which was formerly owned by Spaceland Productions. Before working at Zebulon, Rana was employed at The Echo when LiveNation acquired it. “I went to the ‘Welcome to LiveNation’ meeting, and I walked out in the middle of the meeting,” said Rana. “I cannot express how much LiveNation is the complete opposite of what you want in a music community space.”

After the 2010 merger, there were also instances in which indie venues were unofficially looped into a contract with LiveNation. For example, Tyler Porterfield of Pop Cautious Productions, who formerly managed the in-house bookings at The Whisky a Go Go, attested to the gradual surge in prices and explained how they are under contract with the ticketing website, TicketWeb, which was acquired by Ticketmaster in 2000. So, being a subsidiary of Ticketmaster, it is now also owned by LiveNation.



The Whisky a Go Go exterior. Photo from Getty Images.

As a musician and professional booker with Pop Cautious Productions, he is most familiar with a ticketing model that many refer to as “pay-to-play.” According to the [LA Times](#), this presale ticketing model began to emerge in the mid-1980s when record company support for venues started to decline.

Porterfield explained that the way this model works is that each band is given a number of tickets that need to be sold during their time slot. This number is multiplied by the ticket price, and then the artist must sell x amount of tickets (typically around 25) to make that back before

they start to turn a profit. If the artist does not sell the ticket minimum, they must pay the venue out of pocket.

Porterfield, who does not prefer to use the term “pay-to-play,” views this model as an effective safety net for venues. He also believes it incentivizes artists to work harder to attract a larger audience, which ultimately benefits everyone, while also allowing young musicians to get their feet wet in the live industry. “As an artist myself, I’ve sold the most tickets ever doing that model than I have any other model,” said Porterfield.

Many artists, however, are critical of this ticketing model and spaces like The Whisky in general. Lyman does not agree with the model and said he would never use it in his projects, but he can understand the perspectives of the venues and the artists who do participate, especially if it is a useful stepping stone for their career. “But you don’t want to become known as the pay-to-play band because people will take advantage of you,” said Lyman.

For high school senior Ralston Turcotte, adhering to the “pay-to-play” ticketing model is out of the question for him. Playing and touring live is what he hopes to do for the rest of his life. The average week for Turcotte looks something like this – Monday: school play rehearsal after school, Tuesday: band practice after school, Wednesday: play rehearsal, Thursday: band practice, Friday: play rehearsal and live show with his band, Saturday: play rehearsal and live show, Sunday: break. Turcotte has yet to play a show at Lodge Room, but even as an 18-year-old, he said he sees it on his horizon.

The DIY music scene is no stranger to Turcotte, who has played in various bands since the age of five. He’s been doing it consistently in LA for the past four to five years, with his fondest memory being playing The Smell, an iconic all-ages DIY venue in Downtown LA, with his band, Bloodshot, for his sixteenth birthday. “Live shows are so important because when you go to a show, it’s like you’re there with either all of your friends, or you make all your friends,” said Turcotte.

Nowadays, Turcotte has two major projects: his solo project, [RKT](#), and playing guitar in an LA-based punk band, [ROAD TRIP](#). With ROAD TRIP, he plays live shows every weekend from Isla Vista to Grass Valley. Despite being underage, Turcotte plays numerous live shows across California and LA. He just says you have to dig for them, as they can be anywhere from college towns to even stores like guitar shops, vintage stores, video stores, skate shops, and more.



ROADTRIP playing at SOMA in San Diego. Ralston Turcotte on the far left. Photo provided by Turcotte.

Like most artists, Turcotte occasionally takes to social media to promote his music and shows, but he does it in moderation. According to Turcotte, this stems from both a rejection of the oversaturation of media and “AI slop bullshit.” In terms of where he puts his energy, he’d prefer to focus on live experiences.

Because of social media, some may consider that building your reputation in your local live community can be entirely avoided, but artists like Sequoia Branson have decided to do both. The 18-year-old singer has found her own rhythm for both social media and playing live shows. Her Spotify profile under her artist name, [SEQUOIA](#), has amassed over 30k monthly listeners, with multiple singles that surpassed 100k streams. Her TikTok account, [@sequoiabranson](#), has garnered a following of nearly 181k. Like many other artists, she was hesitant to promote her music online, but once she started viewing it as a form of authentic self-expression, she grew to really enjoy it. “I started viewing it more like, there could be one person that’s seeing this for the first time, and it could completely change their world,” said Branson.

Her success on social media has not stifled her connection to the live music scene; in fact, it’s one way that she has brought the online sphere to her real world, where she often meets people who discovered her online. Branson has also had a level of success on Spotify algorithms, as she has seen herself on “New Indie Pop” and more recently on a “Jazz Pop” playlist.



Sequoia Branson performing in the crowd at her show at the LA College of Music in Pasadena in a red polka dot dress. Photo provided by Branson.

Both Turcotte and Branson understand that playing live and social media are key vehicles to share their art with the public. While the two musicians engage with both methods, they have leaned into what feels most comfortable. With this, they are laying the groundwork to grow their music careers, build an audience, and expand to new audiences and stages, such as Lodge Room or Zebulon.

Regardless of whether an artist under 21 can bring in a legal drinking age audience, the truth of the matter is that young people are not drinking as much, and they are especially not drinking out as much.

A study conducted by [Gallup](#) found that 62% of adults under the age of 35 say they drink, which is down from 72% just two decades ago, which is attributed to factors including a greater awareness of alcohol health concerns and marijuana usage.

Regardless of the cause, venue owners are aware of this fact and must figure out how to adapt. Kevin Lyman explained that many in the live music industry have been exploring multi-use spaces, like a coffee shop in the daytime and a venue in the evening.

Rana claimed that he's seen multi-use spaces for years, such as Scribble in Highland Park, which serves as a counseling center, the host of various arts classes, and a music venue in the evening. Rana explained that Zebulon has used their own space in multipurpose ways, like for music videos or commercial shoots, but because of how large the space is, it is not necessarily profitable to open up the space for events such as a pop-up market.

Borg explained how the overall uncertainty of the music industry is something he has tried to prepare his students for. “Music is an art, but making money from it is a business, so you've got to understand that there is going to be shit that you have to deal with if you want to make a living and for this to be your career,” said Borg.

With LiveNation in the picture, the live music industry will continue to be challenging, but the music industry has never had a reputation for being easy. Following the controversial LiveNation settlement, Michelle Zalabak said that with the majority of the plaintiff states stating that they will pursue their own cases, “we can expect this to drag on for potentially years.”

Despite the challenges presented by LiveNation, indie venue staff understand that this is simply part of the business and are still committed to maintaining live music spaces that uphold art and community. “Unfortunately, we also kind of have to have the LiveNations so that we can fight against them,” said Rana.

A similar sentiment was echoed across all sources, from music professors to musicians and venue staff: Live music will always be sustainable because it cannot be replicated.

As younger musicians like Ralston Turcotte and Sequoia Branson continue to find their footing, they, too, will encounter these challenges. As they continue to put in the dedicated time towards their art and audience, with independent venues like Lodge Room and Zebulon, which wish to invest in a mutually beneficial relationship with their artists, they will also have the opportunity to grow alongside them. Despite the odds being trickier while they are under 21, they are never zero. Neither are the odds of the indie venues prevailing under LiveNation, but it will not be painless.