

Battle for the soul of key music venue

The dispute for control of The Leadmill live music venue in Sheffield speaks to a wider struggle for identity, independence and ownership. Nick Harland reports.

WHEN news first broke of The Leadmill's eviction notice last year, it seemingly came out of the blue. But in truth, the roots of this ownership battle can be traced all the way back to March 2017, when the Lambdo-based Electric Group purchased the freehold to the site of the Sheffield music venue.

Although it's actually quite common for live venues in the UK not to own the freehold to their building – according to charity the Music Venue Trust, 93 per cent of grass-roots music venues are tenants just like The Leadmill – it is a situation which leaves them vulnerable to eviction.

Which is exactly what happened to The Leadmill in March 2022. Five years after purchasing the freehold to the building, the Electric Group served an eviction notice on the leaseholder. If successful, the current tenants would have to vacate the building when the lease expires.

Initially, it was widely assumed that the eviction notice was issued because The Leadmill was under threat of closure. However, the Electric Group have been keen to point out that they have no intention of closing the venue.

And there's little reason to doubt them. The group already owns three other live venues in the UK – Electric Bexton in London, SWX in Bristol and NX in Newcastle – and they say The Leadmill would continue to operate as a live venue under the Electric Group banner.

While ownership issues are threatening The Leadmill's independence, they're threatening the very survival of other UK venues. In the same month that The Leadmill was served an eviction notice, London's Nambucca announced it would be closing its doors. Responding to the news, the Music Venue Trust said ownership issues were ultimately behind the closure.

"Gentrification, development, noise, rent demands, excessive charges, poor working conditions, there are so many challenges," it reads. "However, everything we deal with eventually comes back to the same core problem. That problem is ownership. Like 93 per cent of music venues in the UK, this

venue operator does not own the venue. If they did, Nambucca would not be closing. It's that simple."

Concerns about ownership and independence are a growing issue in the live music sector. But there is a fightback in the works. This year, the Music Venue Trust successfully crowdfunded £2.5m to purchase the freeholds of nine venues across the country. Once purchased, the Trust intends to rent the buildings back to the tenants at a fair rate. In a statement on its website, the Music Venue Trust explained the thinking behind the campaign.

"The 'Own Our Venues' concept is built on the Community Share model that has been so successful in saving and protecting local pubs, post offices and even sports grounds, and is seeking to acquire nine venues in its first phase," it reads. "On completion of purchase the venues will be offered an immediate rent reduction and help contribute to building repairs and insurance, while also guaranteeing long term security and market resistant rents."

It's a campaign which seeks to address an imbalance in the live music industry. If a venue doesn't own its building then it will always be vulnerable to eviction or takeover. But for The Leadmill, what does a potential takeover look like?

When asked about their plans for The Leadmill, Dominic Madden, CEO of the Electric Group, told The Yorkshire Post that the company is "enthusiastic about the potential to build upon The Leadmill's legacy and continue its standing as a cultural hub". If the group is successful in its takeover, they firstly intend to undertake what Mr Madden describes as a "limited refit" of the venue.

"This will primarily concentrate on enhancing backstage facilities to better cater to touring bands, musicians, and other artists," he says. "By improving these facilities, we hope to make The Leadmill an even more attractive and accommodating space for performers."

The next question is what The Leadmill will actually be called under new management. Although The Electric Group registered the trademark 'Electric Sheffield' in February 2022, Mr Madden says his preference is to retain The Leadmill name –



DISCORD: Renowned Sheffield music venue The Leadmill is at the centre of a dispute between the building's owners and its licensees.

"or something very close to it which reflects the heritage of the space".

For their part, the current Leadmill management insist they own the rights to The Leadmill name. They say that if the Electric Group retained the name then it would be an infringement on their trade mark. If evicted, the management have also promised to remove all the fixtures, equipment and doors from the building.

It's the latest back-and-forth in an increasingly bitter dispute, and raises the question whether a Leadmill under Electric

Group control could ever keep the same identity. To paraphrase the old joke from *Only Fools and Horses*, once you've taken away the name, the fittings and the people behind a venue, is it even the same broom any more?

Others would argue that as long as the building's still operates as a live venue, what's the difference? After all, it seems likely that there will still be live music bleeding out of the doors of 6-7 Leadmill Road, just as there has been for 43 years. On September 18, we'll find out the next

and possibly final – steps of this long and drawn-out battle.

Sheffield City Council's Licensing Sub Committee will hold a public hearing to decide whether to grant a premises licence to Electric Group. If successful, they will be poised to complete what the current management has labelled a 'hostile takeover' of the venue. The outcome could have major implications not just for Sheffield, but for live music across the country.