

## **Is Pay-To-Play Ever Acceptable:** Live music is tough business for artists & venues alike, but should artists be expected to cover costs?

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Back in May, Canadian Musician received an email from Hamilton, ON-based independent singer-songwriter Piper Hayes detailing a recent experience she had with an unnamed venue owner. Recounting their email conversation, Hayes told CM the venue owner said she, the artist, would need to cover the cost of the doorperson. "When I asked if I could have my own door person," Hayes continued in her initial message, "I was told, 'I can't due to the neighbourhood. We need bag checks and the front watched closely as people like to take booze outside.' This indicates to me that the door person needs to be an employee and therefore covered by the venue itself."

Though covering the doorperson's wage is unusual, the expectation that musicians cover costs – either by paying a fee to the venue for the "privilege" of playing, or covering costs directly by, say, paying the sound tech – is unfortunately a not-too-uncommon occurrence. The practice of "pay to play" is decades old and online complaints from musicians continue to pop up with regularity. "I have been taking it upon myself as of late to challenge music venues on how they treat musicians," Hayes said in her email, "Over and over again, I approach venues to set up shows and I am met with pay-to-play standards."

"I find there's a trend in paying for the sound person and it's anywhere from \$40 to \$100," Hayes later says by phone. In another example, she recalls, "I was part of this festival this year and then it got cancelled. I was supposed to be playing at [a venue in Toronto's Kensington Market] and they contacted me and said, 'Would you still come? Would you still fill the spot?' I said, 'Yeah, great. What are the terms?' The terms of the festival were I was offered a guarantee and we were playing with two other bands. It was in Toronto and I live in Hamilton and even transportation and all that factor in, and they said, 'Well, it's the same thing, we'll do this at the door and you pay \$60 for a sound person.' Well, that's not the same thing. She called it a 'nominal fee of \$60' and I'm like, 'Well if it's so nominal, why don't you pay it? I don't understand.'"

Hayes messaged the other two artists on the bill and explained why she was going to say no to the gig. A little surprisingly, "One of them wrote me back and sent a really long message about why I should do it – that the \$60 isn't that much and 'if we get this many people, then we'll make this much,'" Hayes recalls, "and the reality is, too, that it's not true for me. I will make more money if I go across the street and play at the old coffee shop I used to work at, do a pass the hat or whatever I want, and not have that loss of \$60. But it is ethical, as well. I don't want to encourage that system anymore. It's an old, broken system."

Shawn Creamer couldn't agree more. Creamer owns the Dakota Tavern, a staple of Toronto's roots music scene, as well as the The Hayloft Dancehall in Prince Albert County and the Whippoorwill Restaurant and Tavern in Toronto, in addition to being a guitarist and singer with highly regarded alt-country band The Beauties.

"Totally would never happen... I've got two venues and there would never be an occasion at either of those venues where we would have an artist pay to play," Creamer tells CM emphatically. "For one, it's an ethical decision, and being a musician, I would just never do that to another musician. But I think it is also a business decision, too. I own music venues and we have a place where we need, sort of, a farm system for young bands to be able to come up and go through. So for us to be only thinking about the bottom line and having bands pay to play would not be good for business for us at all. It would tarnish our reputation as being a reputable place for bands to get their start. The Dakota only holds 130 people, so it's a great place, that sort of venue where a band really cuts their teeth and is a good stepping-stone from our venue to bigger venues. I think if you're paying to play, you wouldn't last too long."

What is acceptable, Creamer says, is for the venue to expect the band/artist to hold up their end of the bargain, which means promoting their show. "It should be an agreement between the venue and the band that they're going to promote this together," he says. As far as payment, an artist should expect a guarantee, which can vary, and likely also a split of the door. An 80/20 split of the door revenue is common, with the band getting the majority share, and the smaller percentage going to the venue to pay for the PA rental, sound tech, security, and/or other costs. The venue, Creamer says, makes its profits from food and drink sales.

"For The Beauties, my band, if someone told me they were taking 50 per cent of the door or we were only getting paid if they made X amount of dollars at the bar, I would go, 'Forget it, I'm out.' As a musician, I wouldn't play for it and as a bar owner, I would never put that on a musician to make them feel like that was their responsibility," Creamer adds.

What is considered an acceptable offer for their services is up to the artists to determine, but the basic message from both Hayes and Creamer is just that – that the artist/band is providing a service and deserves compensation. It's the same as if they were the server, security, sound tech, or any other employee or hired hand. It is also about self-respect.

"I think my tipping point just became, 'I need money because this is my income now and I need to value myself,'" says Hayes, noting how tiring it has become for her – working as her own promoter and manager – to reach out to venues and nearly half of the time receive a pay-to-play offer in return.

If, in some quarters of the live music industry, pay-to-play is prevalent to a degree, then it must be working for someone. It's unlikely that person is the musician. Pay-to-play would not exist if it didn't succeed on some level for the venue owners; therefore, are artists who accept these conditions undermining their fellow musicians? Hayes is fairly diplomatic on the question; Creamer, not so much.

"I don't necessarily inherently feel that," says Hayes. "The problem is, there are so many categories of musicians, and that's not a bad thing. It just means there's going to be some people who don't need it for the finances; they're doing it as a hobby. There's going to be bands of people's parents who have been playing for 30 years and that's just what they do. I think that's great and I don't really feel undermined. It's a really hard road to walk and I would never want to judge somebody or feel poorly about some of the choices they make. It's so hard at the end of the day and, if anything, if people are doing that, I might just say, 'Here's why that's maybe not a good idea.'"

Creamer, on the other hand, responds with an instant "100 per cent" when the question is flipped to him. "If someone is willing to play for free, then these [venues] are going to grab those people. And it's unfortunate because if you're going to try and make a career or make a go of it, you have to have respect for yourself in the first place," he says. "If you are willing to play for free, you've already devalued yourself and it's hurtful, I think, to the music community as a whole and as to what musicians consider to be the standard."

Running a music venue, bar, or restaurant is not an easy business. In fact, it's extremely stressful and tough to turn a profit. Musicians should be sympathetic to that, but that sympathy shouldn't come at the expense of their own livelihood and self-value. As Creamer advises, "I always say the same thing to young bands. I tell them, 'Tell me what you're worth, and then show up and be worth it.'"

*By Michael Raine, Assistant Editor of Canadian Musician; article printed by permission.*