

ARTS IMPACT CHATS - Craig Pennington, Future Yard

SEVA: Hi everyone and welcome to Arts Impact Chats. The new podcast from Arts and Culture Finance where we talk with Arts leaders in our network about the personal and professional side of culture. My name is Seva Phillips and today I'm going to be joined by Craig Pennington from Future Yard. We're making the recording of this podcast interactive, so while I have some prepared questions I encourage our live audience to submit their own questions for Craig in the Q&A box as we go and I'll try and get to them at the opportune moment. We're recording this conversation to be edited and shared more widely at the later date. Finally, automated captions are available. Please click show captions on your Zoom interface to switch this on.

SEVA: So just to set the scene. Future Yard is a grassroots music venue in Birkenhead on the World Peninsula which opened in the middle of the COVID pandemic in September, 2020. Craig is Future Yard's director and has been working in the music industry for nearly 2 decades. Prior to running the venue, Craig co-founded the Bido Lito magazine and creative agency who work with organisations across the creative, academic and public sectors. He also worked to create an artist development and mentorship program in the Mersey region, which is the Merseyrail sound station and has been involved with a number of festivals in the area including the art of football which was commissioned by Culture Liverpool to coincide with the 2018 World Cup, and 6 editions of the Liverpool International Festival of Psychedelia, the largest and most significant event of its kind in Europe, named Best Small Festival at the 2015 NME awards.

SEVA: Great accolade there, Craig. Craig, it's a pleasure to have you with us today, thank you for joining. Can I ask, where are you dialling in from today?

CRAIG: So yeah, thank you very much for the invitation, I really appreciate it. I'm dialling in from our recently opened workshop space here at Future Yard. So there's a very on-brand blocky yellow wall, it's a nice mustard yellow in the background there, I quite like it.

SEVA: I love it. Great. And can you just tell us a bit about Future Yard in your own words? So maybe a sort of a sales pitch for our listeners to come to the venue

CRAIG: So yeah, Future Yard is a grassroots community music venue and bar and we are, I suppose, here to bring the most exciting new music to our town. And, you know, we programme a wide range of electronic music, alternative music, jazz, hip hop, contemporary, classical. And that's all kinda cool and I think we're good at that. We've demonstrated over the last couple of years a real kind of strong program which has brought in and around 14 to 15 thousand people, so they're gonna head here for live music experiences that wouldn't be coming here otherwise.

CRAIG: Our real kind of essence for being is, how do you reimagine a community music venue as a real kind of driver of meaningful social change, and how do you utilise your model to really kind of bring about that change? We believe, and I believe, that music can change the world, that's the reason we get out of bed in the morning, that's the reason why I come in to do my job. And with Future Yard, we'd love to create a community business model that really creates a kind of best case demonstration of how you can achieve that in a

place like this, for those of you who don't know there's an amazing musical heritage from this part of the world.

CRAIG: You know, a lot of the artists that people kind of perceive in their collective imagination as being artists from Liverpool are actually from Birkenhead. And we haven't had, in our day, a live music venue which is dedicated to supporting emerging new talent in this town for 30 years. So it was a real missed opportunity and also in a place of quite acute social challenge, the ward we're located in is in the bottom 1% with multiple deprivation and a lot of challenges here. That was pre-COVID, it's even more acute post-COVID and what we've tried to do is create a model which is all about creating a richer positive impact socially as possible by opening out our space and reimagining it as a training resource, as a real kind of valuable collective community resource and thinking about how we make sure that we reach the people who are in the most need within our local community.

SEVA: Makes sense. And, you've said this before, that music can be a tool for development and change and I kind of wanted to make that the theme of this conversation. It's a really powerful and interesting theme that I think will resonate with a lot of listeners. But just to kind of provide a bit more content about the artists that you've been referring to, can you tell us a bit about those artists that have come from Birkenhead that people may have heard of?

CRAIG: Yeah absolutely. Some people think like to be artists, you come from Birkenhead and head to Liverpool, so on this side of the river I won't want this to become an anti-Liverpool conversation.

SEVA: Yeah of course

CRAIG: I dearly love Liverpool for, you know, like any city it's got its own regions and areas that have got their own stories to tell, and artists like the Coral and Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. Elvis Costello grew up in Birkenhead so you know, a real kind of key icons that have kind of come through from Liverpool and this part of the world. The Wirral has always produced slightly offbeat, off-kilter alternative, slightly off, weird and interesting fabulous kind of music. That's the kind of thing that comes from this part of the world, I think being kind of like almost halfway between Liverpool and North Wales gives it a slightly different kind of perspective. That geography kind of creates a different artistic outlook. So yeah. There's some of the artists that come from this part of the world.

SEVA: Right. And who are some of the artists or bands that have played at Future Yard?

CRAIG: I mean, luckily we've had nearly all of those play recently so we're working on that one, but OMD came and did one of the shows very very early on and the Coral played an exclusive small show for us as part of Eurovision celebrations and when Liverpool was hosting Eurovision. But you know, away from that, I think some of the most exciting shows that we've had, we've hosted a band called Bodega from New York. They've played a couple of shows for us and they're actually coming back and headlining on our Future Now Festival in August, a very exciting buzzy Brooklyn based post-punk band coming and playing regular shows in Birkenhead. If you think about the aspiration and the level that kind of paints for the local image, new artists and local people, I think that's a really key example.

CRAIG: But you know, people like say Sierra Ferrell, you, know, a real mix of hip hop artists like Marlowe or we've hosted a number of shows with Manchester Collective. A real kind of mix of genres and you know, we try to be as diverse as possible within our program. And I think The Thought sold out on the day, you could say is a real highlight for me, and I love it.

SEVA: Right, right. Just to step out of character and pause for a second. Is it possible for you to move closer to the microphone? Just, I'm just a bit worried you need to move closer to the microphone, I'm just a bit worried that you might be a bit quiet. I think that's a bit better, yeah, thank you. Ok, we're back in the room.

SEVA: And for those listeners unfamiliar with Birkenhead, can you tell us a bit about the town, so maybe its heritage and culture and otherwise maybe some of the challenges it's experienced in more recent times.

CRAIG: Yeah absolutely, so Birkenhead is formerly a ship building town, the Camel Head Shipyard is in Birkenhead and essentially the town grew out of the shipyards and the ancillary kind of supply chain that was based around ship building. And you know, over the last 50, 60 years it sports a very very similar post industrial decline story that a lot of you know provincial and northern ship building or towns that are based on a primary and heavy industry went through, and you know, had a real tough time with that. Especially during the 1980s, it was a very similar story to Glasgow with the decline of ship building on the Clyde's and a real issue with a heroin epidemic at that point, and it suffered very acutely. I mean Liverpool obviously had a very hard time during that period as well. Birkenhead was almost one step removed and an arguably even more challenging experience because of it being, you know, provincial again away from the city sails of Liverpool. And the kind of cultural story within that has also been, you know, really interesting. We've got a great mix of writers, actors, the musicians that I've mentioned, a very very rich and diverse kind of artistic and creative heritage.

CRAIG: And a complete lack of investment really in the structures around that, and the support services around that, certainly when you look at the decline of kind of essential forms of community arts, community theatres, community libraries, you know, the investment in that kind of art infrastructure through councils and council officers were really in decline in the 1990s. It's kind of been left for a long long time, you know. Interest and motivation around Future Yard was only ever going to be in Liverpool because, you know, if you were just looking at it from a programming point of view, putting on the kind of shows that we do, you'd put it in a city centre. That's the easiest thing to do from an audience point of view. But for all, the primary motivation would be if you think about this as an intervention, which is principally about place and about people. Audience engagement is easiest if you put it in the place where it needs it the most, so it really kind of doubles back on that motivation piece.

SEVA: And I read somewhere that, prior to Future Yard opening, there wasn't a live music venue at Birkenhead for quite some time, quite a few years. And how did you become involved in Future Yard in the first place? What's been that journey? And maybe if you could talk about your professional journey to that point as well.

CRAIG: Yeah, so I've been involved in music my whole professional life, you know, I had a job at Uni, a little placement job working for a record company when I was at uni. Then I'm

skipping around a couple of kind of real jobs for 6 months after uni, then I ended up at Sheffield University Student Union as part of the events team putting on shows there, what an amazing experience. And then after that I set up a small community studio space in Leeds, where I was living after uni. I was doing a lot of things that we do here in Future Yard on a much much smaller scale.

CRAIG: So, looking at artist development, hosting shows, putting on bigger gigs in larger spaces. Then I came home back to Liverpool in 2010 and started Bido Lito, which started out as a music magazine, which was all about platforming and celebrating new music in Liverpool. And through that experience, we ran that magazine for nearly 11 years, I got very involved and interested in music policy. And in the role that music plays within, policy frameworks around employment, around limited investments, around education, around treating music as an industry that needs to be considered and strategised as a key industry, as an employer, as a driver of GDP.

CRAIG: I was very involved, working with friends and colleagues at Liverpool John Moore's University, in shaping a report in 2017 all around the challenges that the music sector was facing in Liverpool, which then led to there being a Liverpool City region music board established with a policy framework around it. And then eventually led to there being a large £2m investment fund to support the music sector within Liverpool City region. Now I think, throughout that experience, throughout that journey, certainly that 10 year period, doing Bido Lito and becoming more interested in the policy frameworks around it, I really understood the power of music to bring about change. And I started to understand models around the world, particularly some great examples in Europe. The Netherlands do this really well

SEVA: What are some of those examples? Sorry to interrupt, but what are some of those examples?

CRAIG: Places who use music industries, structures and clustering, like basically use clustering as the kind of approach which is normally applied in, you know, automotive shipping, petrochemicals, different kinds of sectors. Apply that to music and culture and how you find the indices between music and tech and design and really kind of create industries that drive them, at investment, that drive jobs, to create opportunities for people. And think about that with a really strong policy framework, I'm coming at that from a policy point of view.

CRAIG: Actually, none of this came up by design, but I did a geography degree at university, I didn't do music. I think I've maybe realised over the last few years that my real passion is places and people. You can use the kind of things that we do to really bring about powerful change in a particular place. So that experience was involved in the evolution of what led to the Liverpool City Music Board being established. I still sit on that board. I'm so passionate about that work. It made me really think about, well, if you were gonna do something like that but you're gonna do it in Birkenhead if you can do that in the Wirral.

CRAIG: That's where I'm from, I grew up literally down the road. I was born in the hospital in Birkenhead, I've spent my sins, and this is the town where I'm from. So if you were gonna do that in that particular place, how would you do that? What would that look like? How would you design your programs? How do you really engage with local people throughout that

process and make sure that it responds to local lives? And that's where Future Yard came from, that's where the concept was born.

SEVA: And so initially it started off as a festival, right, in 2019? But can you just explain how it went from the festival, and what spurred on that idea, to the venue that it is today?

CRAIG: So the festival was basically a big massive kind of case study, that was a big test. What I would say is that before the festival we did something else as well, we did a project then the festival in 2019 - I'm rubbish with dates so I'll take your word for it. Before that and the year before that we did a project called Wirral New Music Collective, with a little, tiny bit of seed-funding through a project called Beautiful Ideas Company. This is now going on to be a company that people will be aware of, a really fantastic organisation that does social investments for social enterprises within the city region as well as support for pre-funded little pilot projects. And basically we did little shows which gave some seed funding out to local people. It was like a few hundred quid spent upon a gig in a back room or a church hall or a little industrial unit.

CRAIG: Basically it was to try to get some stuff happening in Birkenhead to see some shows, put on some kind of mentor support around those and put together a program and deliver it. And we did that the year before we did Future Yard Festival just as a way of kind of getting something happening, getting some green shoots moving, putting some shows on in some nooks and crannies in Birkenhead and just to see if the people were there to support it, if the audiences were there, or artists that wanted to play in the town.

CRAIG: And that was really, really exciting. And a lot of the people who I came into contact with during that process are still involved directly within the team at Future Yard, part of the family doing stuff in Birkenhead. And we'll talk about that approach I think a little bit later on, but off the back of that we really bought into let's do a festival, let's do a festival in Birkenhead over an August Bank holiday weekend, a wristband model where people can get a wristband and go and check out shows in a number of different venues but use some of the key civic spaces because it was all about place. So we managed to convince Wirral council to partner with us on that and then we used Birkenhead on the main stage, beautiful old assembly rooms that used to be for dances in the 1920s but haven't been used for live music for a long long time.

CRAIG: We used Birkenhead Priory, which is the oldest building on the back of the River Mersey, where the monks originally ran ferries in the 1300s, a beautiful beautiful space. We used those two locations, as well as the Bloom Building, which is a community mental health support building. We wanted to have a great industrial space around the corner and we just programmed shows across those spaces, with artists like Bill Ratter Jones and the Cavalry in Black Country New Road Working Mens' Club. And Dry Cleaning Artists have gone on to be pretty big, yeah, successful. And we did that. 2000 people turned up and it was incredibly exciting and successful and made us realise that not only was there an audience, there was a good group of local people who were passionate about backing us as a town that hasn't necessarily been given the opportunity or a platform to be enthusiastic about it.

CRAIG: So one thing that we did during that festival, all of the crew shirts that all of our team were wearing, rather than 'crew' being written on the back, on the back of the t-shirts we put 'The Future is Birkenhead' and had hot pink glasses and

SEVA: Which is a bit of your slogan, right? It's become the slogan for, this kind of defining motif that you still use really, you know, vividly today

CRAIG: But that just sparked something with people and it was like, yeah, people got it, people understand. Like, I think football clubs can be great civic institutions when they're run well by people with the right motivations at heart, where they give people a platform, something to be really excited about. Proud of Birkenhead, the capital of culture in 2008 was Liverpool, like this kind of cultural and civic pride reawakening, people were proud to be from the 'Pool again in 2008. I think that in our little way we realised that we could use music and add back this way, people were like yeah, the future can be Birkenhead. We can be proud of our musical heritage. We can welcome artists from around the country and around the world. It became a really positive vehicle for that. So yeah, not only that, it also gave us an opportunity to develop really great relationships with our local council, with the Arts Council, and you know, it gave us that chance to be like 'we've got this idea, we believe we can do this'. Gave us the opportunity to kind of test out that appetite with some key partners. Magenta, a larger housing association, and a few people we spoke to at that point. So yeah, it was a big R&D exercise, it was a big test. It was a messy kind of, you know, kickstart project in many ways, but hugely rewarding and I think really really valuable in our journey

SEVA: So how did the venue itself, the building, come about?

CRAIG: Wow, how long have we got? So I'll give you the bulk of it. So we wanted space, we wanted a venue because we wanted, rather than, the festival was brilliant but it was one weekend of the year and we wanted a space that was 365 days a year, to drive this change to a permanent fixture. We wanted to buy somewhere, because of the challenges of live music venues in the context of gentrification and people living in town centres and regions and noise and we see all the challenges that flare up in every major city in the Western world to be completely honest. It's no different than in New York and Baltimore than it is in, kind of, northern Manchester, all the issues that they face in London with venue closures. Gentrification and people living in city centres and real estate values going up doesn't necessarily correlate with great independent thriving live music because of, you know, people living next to spaces and complaining and getting closed down.

CRAIG: So we wanted ideally to own somewhere and not have a landlord that effectively would utilise us to push the value of their assets and then flip us out when it became, you know, to do that. We didn't have any money. We couldn't find, we struggled to find a place in that location because we knew we would have issues potentially with neighbours. If we were in or around residential areas, we knew we wanted studio spaces as well as a venue, we knew we ideally wanted a front door that we could open 7 days a week as well as the live space. So the needs of the physical asset that we needed were quite specific. And then we found this building that we are now in, which, okay, is in the centre of Birkenhead right? So, for those familiar with Birkenhead, it's sort of about a 5 minute walk from the train station. And it's over the road from the main bus station. It actually backs onto the Birkenhead

tunnel, so you can drive from our front door to Liverpool city centre in about 6 minutes, literally just through the tunnel.

CRAIG: So from that point of view, from a connection point of view, we needed to be by the train station because we knew a lot of our audiences would come from Liverpool. If you think about it, we're on the river. If you draw, you know, a circle around the venue, it's in the middle of it, half our catchment is in Liverpool. So we needed to have good transport and good transport links. The venue gave us that, and it was a former night club. They didn't close for a few years and it needed a lot of work doing on it to make it habitable, but it gave us a basement, it gave us a first ground floor, it gave us a first floor, gave us the scope to be able to do all the things that we wanted. But it was only up for rent and so, initially, we took it on a rental. We negotiated a very, very long term lease that gave us the time within the lease to be able to do the capital work that we needed to do on it so that we could run it as the, you know, the space that we wanted it to be.

CRAIG: And now about 6 months in, the landlords that we were working with on that decided they wanted to sell the building. This is summer 2020, sorry, absolutely in the jaws of COVID. And yeah, we were faced with a really quite stark dilemma if I'm completely honest, it was either we found the money to buy it or we run the risk of the landlord we had at the time, we had a decent relationship with them, but of them selling it with a sitting tenant, we couldn't have gone on any more. And, you know, though we have the protection of the long term lease, anyone who's ever leased commercial premises will know that.

SEVA: Of course

CRAIG: And if you enter those, once you're in there they can make it very difficult. So yeah, we needed to buy the building and it was at that point that we obviously started talking to ACF. So COVID was really, obviously inherently an interesting experience, a difficult experience but in many ways it allowed us to physically get the building how we wanted it to be. And also to really drill into the financial model and invest in those partnerships and those relationships which, you know, looking at it now with the benefit of hindsight, was actually really really useful in the development of the organisation.

SEVA: It's a really classic sort of risk - opportunity or dilemma, right? Because presumably ideally you would have had a bit more time in the venue to really test it out, really work out the model. Ideally this wouldn't have happened during the pandemic either. But you've definitely made it work over the last couple of years right?

CRAIG: Yeah absolutely, you're right. And you know, I'll always kind of preface any kind of conversation about COVID and our experience with it with the fact that, you know, for many many millions of people it was way worse than it was for us, you know, people who lost loved ones and felt the real sharp end of that pandemic experience. From our point of view - I'm going to talk about our point of view - it was very very challenging, obviously financially, we didn't have any audiences in the building. And our model had been based on having audiences in the building within 3 months because we were going to run a very, almost spit and sawdust, kind of pop up eventually and kind of build through the development phases, being able to reinvest the revenue that we could during that process. We didn't have that opportunity, so it was very challenging.

CRAIG: Right, in many ways, it gave us space to be able to get things right and really kind of drill into that model, the vision, the partnerships, how we wanted to operate the space where we did open, and I do think that time and that space was really really valuable. And it meant that we opened in this slightly weird, hotch-potchy way because of the fact of how the restrictions were lifted, and you could do things outside and you could do them inside and then you could do shows where everyone has to sit down and you have to be a metre away from people and like, yeah, we did loads of live streaming. Who opens a live music venue and the first 6 months of their program is not in the room

SEVA: It's like a forced experimentation right?

CRAIG: Like, it was. Almost, experimentation is a very positive way of putting it, but no, it was, it made those dynamics foot loose and you know, you've got it, you've got to respond, you've got to find a way. And

SEVA: Yeah, you really kind of seized on the opportunity that was presented to you at that time. And it's a risk and, I mean, like any entrepreneur, you have to you know, weigh it up and take risks. And risk's a good thing, you know, managed and balanced and considered risk is

CRAIG: You're right, that's what, you know, entrepreneurialism or kinda support communities or any kind of organisation is inherently.

SEVA: It's about being informed and, you know, across the detail, as across the mitigations as you possibly can be

CRAIG: And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't and there's things that we've tried, but I think the core model and the underlying idea and the fact that it's based on a place and people and a real steadfast unwavering belief that we can be a positive change means that there's a lot of love and a lot of support and a lot of, a lot of people have our back which is really really pleasing

SEVA: And that's a really perfect lead into a conversation around place making. So having been to Birkenhead and Future Yard a couple of times myself, I think it's a powerful argument for cultural place making, by which I mean culture leading the development, revival and regeneration of a place. So is making central Birkenhead a more culturally live place and a destination for people from outside the area. So this should attract investment into the town and strengthen the community and sense of local pride. But the question is, how do you go about making this truly inclusive for local people? And how do avoid the perils of gentrification? I'm sure you're asked this question a lot, but it would be great if you could expand upon that.

CRAIG: Yeah definitely, I mean one thing that would kind of like terrify me more than anything is the idea that Future Yard is some kind of hippy commune, and is kind of disconnected from local people, because that couldn't be further away from the motivation of what it is. I don't think we are, I don't think people view us like that. But I think that the key role within what you've outlined there is where that change comes from. Because being, you

know, before we opened Future Yard all of my kind of professional, you know, kind of working career in this part of the world had been based in Liverpool. And I've been very kind of like, you know, embedded in the Liverpool experience of cultural regeneration. And the model around cultural regeneration, which is rightly celebrated around the world, is around large civic cultural innovation interventions. It's around like the giants. It's around Eurovision. It's around the 'capital of culture' year. It's big programmes which are bombastic, artistic moments that are run by a large organisation within the city that deliver votes and it's been fantastic and it's great

CRAIG: That's one model of culture, cultural regeneration. Not everywhere in the world has the resources or the opportunity to do what Liverpool has done. And also I don't necessarily think that's the right model for everywhere, and I think that's what we're demonstrating in Birkenhead and the Wirral, it's cultural regeneration where it's from the bottom up, rather than the top down. It's about those ideas and those projects and those programs coming from local people being seeded with local people, being developed with local people. People who drive not change, but being invested in that place, principally and primarily first before anything else. And then that change comes in from the bottom. And I think that's what I'm really interested in, our model and sharing that model with other places as well and thinking about our experience - that art form has been through music, but I don't necessarily think it always has to be with music as a principle.

SEVA: Awesome. I mean, I'd always argue that music is unique and fabulous and a great great way of doing that

CRAIG: Music is a great way of telling stories. It's about a way of telling a story about a place. And if you can engage local people in those stories and they tell them and then they kind of bring about that change, that's when really meaningful kind of community like regeneration can kind of take part. The key key thing is aligning that with policy frameworks and local authorities and investments that are aligned and kind of on that journey at the same time and it's one holistic approach. Or the two things can't work independently. They've got to be alive and they've got to be holistic. And I definitely would take this opportunity to say that, you know, our experience with our local council, our local borough council, is very much in tune on that point and I think that's/ when you know, really really kind of amazing things can happen when you get that alignment right.

SEVA: Yeah, and that's a really interesting point because I think it's worth talking about your relationship with the local council and how instrumental that's been. But can you give us a few examples? I know that there's actually many within Future Yard of how you engage local people, either in programming or in working at the venue.

CRAIG: Yeah absolutely. So maybe we'll talk about our Soundcheck program first. That might be a good example.

SEVA: Yeah sure

CRAIG: Before we had audiences in the room, we had local young people, essentially learning the skills that they need to go on and have careers in a live music venue. They were doing that in the room before they had audiences. So when we were doing those live stream

shows, we had our professional team work at the shows but they were being supported by a group of young people who were doing our Sound Check program and delivering those events. So Sound Check is really about opening the venue and thinking about every professional role that we have within the organisation, about that being a learning opportunity for a local young person. Developing the skills to then essentially have a career within the live music industry. Jobs and careers within the live music sector have traditionally been reserved for people who've been through HE or some kind of degree-level education, what about the opportunity to learn on the job?

SEVA: And how do you learn on the job, or even realise the opportunities that could be had, if there's not a live music venue in your town and then, doubly, if that live music venue doesn't create opportunities for you to learn those skills and experiences within their business structures?

CRAIG: So you know, we've now got almost 200 young people through our Sound Check program and all of our event delivery team within the venue, all of our engineers, all of our event managers, all of our box office staff have all come through that programme, now they're paid members of our team. And we've got a rich group of alumni who are working at festivals, venues and cultural organisations all around the country. So that model is specifically designed to utilise what we do to create new opportunities for local young people and that's really really key to us.

CRAIG: Another scheme that we run is our neighbourhood program, basically a program through which we engage and work really closely with all the local third sector organisations and housing associations, youth services and women's organisations. We do a variety of different things where we'll provide free to access tickets for our programme, we'll engage those people around the shaping of our training programs, and you know, these relationships with those organisations are really rich as well. Because we can create different kinds of collaborations with those organisations, which we can hold for the future. And programmatically, you know, we make sure that we're providing opportunities for people to engage with what we do that isn't just coming to gigs.

CRAIG: Like I mentioned before, we run weekly shows on Sunday mornings which are basically gigs for kids. So every Sunday morning there'll be 50 or 60 kind of 4 to 5 year olds with their parents, you know, moshing along to a band doing a kind of 7 genre, you know, that's what we're doing. Something more than Mosh Tots, but that as much as giving kids their first experience of live music. That's a great way of always getting local families into the venue, having those kinds of cultural experiences as a family who, I mean, probably would not have that opportunity to do that if Future Yard didn't exist in their neighbourhood doing that kind of program.

CRAIG: I've not really come across things like that, actually, in other venues. You know, it sounds like a really simple, really effective idea to, you know, plant the seed of interest in music and have something for parents and children to do that's a bit fun, a bit different, so it's really great. I mean, we just came back, me and my wife and our 2 kids, from Deer Shed festival this weekend - it's up in North Yorkshire, which we go to every year, it's basically a festival for kids that well-behaved parents are allowed to come to. Because that experience

was as a family, it's one of the highlights of the year, brings us close together and we have a really really brilliant experience.

CRAIG: But you know, we try to do that every week at Future Yard. But it's, that's fine for people like me, who work in the arts, who've done that for a period of time, you know, who have a privilege in terms of like access to those kinds of things. Well, we need to make sure that we have those opportunities for everyone. So making sure that we use Mosh Tots as a really key kind of gateway into what we do. We issue free tickets to that through local primary schools, we're very targeted with that, they're the primary schools with the highest levels of poverty, with the areas of most acute need. And I mean, we use those partnerships to reach those families, and we see them coming back and then those kids will then come and join our youth music centre, and then they'll do a sound check program and they'll do our propeller development program. And before you realise it, you've got that kind of almost cradle to career pathway where you create young people who are either music fans or who feel comfortable engaging with the artistic kind of infrastructure where they're from, all of their training to be a sound engineer or they're an artist, doesn't really matter. You can just be an enthusiastic gig-goer or an artists or an engineer. But we've provided you with that opportunity to do that from when you're, you know, 2 years old to 26 or 27.

SEVA: Great. And you've mentioned your relationship with Wirral Council earlier. Can you tell us a bit more about that and the importance of, I guess, the alignment in vision for the role of culture in the local area?

CRAIG: Yeah, I mean, so we've got a really really good relationship with our local council. And we've had flash points -

SEVA: Of course, in any relationship right?

CRAIG: Which is like in any relationship, absolutely. But I think the reason why, one of the reasons why it works is that they really understand what we are. Rather than them thinking that are just an arts organisation that is constantly asking them for things, I'm kind of like, it's a problem that needs to be resolved. They actually view us as a regeneration organisation that's helping them deliver on their vision for the town. So I think that shift of, you know, as a place which is, basically we work with them to help solve their problems. What they want are jobs, inward investment. Well, being kind of interventions for local people, with training for young people, we help solve their problems. Which I learned quite quickly when we were developing the work around the city region music board and the strategic approach, and kind of what that kind of strategy framework looks like for music.

CRAIG: It needs to be a civic policy that helps solve the problems of a place. Yeah, we're a music organisation, we're used to doing that, but it's as much about like, what are the challenges that this town is facing and how do we use our work to solve that. And I think once the council got that that's what we were doing, like, all right, okay, we can work with that because we've got these challenges we need to address. This was around the time when Birkenhead was successful in a town deal application with central for a large regeneration investment, and we worked really closely with the council on the investment proposal to local government on that, and worked collaboratively to make sure that our culture and music was very much embedded within that offer. And Future Yard became part

of that proposal around the town deal strategy. So hey, this was a long game. You know, this was a conversation that's been happening for 7, 8 years with the local council, from "we'd like to do this, got this idea for maybe a festival at some point" to the last couple of years. Building that relationship slowly over a long period of time. So it's now really based in mutual understanding and trust and this genuine sort of partnership. Maybe of equals - I mean, they're the council, you're not a council, but you know what I mean?

SEVA: Yeah, it's more, there's an equality to it right? And I guess mutual respect and understanding as you say. You've also worked with other local organisations to promote what's going on in Birkenhead, under the Left Bank Collective name. Can you tell us a bit about that? It sounds like quite a joined up approach between those organisations as well as the councils. And to what extent can that kind of joined up partnership work be replicated in other towns across the UK do you think?

CRAIG: Yeah I think it's essential. I mean, Left Bank Collective is a group of organisations that share the same motivations and aspirations for a place but are working in very different ways. So you've got Future Yard as a, you know, community music venue. Then an organisation like Open Door Charity, which is basically a peer-led mental health charity that also has a coffee shop and event space, and an organisation called Make who support creative makers with affordable access to space. And there's a great new kind of business, there's a number of different organisations, the Convenience Gallery that do brilliant public realm and visual arts projects. We all work together in a collaborative approach around key moments. So we co-programmed a series of events around the business festival and we worked together very closely around sustainability.

CRAIG: We're all projects within the town, but we're all independent and community led. So I think I would definitely encourage that approach in other parts of the country. And in some places there will be an abundance of those organisations that need wrapping together, in some places there might be like, one kind of flagpole and some smaller ones that can be levelling up. That came about quite organically between our organisations, but again, the council very much recognised that and have tried to support that when they can. Similarly, I mentioned before about the Good Business Festival, when there was an opportunity to do something in Birkenhead with the business festival. They were like right, okay, that Left Bank Collective, let's kind of commission them as a group to do something with that. So I think it's really important.

SEVA: Do you think that grassroots, organisation-led approach is more possible in towns rather than cities? Do you think that this is an area where, actually, smaller places or towns have an advantage over cities in being able to build that broad coalition of like-minded partners?

CRAIG: Yeah I think in some ways you're right. I think what it does allow in a town like that is that a group of 4 or 5 organisations can really almost kind of set a tone for a place. Because they're inherently smaller than cities, like a group of organisations really kind of sets a narrative for a place, where cities are much more, you know, bigger, broader entities and it's harder to do that. That being said, the smallest cities, that's where I think that approach can be effective. But in a place like Brecon, I don't think it's right for it. It's interesting, I mentioned Kindred before, Kindred is an organisation supporting STOs, socially trading organisations

which are non-profit third sector CICs. Organisations like OS and all of those mentioned before have all been part of Kindred as well as a number of others. We've been working with them recently on looking at that kind of clustering approach, and how its methodologies are used in commercial sectors. Then we're using kind of inward investment models and frameworks. How that can be adapted and used within kind of, you know, the third sector, socially trading organisations, like if you invest and create a cluster of socially trading organisations what outputs can you look at, cumulatively, across those organisations in terms of jobs, impact on GDP and something with investment. The social impacts you don't get with any other models - there really isn't much more of a holistic, better way of doing like, building a big, you know, the last tower and hoping that people come, which seems to be the approach.

SEVA: Yeah, makes sense. I also wanted to touch on the issue of grassroots music venues, of which Future Yard is one. It's one of hundreds if not thousands of such venues up and down the country that I think are essential to a thriving music industry, which I think is one of the few remaining great British exports. And so grassroots music venues are the key to not only artist development, but the development of all skills related to live performance. But they're very much under threat. We've talked about some of those issues earlier and being priced out of the property market, there's wafer thin profit margins. But what do you think are some of the biggest issues facing grassroots music venues and, you know, if you could campaign for a single policy that would make the biggest difference what would that be? If you could wave like a magic wand and enact policy change, what would it be?

CRAIG: Yeah I mean, I suppose just to kind of make a brief comment on the core point that you're making, is that yeah, it's hard. It's harder for music than, you know, it's ever has been before. And that is principally a real estate challenge. It's really really telling that in the UK, 94% of grassroots music venues or music venues full stop are not owned by the occupier, so like 94% have got landlords

SEVA: That's huge, yeah

CRAIG: It's huge and if you think that, as you rightly said, that is basically the R&D department of the British music industry. You know, it's a hugely valuable export sector that is worth so much to the kind of brand of Britain, both from a soft power point of view, but also from a commercial point of view for an export perspective. So we have the whole R&D department for that sector essentially at the mercy of private landlords. In the context of gentrification, in the context of rising property prices in city centres and town centres, it is unsustainable and it's terrifying and it's why we were running with, you know, hundreds of those being shut down a year, both pre-COVID and post-COVID. That's been obviously a more acute challenge, so I think is the main one.

CRAIG: And there's been some really great moves by the Music Venues Trust around establishing new models of ownership. And Nesta, you know, using us as a case study - I am going to give you a plug there

SEVA: Arts & Culture Finance, awesome, thank you

CRAIG: As we were building the business, it was the only offer on the table at that time, and we're certainly grateful for that. We love the working relationship that we have with the team. But yeah, if the sector owns its assets it's inherently sustainable

CRAIG: I think I will throw in there, this is more of a kind of political point, that VAT on tickets is a mental construct that exists nowhere else in Europe. And you know, tickets on cultural events are exempt in the majority of Europe. The fact that 20% of ticket revenue is lost in VAT when you look at the fact that, you know, no music venue is actually making money on those tickets, that ticket money is just being reinvested in artists and making the shows happen. It's one of the reasons why, traditionally, the music venues have operated on a skewed model where tickets are half the price but alcohol is so expensive. We've create a culture in this country which is completely anchored on alcohol consumption with live music, which I've love to change

CRAIG: But VAT on tickets is just one point within that. Some kinds of policy ask is very very local. I mentioned before that we're, if you think about it we're kind of smack bang in the middle of a city region and half of our audiences are on the other side of the river. We've got not just one train station within a 5 minute walk, we've got 3 train stations within a 5 minute walk that go out to Chester and outside the world of Liverpool. And the bus station. But public transport finishes at ten to midnight, so then you can't get through that tunnel and you can't get over that river. So you know, well it changes a lot, the tunnel is open but at the moment it's a challenge because, yeah, they've decided there and then to close the tunnel every night to do maintenance works for 18 months.

CRAIG: But let's pop that one aside. The point is that, from a public transport point of view at night, there isn't any public transport and that makes it really, you know, challenging for us with audiences, that affects our program and what we do, when we finish it. But it also makes it really a challenge for staff, for artists. Thinking about safety about, you know, like especially women that might be trying to travel home at night. So reinstating public transport at night time, night buses is a key key priority for all. And it's a piece we've been working with the Liverpool City Region Music Board on, there's a big consultation at the moment, a survey that's being run to try to look at the appetite for that, which is going really really well so I'm confident it's something our Metro Mayor support in principle. I'm confident we will see night buses back, going through that tunnel, in the not too distant future. But yeah, that would be the primary concern locally.

SEVA: You've got a manifesto there with 3 very specific policy objectives, that's great, thank you. I'm just going to take some questions from the audience. So we have one from Louisa, which is what advice would you give to other venues for thinking about developing their own Sound Check program. I suppose the question can be put a bit more broadly than that. You know, you've got Sound Check, you've got Mash Tots, you've got all of these interventions that try and bring the community along. How can other venues replicate that approach and you know, take a leaf out of your book.

CRAIG: I think one of the first things to bear in mind is that you've got to ask people what they want. You've got to engage with local people and really, really do that in a rich and deep and meaningful way, so that anything that you come up with respond to local need. So around 12 months ago we did a project called What Does Music Mean to You where we

basically did that. We went out into the local community, we did pop up gigs in Birkenhead market, we worked with local partners, had conversations with local people and were like, 'what role does music play in your life?'. Within your family? Could we as an organisation utilise the power of music to bring about positive change in your life? So all of our projects and our schemes and the mechanics that we use to engage local people have come from that experience. So it's come through consultation with local people. So the first thing I've say is ask people, straight off.

CRAIG: And I think Sound Check is really quite a simple project, and I think that's because we designed it from day one, or day minus one, I suppose before we had our audiences in the room. It becomes more of a culture thing, a culture within the organisation that that's what we do. So it's normal for our engineers to have trainees working with them. It's normal for our event managers to have trainees working. With the amount of box office teams like, it's baked into the way we operate. So I think that's the first thing that I think venues want to launch the scheme. Just to consider it's about creating the kind of cultural kind of appetite and scope within your organisation to make sure that those projects will work. What I would say is that we are currently working away with our partners that we work on Sound Check with to develop a pilot, where we potentially look at working with other venues to replicate that model. So if there is anyone who's listening to this now or in the future who's interested in how we do that, I would encourage you to get in touch because it might well be that we've got a way of doing that. But yeah, 2 things, that's it.

SEVA: That's great. I think if I was in any way remotely interested in running or setting up a music venue, Craig, I would be on the phone to you straight away. How do we replicate this? What's the plan?

CRAIG: For sure, I'm here. I was, on that point just very quickly, just to point to 2 books that Music Venues Trust published. I can remember vividly being on holiday in 2019, sat on a sun lounger reading 'How do I set up a live music venue?'. If you're interesting in running a music venue, read them first. I was on the Music Venue Trust website yesterday actually and I was really impressed by the resources available on there and just out and stuff. So yeah, I think if it's not just for live music then you know, it's also for just if you're interest in music and live music more broadly then I think it's an interesting resource.

SEVA: I know we're over running a little bit, but a question from Tessa. How did you find your audience in Birkenhead? In the absence of a similar venue, at first, like, what did you do to find your crowd? How did you find your audience?

CRAIG: That's a good one. I think it's still something that working on to be honest. Going back to that point around the almost strange competitive advantage of towns and small cities over large ones is that, if you're in a place like Birkenhead, which from a kind of cultural program point of view, there wasn't loads going on. I mean, that's a controversial thing for me to say. As soon as you, you know, take on a building - we did with a 3 story building. We painted it in hot pink on the front of the building, 'the Future is Birkenhead', as a purely antagonistic kind of statement of intent. And we, you know, use social media and traditional media. Print campaigns just get out to people to be like 'this is happening in your town'. I think as soon as you start doing that and kind of being noisy, being a bit kind of Cleveland, you find people and you draw people out. But it takes time, it takes time.

CRAIG: And I do think that point around really good partnerships with the local council, with the local housing associations, with local third sector organisations that people are engaging with in their day-to-day lives. You know, we've got strong relationships with local youth services and the local hive which is a massive kind of local provision in the middle of those partnerships. We're really invested in them long term because it's really really important to cut through with local people. But you know, a lot of it is kinda like, talking to people, asking them what they want, following through on it, being trusted, being reliable. You know, having programs that you commit to and are sold with so you can build trust. People are creatures of habit right? And they want something that's reliable and consistent and they know, not necessarily that they're going to see the same thing, but they can trust the curation, they can trust the program, they can trust in the experience.

SEVA: And that's what they get with Future Yard.

CRAIG: Definitely. And I think also, as well, I think it's the constant level beneath that where they can trust your motivations and your intentions. Yeah, we were very open and we always are, we are a CIC, we're a non-profit, like you know if we make a surplus - which is very much our intention, we want to make a surplus - that's reinvested in our programs and that's reinvested in what we do, you know, there's no shareholders, no-one's taking it, no-one's taking a cheque if things go really well. It's like, we're here for local people. We invest in our programs. So your motivation and your intention, being really open and honest around that to build trust with local people. Go back to that point around, you know, when also kind of hippies commune with local people that love this place and want it to thrive. We just know to use the venue as a way of bringing about positive change in people's lives.

SEVA: And that brings us back perfectly to the theme at the outset, about music being a vehicle for social change. And I think you've done a really great job of illustrating how that works in practice, in a venue setting. But just to bring it back to the personal level, is there a band or musician or a gig experience that changed your life?

CRAIG: It's true, I can remember it was my first proper gig by myself in Liverpool, you know, it was not cool unfortunately. It was a band called Reef, which were very nineties and that sense of kind of connection and excitement and almost the kind of physical nature of it, the power of a live music experience. It reminded me very much of football matches like that, a communal collective experience of being there with all the people, and the power that has got me, as a 12 year old kid in a room, completely encapsulated by it.

SEVA: Okay

CRAIG: Whatever you think of me, and I don't think much, there you go. I think the other one as well, which is a little bit more, I went to a comprehensive school just around the corner from where we are now. And when I was in year 9, I think, so I would have been around what, 12-13, the school actually had a composer in residence. It was a project that the local music service had, a composer in our school, actually a composer in residence. It was this American, a minimalist composer, and I did a project where we set words to a piece. It was really a very kind of important point in my life where I was playing guitars and playing in

banks and kind of like just schooling my idea of what music might be and could be. It gave me this kind of insight, and so a different kind of way that music can be used to tell stories.

SEVA: Right

CRAIG: And I think that even as a, you know, a young boy at that point, I think that really made me realise that it wasn't as literal as maybe I thought it was and it wasn't as kind of one-dimensional as a band playing songs. It was like, you can use music in so many different ways, to tell stories, to bring narratives to life and to create emotional reactions in people. And I think that my journey, and I suppose my career and kind of where we are now with Future Yard is very much about that, it's about using music as a way of kind of like opening up the impossible. Of taking people to places that they didn't know they could go to. I'm really like, how do you do that and bring about that with people who just wouldn't have had that opportunity otherwise. And you know, without that opportunity, that 12 year old vision, may not have had that experience with the minimalist composer and maybe I wouldn't. And so yeah, I suppose those 2.

SEVA: I love the contrast of those examples. I think everyone has had a perfect experience with seeing a live band, but that project, putting words to a minimalist composer, I think just yeah, there's something really lovely and quite vivid about that. What a great note to end on. But actually I have one more question. Are there any local musicians or bands that you'd like to plug, that we can maybe check out on Spotify or any other listening platform?

CRAIG: Oh absolutely, I always love these ones. And let me give you 2 who've played Future Yard loads and have been through our Propeller Arts and who I'm just a big fan of. One is a post-punk band called 'Eyesore and the Jinx'. So yeah, I saw they've got a debut album which is coming out later on this year, and they're one of my personal favourites, would very much encourage you to check those out. And then the other one is an artist called Beija Flo. She's kind of like halfway between Bat for Lashes, Kate Moss, Cat Power, she did a brilliant

SEVA: How do you spell Beija?

CRAIG: Like BEIJA then Flo

SEVA: I'm going to look that up. Okay. Fantastic. Craig, thank you so much. It's been a really interesting conversation, I really enjoyed speaking with you.

CRAIG: Thank you very much, I've really enjoyed it as well, and you know, if there's anything I can do it's always a welcome opportunity.

SEVA: I'd really encourage any listeners out there to look up Future Yard, maybe if you're in the Mersey area, it's really well worth the visit. Just 5 min from Lime Street I think, really easy to get to, really great connections and really great programming and just a really nice space to be in. In the Summer there's a great outdoor space with food. Really good beer on tap as well, from memory, and great coffee in the day. So do look them up. Thanks Craig, really appreciate your time.