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The Music City: popular music's "policy moment"

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 10 years or so, the concept of a 'Music City' has achieved considerable attention both within academic analyses and as an instrument of (local) governmental policy. However, hitherto it has attracted relatively little critical analysis of the sort which this article offers. It suggests that while the term 'Music City' has little explanatory power, it remains something worthy of academic investigation. Further, it argues that the Music City can be envisaged as popular music's 'policy moment' and examines the implications of this.

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Introduction



Quite suddenly there is a lot of interest in becoming a Music City, and how to make one succeed (Terrill et al. 2015, 6).

'music city' has... arrived in the halls of government and industry as a central plank of social, cultural and economic policy (Homan 2019b, 179)

The term 'music cities' is increasingly common (Johannsson 2023, 40)

This article concerns the phenomena of the 'Music City' and its main provocation is to argue that unlike concepts such as 'scene' (Straw 1997), 'ecology' (Behr et al. 2016), 'pathways' (Finnegan 1989), 'artworlds' (Becker 1982) and 'field' (Bourdieu 1993), the concept of Music City has almost no explanatory power in terms of understanding musical life within a particular location. This is important for me as a Popular Music Studies (PMS) scholar always keen to provide readers with tools with which to understand the world. So, given the prominence which the notion of the Music City has achieved recently, there is still a need for scholars to address it and the best way to do so is to explain how it emerged and what the consequences of its emergence are for policies around popular music. In fact, the notion of a Music City can be seen the latest manifestation of the long march of popular music policy which has emerged within a broader context of around 40 years of 'the creative industries' being seen as key drivers of the new economy. In fact the Music City can best be seen as popular music's 'policy moment'.¹

This association of the Music City with policy has also been recognised both within academia, where the subtitle of an edited collection by Ballico and Watson is 'evaluating a global cultural policy concept' and within business where leading Music City consultant Shane Shapiro has suggested that the title should be Music Policy City (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAWxQib12IE). However, there has been relatively little academic scrutiny of the Music City as a concept *per se* with most analyses thus far examining what makes up a particular Music City and the extent to which it can justifiably claim the title.

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This article starts by examining the rise of popular music policy and notions of the Music City. The second part makes some observations on this. The third examines discourses around the Music City, outlining its use in three overlapping arenas: consultancies, government and academia. This leads in to the concluding part on why all this means this is popular music's policy moment. Overall the article suggests that there is a need to understand the impact of Music Cities on the ground, that the concept adds little to critical understanding of popular music and its related industries and that all this has implications for PMS.

Part one: popular music policy and the emergence of the Music City

If the Music City is popular music's policy moment, then it is apposite to ask: why now? In order to answer this, it is necessary to examine the development of the notion and the ways in which the interests of politicians and some music industries' personnel came to converge in the mid 1990s. Here I primarily draw on the experience of the UK and Australia. In both countries, as in the west more generally, over the last 40 years or so there has been great emphasis on the 'creative industries' as key economic agents. At the same time, problems were increasing within the music industries, especially concerning areas such as copyright (Williamson, Cloonan, and Frith 2011), the growth of new media including the internet (Silver 2014) and issues for grassroots venues (Culture Media and Sport Committee 2024). As a result key personnel from these industries who had previously wanted to avoid engaging with government now saw the necessity of doing so, if only in the interests of self-preservation. In the UK the peak of this was during the New Labour government (1997–2010) when some elements within the music industries clearly aligned themselves with the government (Cloonan 2007).

Meanwhile Australia has arguably been at the forefront of developing both music policy and notions of the Music City. While the country's geographical location, size, domestic geography and demographics all play important roles here, it is the federal system of government which plays the most important. The fact that Australia's major states all have parliaments which are located within powerful, rivalrous, cities has played a crucial role in the development of popular music policies. Additionally many Australians live in densely populated cities, where questions of the acoustic environment have become politically more acute in recent years. As part of this, a series of political problems around live music in Sydney and Melbourne saw a range of government and music industries interactions which if sometimes antagonistic at least got government and music industries personnel to engage with each other. Meanwhile, the formation of a Live Music Office at federal level in 2013 provided a focus for a number of initiatives. While rarely characterising themselves as Music Cities *per se*, Australian cities have nonetheless been at the forefront of policy developments, with examples including Canberra (MusicACT/Live Music Office 2015), Melbourne (City of Melbourne 2010, 2014, 2018) and Sydney (City of Sydney 2014) and Adelaide becoming a UNESCO City of Music in 2015.

The notion of a Music City has a longer lineage, with Nashville emerging as the first city to assume such a title. The city itself claims that following a performance for by local artists the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1873 Queen Victoria remarked that they must come from a 'city of music' (www.visitmusiccity.com/explore-nashville/music-and-entertainment/story-music-city). Lloyd (2014, 140) has noted that in the intervening years the city has 'solidified its ownership over the Music City brand in the United States'.

Certainly Nashville remains the most brash in claiming this title and marketing it, including having its own website to attract tourists (www.visitmusiccity.com/). Importantly there are strong commercial interests at play here with Gaylord Entertainment – which owns businesses such as the Grand Ole Opry, the Ryman Auditorium and local radio stations – being a key player (Ballico 2024, 104). Other private enterprises such as the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the Music City Beer Company and the Music City Review for bachelorette nights all add to the mix. In purely commercial terms, the city's music economy is highly important and in 2015 was estimated to be worth (US

\$5.5B per annum (Ballico and Carter 2021, 201). Overall Ballico and Carter suggest that 'Nashville is arguably a unique, if not extreme, example of the integration of music across a city's heritage, tourism, and economic endeavors' (ibid).²

More recently the notion of a Music City has appeared across the globe.³ Here the following questions can be usefully posed: Does the city have a music policy? If so, is this expressed in terms of being a Music City? If so, what aspects of the city's music are emphasised? What becomes apparent is that different 'Music Cities' have different emphases, such as tourism, musical infrastructure and economic development. For example, in Aarhus, Denmark, the emphasis is clearly on the economic as the city says that music is important because 'it supports the city's strategy for growth and expansion' and can attract an educated work force (Promus 2015, 3), while Melbourne's last plan focused on 'Melbourne's wider music ecosystem, providing grassroots support for the next generation of musicians and music entrepreneurs, and opening up opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds' (City of Melbourne 2018, 6).

Before proceeding further it is necessary to draw upon Bennett's (2020b) distinction between a Music City and a UNESCO City of Music. In the former case, the title is self-designated and cities can simply declare themselves to be a Music City. In the latter, cities located within UNESCO member countries may apply to become officially designated Cities of Music following an annual application process. To this, Ballico and Carter (2021) have added a third category of 'legacy' music cities, such as Liverpool, New Orleans and Seattle which have an established history as music cities and may or may not branded themselves as Music Cities and/or applied for the UNESCO status.

For self-designation what is often required is having a city-wide policy for music and this has often resulted from a sense of crisis. For example, the restrictions on venues which led to the SLAM protests in Melbourne (Homan et al. 2017, 101), the lockouts in Sydney (Homan 2019a) and the closure of many London venues (Terrill et al. 2015, 61–64) all triggered local government reactions.⁴ Once a policy is in place, what follows is often attempts at branding the city as a Music City. It should be noted here that those claiming to be a music city tend to emphasise popular music, whereas the UNESCO cities tend to veer more towards traditional and classical music and to be less known for their popular music scenes. Some cities, such as Liverpool, claim both statuses (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile the UNESCO City of Music process began in 2006 and as of 2024, there 75 UNESCO Cities of Music.⁵ They form part of the broader Creative Cities network which was established in 2004 and now has 350 members. These cities come from more diverse geographical locations than the



Figure 1. Liverpool, UNESCO city of music, proclaims itself to be a city of music via a banner on the city's St. George's Hall, may 2024.

Music Cities. In order to be accepted, cities have to demonstrate six characteristics in relation to music: 'music heritage . . . a history of music making, music education, community involvement and regular local and international music events' (Ballico and Watson 2020, 5).

Various commentators (e.g. Jones 2020, 99; Mani 2020, 103; Soares 2020, 66) have shown that the award of the UNESCO status often starts a battle to determine what it actually means. Evidence suggests a positive experience in Liverpool, where academics were happily involved in writing the initial bid for the status (Jones 2020, 81) and a less rosy picture in Glasgow where academics have been more critical (Cloonan 2014; Williamson 2017). What is important here is how seriously the designation is taken by local politicians. Ballico and Carter (2021) interviewed four representatives of UNESCO Cities of Music and identified both the importance of live music to the designation and that governments often prefer big new projects over the protection of existing grassroots venues (204 and 206). They also suggest that the UNESCO status is an attempt to drive new policies forward in ways that are not replicated in the self-designated and legacy Music Cities.

Part two: some observations

Some further observations can also be made. The first is that Music City discourses emerge from a wider one about the creative city, and in particular the work of Florida (2002). Such talk can be dated to the mid 1990s in the UK and U.S.A. (Gathen, Skoglund, and Laven 2021, 727) and as Homan *et al* have argued that 'the creative city cannot be imagined without music' (2015, 87).

The second is that the rise of Music Cities coincided with the decline of the recording sector. This is a post-analogue phenomenon which is overwhelmingly concerned with the provision of live music (Ballico and Carter 2021, 199; Bolderman 2024, 122; Dubois, Renard and Rana 2024, 948 and 956). Thus talk of Music Cities was somewhat muted during the Covid pandemic when live music could not be presented in public. Such a concentration has been criticised for ignoring key areas of the music industries such as recording studios, record companies and publishing companies (Dubois, Renard and Rana 2024). It also represents something of a dangerous strategy as ownership within the live sector becomes ever more concentrated and major acts adopt policies of visiting fewer cities (*ibid*). It also generally fails to recognise the problematic aspects of live music provision such as 'noise nuisance, unavailability of public spaces during festivals, and damage to the flora and fauna in parks' (Van de Hoeven and Hitters 2023, 16).

Additionally, it represents something of a change in policy as from a UK perspective it is possible to talk about the development of local music policies from the 1980s, when such policies were often about allowing local musicians to access recording studios, thus giving them the chance to make records and hopefully gain success in the global recording market (Cloonan 2007). Such a route often meant *escaping* from the local. However, today Music Cities are about *celebrating* and monetising local heritage and trying to ensure that the local provision of live music is as good as one's competitors, something which Chicago recognised early on (Rothfield *et al.* 2007). This means having a sufficient legacy of famous musicians while also retaining at least enough musicians to entertain the tourists upon whom Music Cities policies often focus. Indeed, music tourism is now recognised as a sub-sector of the global tourism industry (Bolderman 2024, 120) and the rise of the Music City has been seen as bolstering tourism (Ballico 2024, 103; Ballico and Carter 2021, 2000). Importantly, while tourists can be attracted by live music, offers such as Beatles tours in Liverpool and tours of Nashville's recording studios can also be significant. Thus, while a vibrant live music scene is vital, so is a heritage of music tourism sites beyond venues.

Thirdly, as noted earlier, recent notions of a Music City are frequently concerned with the *policy* implications of having such an assignation. Here the discourse around music and the city has moved from cities being associated with a certain sound – for example Merseybeat, Madchester, Detroit/Motor City – to a Music City being associated with certain practices, such as showing off its heritage, attracting tourists and staging events. This is popular music's policy moment and, indeed, in some

circles it is a city *having* a music policy which secures its status *as* a Music City (Sound Diplomacy 2019a, n/p).

Fourthly, there is no international body which officially designates the status of Music City as such and cities can either declare themselves to be such and/or apply UNESCO to become one their official Cities of Music. Importantly whereas the UNESCO award is granted by an external body, the Music City title is an act of self-designation. As Homan (2019b, 186), notes, there is no body to which to apply to become a Music City (rather than a UNESCO City of Music) and the title is 'both self-referential and self-enabling'. This can lead to some rather large anomalies. For example Huntsville, Alabama, has designated itself as being a Music City, whereas internationally renowned music industries hub and 'superstar' music city⁶ New York has not. Another important difference is that whereas cities choosing to adopt the title as a policy choice can decide to drop it later, those gaining UNESCO status seem to never lose the title. Thus Tuohy (2014, 79) has noted that Glasgow has the title 'in perpetuity'. In contrast, Bolderman's work on Detroit (2024) has shown how interest in music policy in the city has waxed and waned according to the politicians in place.

Fifthly, the concept of Music Cities remains a radically under-theorised one. While Bolderman (2024, 117) has noted the importance of *imagining* in developing Music City plans, in terms of simply *understanding* what is happening in music and its related industries the notion of a Music City adds little, if anything, to concepts such as scenes, ecology, pathways, artworlds and fields. In fact, while Music City policy documents often mention such concepts, they have done little to develop them further. As Ballico and Watson note, the idea of a Music City 'has only been subject to limited empirical and conceptual interrogation' (2020, 2), meaning that academic critique is 'both necessary and timely' (ibid, 9).

Sixthly, it should also be noted that while UNESCO cities of music span the globe, the music cities such as those in the Music Cities Network are overwhelmingly located in the global north.⁷ Whatever a city's musical heritage unless it has the wherewithal to exploit it, then it is unlikely to be a Music City – and, all things being equal, such wherewithal is generally located in the global north.

Finally, it should also be noted that there may be senses in which the notion of a Music City is a pre-Covid one. Its focus on live music became hugely problematic during C19 and fewer Music Cities (as opposed to UNESCO cities of music) seem to have emerged in its aftermath. There are certainly fewer policy documents being produced now. However, the counterweight of this is UNESCO, where 11 cities were granted the status in 2021 and another eight in 2023.^v

In the absence of an agreed definition, there is at least a set of characteristics which those claiming the title Music City generally share. The first of these is a commitment to musical diversity. Thus while many cities have had their musical reputations built upon one genre, this is not universally welcomed. Terrill *et al* are adamant that a Music City needs 'a diversity of music offerings' (2015, 18) and in Rothfield *et al.* (2007, 3 and 31) made much of Chicago being a 'musical omnivore's paradise'. New York has claimed that the city's DNA was driven 'the extraordinary level of cultural diversity' (BCG 2017, 9) and Melbourne claims that 'one of the hallmarks of a healthy music city is a culture of diversity and resilience' (City of Melbourne 2018, 11). However, this can be in tension with an emphasis which is often placed on musical genres within city (marketing) strategies, such as Nashville being the home of country music (Ballico 2024, 104) and Birmingham the home of heavy metal (<https://homeofmetal.com>).

Evidently the dominance of one form of music can lead to the marginalisation of others. So, a key issue for policymakers is what to do if a city's musical reputation is built on a certain genre or even, as in Liverpool, on a particular act (Cohen 2007). Moreover, cities 'differ in the genres that dominate local scenes and the relative importance of particular festivals or venues. Furthermore, cities tend to have a local understanding of their character that might affect their approaches to cultural production and policymaking' (Van de Hoeven and Hitters 2023, 19). The result is that cities act in different ways in areas such as tourism and, relatedly, the promotion of their musical heritage (Ballico 2024, 108; Johannsson 2023, 52 and 60).

Another issue concerns cities' alleged uniqueness, with many commentators stressing exceptionalism. Jones writes that 'the political culture of Liverpool . . . differs markedly from that of the more "manual trades" industrial areas of the UK' (2020, 87) and Mani writes of 'the special circumstances unique to Chennai' (Mani 2020, 105). New York has claimed that 'for major concerts, festivals, and artists tours, there is literally no place like New York City' (BCG 2017, 19) and made other claims to uniqueness (ibid, 20 and 21). Bennett (2020b, 4) has noted that the Music City itself is reliant on 'music's apparently exceptional culture-making capacities'. Thus, to be a Music City is often simultaneously to claim distinction both from *other* music cities. However, there is another tension here. If all cities are claiming diversity, then what makes a particular city unique? Here much will depend on what a city chooses to emphasise – musical heritage, tourism, local musicians' needs, the environment and so on. Even if all these are mixed, there will often be a need to prioritise.

Overall, the notion of a Music City is generally not something which is used to *explain*, but to *exalt*. This is being played out in a number of arenas of which three are particularly notable: consultancies, government and academia.

Part three: Music City discourses

This section examines some of the discourses around the Music City, beginning with Music City consultancies, going on to government usage and then academic work.

Music City consultancies include Sound Music Cities (soundmusiccities.com) which emerged from Austin and has largely retained a US-focus and a range of other creative industries consultancies which periodically examine the Music City. However, by far the foremost Music City consultancy is the London-based Sound Diplomacy (SD) which was formed in 2013. Its activities including undertaking numerous bespoke projects, holding a series of Music City events and issuing a regular Music Cities Events newsletter. It justifiably characterises itself as 'the leader of the global music cities movement' (Sound Diplomacy 2019a, 29). Bennett (2020b, 3) has noted that 'it is not the city-wide audit or action plan that best expresses the Music City construct but the international consultant and the "best practices" handbook' and it is SD who are at the forefront of producing such handbooks and even books (Shapiro 2023). They will thus be subject to some investigation here.

Before doing that the context in which Sound Diplomacy works should be emphasised. It is a commercial entity working in a fiercely competitive environment within which keeping customers happy is a key criterion. SD is selling a product and has to be upbeat about that product. However, what will be shown is that this upbeatness results in a series of claims which ultimately present only a partial view of the Music City. SD proclaims that 'We are a truly global company, with businesses extending across the UK, Europe, North America, Asia and Latin America (www.sounddiplomacy.com/) and claims to have assisted over 60 cities in over 30 different countries. It coordinates the Music Cities Network, which in 2024 had 12 members, each paying an annual membership fee of (US) \$6,500. Potential members are assured that its "application and selection process is slim and based on the aim for good transnational, borderless collaboration" (www.musiccitiesnetwork.com/become-a-member). This can be compared to the somewhat laborious process of becoming a UNESCO City of Music (<https://unesco.org.uk/become-a-unesco-creative-city/>). SD's CEO, Shain Shapiro, also has a Center for Music Ecosystems which has developed a European Music Cities Policy Guide in conjunction with the Music Cities Network. It has also worked on the role of music in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, held Music Cities events in numerous cities across five continents and developed an annual Music Cities Awards.

SD defines a Music City as 'a city that embeds music as a tool into its collective governance ethos, across economic development, tourism, education, equity and overall quality of life' (Sound Diplomacy 2019a, n/p). Importantly, Shapiro has both an academic and a music industries background, having completed a PhD on music policy (Shapiro 2014) and worked for the Canadian Independent Music Association. SD's work is academically-informed, something vividly illustrated by the foundation of the Center for Music Ecologies (Figure 2) the very notion of which draws on



Figure 2. Sound diplomacy CEO Shain Shapiro presents at the Linecheck music industry event, Milan, November 2024.

academic work (see Behr et al. 2016). The company has worked with the University of Colorado on the provision of courses of music cities and music tourism, something which it called ‘a sign of things to come’ (Sound Diplomacy newsletter 11 March 2020), although this seems not to have progressed. It also consults academics about its work.

Shapiro’s book argues that everyone lives an ecosystem and that music is an ecosystem within an ecosystem (2023, 1). He posits that ‘A music ecosystem policy is an overarching framework that encompasses the role of music across all governance structures, defining policies to support the creation, dissemination and enjoyment of music across society’ (ibid, 15). Shapiro points out that many departments within a city can affect that ecosystem and so to bring change work is needed across such departments (ibid, 78–9). However, the book also veers on the hyperbolic when it claims that ‘few of us disagree that music is inherently a good thing’ (ibid, 152) and ‘Music is one of our most trusted unifiers’ (ibid, 154). SD has also suggested that: ‘Music has never been more important’ (newsletter 20 July 2023) and the Center for Music Ecosystems is said to have ‘A vision for how music can help eradicate global poverty and support economic growth everywhere’ (Center for Music Ecosystems/Global Citizen 2024). However, Shapiro at least acknowledges that the free market alone cannot safeguard music ecosystem (2023, 180). He has advocated a global music policy, by which he means a set of minimum standards and music as an economic right (newsletter 11 October 2023).

SD has produced an almost bewildering number of documents and it is striking that while some Music City work stresses possibilities, what Sound Diplomacy proclaims is *certainty*. The following quotes are characteristic. It declares that Music ‘makes place better ... makes cities more vibrant and wealthier ... creates jobs and skills ... (and) promotes social inclusion’ (2019a, 4) and claims that music: ‘Creates Jobs, Is a Regeneration Tool, Increases Economic Output, A Tourism Driver, Improves Wellness, Enhances Social Inclusion, Supports Global Sustainable Development Goals, Supports A Thriving Night Time Economy’ (Sound Diplomacy 2019b, 3). Perhaps such claim are unsurprising given the commercial environment within which SD works and where something that *might* help is unlikely to have much appeal, but it also jars with the more detached and nuanced approach which Shapiro adopts elsewhere. For example, he says that one person’s music is another’s noise (Sound Diplomacy 2019c, 14) and has said that is important to value all art forms as much as music (2021, 4).

However, elsewhere Shapiro (2017) has stated boldly that ‘If you disagree, you’re wrong’. SD’s *Manual* is said to be ‘tried and tested’ and to lead to ‘the development of new music infrastructure, (which) builds networks, creates jobs and develops economies’ (2019b, 4). If

music is little understood by policy-makers, then SD can show them how to do it: 'With this document and with Sound Diplomacy's direction, your music policy *will* create jobs, drive economic growth, support sustainable development goals, increase tourists and improve quality of life' (ibid, 5). It is also claimed that: 'The more strategy there is around music, the more value it *will* return to your overall tourism offer. More music means heads in beds' (ibid, 22). Moreover music '*will* create jobs and lift people from poverty' (ibid, 26; all emphases author).

While all this is presented as common sense, it is premised on the idea that everyone is on the same side. However, this is somewhat ahistorical and fails to recognise that: (i) the music industries are full of conflict (Williamson and Cloonan 2007) and can be characterised as being sectors within which there are a range of issues relation to the status of work, of the value of that work and the damage to personal relationships that can emerge from this (Dubois, Renard, and Rana 2024, 948; Gross and Musgrave 2016); (ii) there is a history of popular music being in conflict with the authorities; (iii) local music scenes are sites of power relationships and disputes and (iv) there is growing evidence that while making music might be good for people, working within the music industries can often be destructive and lead to such things as anxiety, depression and even suicide (Musgrave 2023, 281).

In sum, music is a site of contestation (Johnson and Cloonan 2008). So, when readers are told that they need to 'ensure your music strategy engages across all evening and night time stakeholders, from police, ambulance and fire services to environmental health officers, licensing officials, community pastors, night transport workers and nightlife entrepreneurs' (Sound Diplomacy 2019b, 40) this may seem reasonable. However, history suggests otherwise as these bodies have competing interests. The cases of Save Live Australian Music (SLAM) in Melbourne caused by the closure of local venues (Homan, Cloonan, and Cattermole 2015, 98–99) and the Sydney lockouts where music was associated with violence and venues had their opening hours restricted (Homan 2019a) are just two examples of this. In addition, the music industries have long been associated with dubious business practices, especially in the live music sector (Cloonan 2012) which is held to be at the core of a Music City (Homan 2019b, 18). Unfortunately, such things cannot simply be wished away or ignored.

While acknowledging that SD is selling a product, the certainty it displays is misplaced. Saying that something *will* happen rather than *may* or *could* suggests that the adoption of such policies will *always* be successful, when, clearly, they will not. Like all initiatives, some will succeed, and some will fail. Moreover, such analyses inevitably overlook the less palatable sides of music making and its surrounding industries. Unfortunately, music is *not* a panacea. In addition to often being aesthetically beautiful, it is also simultaneously the site of inequality, exploitation, illness-inducing career structures, conflict and disputes (Bennett 2020b, 6; Musgrave 2023; Williamson and Cloonan 2016).

Additionally, some of SD's claims do not bear close scrutiny. For example, consider: 'When one is learning music, one is not joining a gang or experimenting with illicit substances. Music promotes responsibility' (Sound Diplomacy 2019b, 37). In reality, numerous musicians have taken drugs and avoided social responsibility. Live music often takes place at unsocial hours, in situations where alcohol and other drugs are freely available in ways that may encourage unhealthy usage. SD also claims that: 'Music is not political and it supports everyone' (ibid, 12). But again, this not true – some songs deliberately tackle political issues and take sides.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, SD adopted a more nuanced approach. This focused on resilience and included a *Handbook on Resilience* on solving what it calls the Great Paradox – that the public increasingly consumes art, but most artists struggle to earn enough to survive (Sound Diplomacy 2021). It advocated helping musicians to cope with diverse sources of income (ibid, 21). In this new approach cities are advised to be 'humble' (ibid, 37) and it is noted that great disparities of wealth are apparent in music cities, something which can be exacerbated by a concentration on the creative industries (ibid, 15). The *Handbook* postulates that a new definition of what a Music City is, or could be, is necessary for the post-Covid world (ibid, 18) and a nine-point plan for moving forward is provided (ibid, 26). It also suggests that 'resilient cities are gender equal, pay a living wage, have

climate action plans and create partnerships to meet collective challenges' (ibid: 31) and urges readers to 'work with us to make all our cities better' (ibid, 37). The issue of resilience is also raised in Shapiro's book (2023, 2, 29 and 179).

What is important here is that the exhortations made by the world's leading Music City consultancy offer only a partial account of music. Despite some recent rolling back post-Covid, SD's almost relentlessly upbeat tones hides the fact that music is a site of contestation and exploitation, something which its Music City paradigm *has* to ignore. As Bennett (2020b, 6) notes the Music City model contains and obscures tensions within the cities it covers. Thus SD's works are largely silent on such things as the use of music in violence (Johnson and Cloonan 2008) and unethical practices within the music industries (Cloonan 2007). There are also no references to a career in music having implications for health (Gross and Musgrave 2016; Musgrave 2023) or to the well-documented fact that music remains a profession within which wages are generally low, hours long and exploitation rife – a situation which has existed for hundreds of years (Ehrlich 1985). This Music City paradigm does very little to advance the understanding of the industries within which it encourages cities to work. While this is not SD's aim, once it is recognised that there is another side to the story, their almost relentlessly upbeat analysis starts to unpack. The certainty SD exudes is aimed about potential clients for whom mixed messages are not required. When this seeps in to the very notion of a Music City, then problems can occur.

It must be acknowledged that SD has done a lot of good work, especially in putting music policy on lots of agendas. This is entirely commendable. The problem is that it cannot be disinterested, it *has* to advocate. But academics should not let consultants get away with presenting partial pictures. We must adopt a more detached tone and illustrate the problems with the Music Cities paradigm as well as showing its successes. As Williamson *et al* have noted (2011, 462), our job is to tell the bad news as well as the good. Indeed, doing so is a hallmark of academic integrity. As much as SD has done good work in pushing music policy forward, it remains important that policymakers do not simply swallow its sloganeering whole and that academics produce more nuanced accounts.

Sound Diplomacy's work is intertwined with the next area – government. Importantly many music policy developments have taken place at local governmental level, where SD generally works. This is clear in processes such as applying for UNESCO status which is often led by cities and other local government bodies. The production of local policies is also important,⁸ as is the role which locally-appointed Night Mayors (often with a music industries' background) can play (Reia 2023). Elsewhere the existing literature reveals something of a global phenomenon, albeit largely western (Bennett 2020b, 4) in which there is some local variance and nuance.

What is often involved at local governmental level is local boosterism, often linked to attracting tourism.⁹ For example, Melbourne's music strategy for 2014–17 sought to ensure that 'Melbourne remains the music capital of Australia' (City of Melbourne 2014, 5) as it was now 'time for Melbourne to take its rightful place alongside the great music cities of the world' (ibid, 6). Importantly, the music plan was to help Melbourne a 'globally competitive city' (ibid, 8). The plan claimed that the city had 500 venues 'more per capita than any other global city' (City of Melbourne 2018, 3) and describes Melbourne as 'a leading music city' (ibid, 8) and 'one of the world's great music destinations' (ibid, 17). However, the fact that after 2021 its Music Plan was absorbed into to the city's wider economic strategy is a salient reminder of the fact that popular music's policy moment may be somewhat short-lived (see also Bolderman 2024; Johannsson 2023, 52).

Meanwhile Bennett notes that 'the world imagined by the Music City handbook is not a critical space: it does not seem to consider the possibility of music that is *bad* or "difficult", perhaps even violent' (2020b, 6). It is thus left to academics to provide the necessary assessments and critiques and academia forms the third important arena where notions of the Music City have been discussed, although Johannsson (2023, 4) rightly suggests that 'Academic research on the subject is ... in an emerging state'.

Importantly academics were also involved in developing the idea of a Music City and the policies to promote it early on. A pioneering – and much cited – study from Chicago, published

in 2007, was written by the University's Cultural Policy Center (Rothfield et al. 2007). This positioned itself as 'the first comparative study of music industries and music scenes in the fifty most populous metropolitan areas in the United States' (ibid, 1). Notably it suggested that music 'may be a driver of job growth' (ibid, emphasis author). The report looks first at economic impact and then tourism, before making relevant comparisons. It also admits that some of its figures are 'extremely crude' (ibid, 14).

However, its boosterism is shown by the fact that it notes that payroll figures for the music industries in Chicago are 15 times that of Austin (ibid: 12) and that it attracted more critically-acclaimed artists than any other US city apart from Memphis (ibid, 21). In comparison, it describes both Memphis and Nashville as 'non-descript' (ibid, 33). Such boosterism has since become part of this competitive element wherein cities seek to outshine their fellow Music Cities (Bennett 2020b, 5). But if academics become involved in such boosterism then this undermines the more critical role that should be expected of them (Williamson, Cloonan, and Frith 2011).

Meanwhile the *Mastering of a Music City Report* in 2015 is perhaps the most cited report thus far written by academics. Bennett (2020b, 3) identifies it as 'a key moment in the emergence of this global agenda', Ballico and Carter (2021, 202) cite it as a 'crucial development' and Johannsson (2023, 42) calls it a 'key' one. It defines a Music City as 'a place with a vibrant music economy' (Terrill et al. 2015, 5), which is actively promoted (ibid: 10). The focus here is again on live music (ibid, 114). Importantly, it says that promotion should be done by the city itself, thus making Music Cities an inherently political concept and cementing the idea of a policy moment.

Mastering identifies four areas as being important: revenue, employment, audience participation and number of venues. It also suggests that helping to promote Music Cities is important to four groups – music industries professionals, local politicians, government officials and the tourism industry (Terrill et al. 2015, 10). Notably here the musicians upon whom that Music City ultimately rests are *not* specifically mentioned, but subsumed within a broader category. The report argues that what is needed for a successful Music City are: Artists and Managers; A thriving music scene; Access to spaces and places; A receptive and engaged audience and Record labels and other music-related businesses (ibid, 13). The key Strategies identified are: Music friendly and musician-friendly policies; a music office or officers; a Music Advisory Board; Engaging the wider music community; Access to spaces and places; Audience development; and Music tourism (ibid, 13–15).

Refreshingly, the report sees potential problems as well as potential benefits. For example, it highlights processes of gentrification as a particularly difficult issue (ibid, 37–39) and also notes the need for some mediation (ibid, 52). Bennett suggests that the feeling given by this report is that: 'Anything is possible ... music solves all problems' (2020b, 5). However, this does a disservice to a report which is actually relatively measured. It says that 'Music *can* be a significant driver of economic activity, employment, exports and tax revenue' (Terrill et al. 2015, 22), that 'A successful Music City *can* fuel other creative industries' (ibid, 27) and that 'Music *can* be a big part of recruitment success' (ibid, 28, all emphases author). Such qualified claims stand in marked contrast to some made elsewhere. However, Bennett (2020b, 6) is right in suggesting that the report lacks the necessary evidence with which to back up claims that music may make people less angry, disillusioned and disenfranchised. It is also somewhat free-market in its approach, arguing that 'artists are essentially entrepreneurs' (Terrill et al. 2015, 10) and are 'best viewed' as such (ibid, 21). It also suggests that regulation can stifle growth, so Music City activists should set up Chambers of Commerce to argue for reform (ibid, 15). If cities invest in tourism, then the results are said to be economic, social cultural (ibid, 6) – an order suggesting its priorities and fitting with the 'artists are entrepreneurs' rhetoric.

Meanwhile perhaps the most prolific scholar in this area has been Shane Homan. He argues that the notion of a Music City 'can be affected across different portfolios of governance' (2019a, 500) and 'has become a useful lever of economic and symbolic advantage' (ibid, 505). He also says that it led to 'an arms race of regulatory mechanisms ... amidst increasing displays of cultural boosterism' (ibid, 506) and that it 'remains contentious in the development of strategies and in meanings constructed by different music industry sectors and levels of government'

(2019b, 179), being built on the promise of a range of activities (ibid). Homan shows the complexity of what is involved as he notes that “the music city” can be affected across different portfolios of governance’ (2019a, 501) such as culture, economic development, licensing and tourism.

Homan’s work suggests that there are four characteristics of a music city – that it privileges music within it fabric, makes it part of its communal and civic identity, deploys it across a range of sectors and undertakes a range of practical measures to help music (ibid). It also suggests that the notion of a Music City can ‘contribute to debates about the extent of the role of the state in proactive attempts to foreground arts and culture as integral to city life’ (ibid, 106), providing further evidence of the essential links to policy.

Elsewhere in Australian academia, Baker (2017) has suggested that in addition to the *Mastering* report’s definition of a Music City approach the use of algorithms is useful in order to account for the range of activity in music. She (ibid) also posits three parts of a Music City – economy, creativity and heritage. While this offers some promise, Baker’s later work (Baker 2019) revealed the inadequacies of her approach and the considerable factual errors within it (including wrongly accusing the musician Tyler the Creator of murder, see Cloonan 2020), which are unfortunate as hers remains the fullest account of the Music City thus far.

Ross’ (2017) work on Toronto’s attempts to become a Music City is possibly the most critical thus far. She argues that this meant prioritising exchange-value over ‘use-value and community cultural wealth’ (ibid, 2), with the result that the interests of property developers and tourists took precedence over local DIY artists. She notes that the urge to *create* a Music City, led to ignoring local grassroots venues and their needs. Overall, Ross suggests that as far as such venues are concerned ‘there remains a disregard of both what is needed for these to flourish as well as their tradition of presenting musical fringe acts’ (ibid, 26). She suggests that rather seeking Music City status, Toronto should be protecting its venues (ibid, 24). This is a timely reminder that music is a site of contestation, as well as celebration.

The work of the Urban Music Studies Scholars Network should also be acknowledged. Their conferences in 2018 and 2020 provided spaces within which to discuss many of the issues addressed here and their publication *Music City: Musical Approaches to the ‘Creative City’*, born from a conference in 2010, was the first academic account to utilise the notion of a Music City in its title. However, no coherent ideology or organising framework has yet emerged from this work.

Thus far academic accounts of the Music City in book form have tended to be edited collections with a formula of having an introductory chapter and then a series of case studies which examine the extent to which particular places are Music Cities, while rarely critically evaluating the concept itself. Examples include Ballico and Watson (2020), Barber-Kersovan, Kirchberg, and Kuchar (2014) and Darchen, Charrieras, and John Willsteed (2021). While often providing much evidence, it also leaves a feeling that the concept itself needs more unpacking.

Perhaps the one theory to have emerged from the Music City discourses is that of ecosystems. This was noted in a report on New York (BCG 2017, 3, 9 and 11) and used in a parliamentary report in the UK (Culture Media and Sport Committee 2024). Sound Diplomacy establishing the Center for Ecosystems is obviously one outcome of this and it uses the term widely across a number of publications, including Shapiro’s book which calls for ‘more resilient music ecosystems’ (Shapiro 2023, 2). However, there is a sense in which this idea is being swallowed whole and has yet to be subject to sustained critique.

If this offers some theorisation, it is also important to ask whether the notion of a Music City has done anything to advance the understanding of popular music and the industries which surround it. As a concept can it inform thinking in the same way as other ways of explaining musical life within a given location such as scenes, ecology, pathways, fields or networks can? Thus far academic work has largely produced a mixture of discussions of local scenes and some critical explanations of the notion of a Music City is. For example, Behr *et al* have argued that ‘To be a “music city” ... suggests a critical mass or centrality of musical

activity that carries its own cultural cachet, with economic implications' (Behr, Brennan, and Cloonan 2020, 168/9), going on to say that Music Cities are *cities* first and foremost and that 'all urban environments are the site of musical activity and (despite the idea of Music Cities) there is also value in seeking to shed light on the wider relationships at work' (ibid, 185; emphasis author).

It is hard not to feel somewhat ambivalent about all this. I am glad that popular music is having its policy moment and that musicians and fans are being helped, but still feel that the concept of a Music City is much more of a badge than it is an explanatory tool. Unfortunately, thus far the idea has produced a range of policies, but done little to increase understanding of musical life. In addition, much of the academic work on Music Cities has remained at the level of observational reportage. There is little within this literature which to make readers think differently about the music industries, local music making and the development of music policy. What is more apparent is that the Music City has become popular music's policy moment. Thus while not in itself offering tools for critical engagement, it remains something which necessitates critique.

Conclusion

Despite the continued work of Sound Diplomacy and others, it could be that we are heading towards a post Music City world. While the UNESCO group has grown, following Covid, few new Music City policy documents have emerged and little genuinely new thinking. As someone with an interest in music policy (Cloonan 2007), I welcome the emphasis on policy which notions of a Music City have engendered. These can have real, tangible, benefits for musicians and audiences alike. However, there remain problems with the notion of a Music City of which four are particularly germane.

First, if Music Cities are focused on policy and the coming together of government and the music industries (Bennett 2020a, 23) then it is necessary to ask what effect this has on the ground. For example, when Melbourne has had three music policies, it is pertinent to ask: what the impact has been? Moreover, what evidence is needed to determine this? No review appears to have taken place and unless research is done, such questions will remain unanswered. Indeed, one of the problems with the UNESCO cities of music is that their evaluations are internal (c/f Glasgow City of Music 2016) and seemingly subject to little external oversight. As noted earlier, membership has never been revoked, but neither has a city's status been independently reviewed. For self-designated Music Cities, the situation is even worse as effectively it is an Alice in Wonderland situation where the title means whatever those who have given it to themselves it want it to mean. Should it fail to muster continued support, then it can quietly dropped as a city policy. Meanwhile SD's many reports appear to have undergone little, if any, independent evaluation.

Secondly, as just noted, the idea of a Music City adds almost nothing to the understanding of music-making and its associated industries and audiences. Rather than being something which aids the process of analysis, it is something which is *subject to* analysis – and this situation seems likely to continue. Indeed, despite having its own definition, SD has proclaimed that: 'Music Cities is a Concept, Not a Definition' (2019b, 5). So, while studying the emergence of the term in to mainstream political discourse can reveal much about the wider political forces at play, this may well be the limit of its usefulness as a concept. If all that is needed to be a Music City is to have a policy (document) then the value of such as assignation is surely to be questioned.

Thirdly, and relatedly, this has implications for Popular Music Studies (PMS). In the clamour to write about places as Music Cities, PMS scholars risk missing the bigger picture. They may also need to be a greater range of expertise involved in PMS, including lawyers, policy analysts and economists. This means that, fourthly, PMS scholars need to think critically about the role of academics here. According to Williamson, Cloonan, and Frith (2011) one key role academics should play is that of being an irritant. If the king is actually naked, then it is our job to say so – partly because if we don't then often nobody else will. What we can expect from consultants such as SD are attempts to promote, but rarely

critique – and that’s where academics *must* come in. Academics can – and *must* – point fingers at existing policies because it is in doing so that *better* policy might emerge. We *cannot* simply act as cheer leaders for Music Cities, but more as critical friends who can point to the dark side as well as the good. This means *critiquing* policy developments, praising the good and lamenting the bad.

Finally, I agree with Shapiro when he says that ‘I don’t like the term Music City, because every city is a music city’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAWxQiB12IE). We therefore return to policy as it is this which makes Music Cities stand out. One thing to recognise is that policies come and go and this is true of music cities (Bolderman 2024). In the fullness of time, they will disappear and policy will move on, as seems partly to be the case in Melbourne. However academic concepts such as artworlds, field, networks, pathways and scenes can be expected to retain their explanatory power and to help us understand the real world of musical practice in ways in which the Music Cities paradigm cannot. Thus, rather than using Music Cities as a tool of analysis, the need is to understand Music Cities as popular music’s policy moment. Ultimately, we should never forget that in the phrase Music City, Music comes first. And for that I, for one, am grateful.¹⁰

Notes

1. A ‘policy moment’ can be seen as being the time when an issue or sector becomes of interest to policymakers at governmental level, be that local, national or international. Most previous discussions of a ‘policy moment’ have ignored the question of definition and instead concentrated on what it meant for their sectors they were concerned with. For examples see Cunningham 2021, Flew (2012), O’Regan (1992) and Windle (2014). Flew suggests, for example, that in the 1990s Australia witnessed a ‘cultural policy moment’. It is notable that such moments can be engendered by a sense of crisis in the relevant sector.
2. For Nashville now see Hodges (2023). See Winders (2013) for the city’s cultural diversity.
3. For some examples see <https://www.sounddiplomacy.com/projects>.
4. See, for example, Greater London Authority (2015).
5. Bolonga and Seville started the process in 2006. Up to 2015, there were just nine members. In 2015 another 10 joined, 12 in 2017, 16 in 2019, 12 in 2021 and 7 in 2023 (<https://citiesofmusic.net/music-cities/>). The reasons behind such fluctuations remain opaque.
6. Following Florida (2015) Austin, Liverpool, London, Los Angeles, Nashville, New York and New Orleans are amongst the ‘superstar’ music cities noted by authors such as (Bolderman 2024, 118 and 124), Johannsson (2023, 49)
7. However, in July 2021 the Music Cities organisation ran a webinar on Music Cities in West Africa – see www.facebook.com/musiccitiesevents/photos/a.1576829535896923/2977426262503903/and. Ballico and Watson (2020) include chapters on Asian and Latin American cities.
8. See also Sunderland’s attempt to join the Music Cities Network, Callaghan (2024) and documents from Glasgow (<https://glasgowmusiccity.com/projects/towards-a-just-green-music-city/>), Leeds (<https://www.musicleeds.com/>), Liverpool (<https://liverpoolmusiccity.com/>), Manchester (<https://manchestermusiccity.com/>) and Newcastle-Gateshead (<https://theglasshouseicm.org/press/newcastle-gateshead-launches-game-changing-music-city/>).
9. Ballico (2024, 103) cites the rise of the ‘Music Cities movement’ as helping to show the important role which music can play in attracting tourists.
10. I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for comments on their article which have helped me to improve my first draft.

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