

FRESH MEAT

Digital Town Hall
on
Diversity and Inclusivity:
April 10 – April 23 2017

Final Report
Published May 1 2017

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Introduction

The What

This report is an executive summary of the events and dialogue that took place during Fresh Meat's Digital Town Hall on Diversity and Inclusivity, which occurred online from 10:00am on Monday April 10, 2017 – midnight on Sunday April 23, 2017.

The Why

In response to the growing need for dialogue on the subjects of diversity, inclusivity, representation, and the creation of safe spaces in both the Ottawa arts community and the culture of performance festivals, the producers of Fresh Meat decided to hold a public discussion on the subject, in order to address the festival's own shortcomings and discern how to move forward.

This desire came in light of articles such as "The Other Other White Meat" (published by Fresh Meat in September 2016), "The Noisy Guide to Not Being a Sh*thole and Making Your Venue Inclusive" (by Jill Krajewski for Noisy, published July 12 2016), and events such as the "Ottawa Theatre So White" Panel, organized by undercurrents in early 2017. Both articles are contained in the Appendix to this document.

The How

In terms of how to best facilitate this dialogue, the producers of Fresh Meat arrived at the conclusion that a Digital Town Hall would be the best way to proceed. Wishing to have a discussion and to solicit feedback from the public, but not looking to restrict the opportunity for participants to provide such feedback to one time or place, the producers opted for a Digital Town Hall, in which participants could offer feedback via email, via a Google Form, or via a Live Chat on April 15th.

The So What?

The goal of this venture was to execute two actionable items:

1. Solicit feedback, and amend the selection process of the festival as needed.
2. Write a concise ethno-cultural statement, as an appendix to the festival's mandate.

The Numbers

The Timeline

The Digital Town Hall was “open” from 10:00am on Monday April 10, 2017 – midnight on Sunday April 23, 2017.

The Participants

A total of 12 people participated in the Digital Town Hall.

The Participation

100% of participation took place by way of the Google Form.

The Outreach

Participation was solicited through a social media campaign via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Social media is the primary form of communication, marketing, and outreach used by Fresh Meat.

The Questions (and The Answers)

Below are the questions contained in the Digital Town Hall Google Form, followed by the summarized responses received from participants. Where applicable, the responses from the Fresh Meat producers are also written below.

Question 1: Would you like to remain anonymous? If not, please let us know how you would like to be identified.

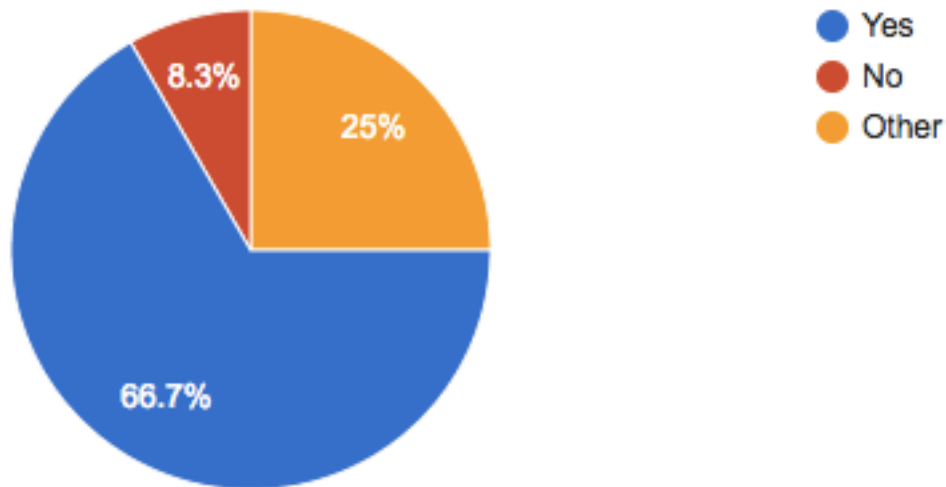
Of 12 participants, 10 wished to remain anonymous.

One identified by name (Gabrielle Lazarovitz), one by their initials ("SI").

One did not give their name, but stated "So I'm a pretty regular euro-white person, that's an important caveat to this all."

Question 2: Do you think Fresh Meat needs to increase its focus on diversity?

100% of participants responded:



Question 3: If so, in what way would you like to see an increase in diversity?

Of 12, 10 participants responded to this question.

Of those, 4 specified they would like to see more work from artists of colour.

One participant specified that they would like to see more offerings from young artists (ages 16-25).

Two participants specified that they would like to see more diverse offerings in terms of form of performance, and community. Quote:

“Part one would be diversity in content: to keep moving toward plays that confront the audience in their habits, expectations and assumptions. Part two would be diversity in community: to create a less cliquy [sic] environment, to welcome outside voices, and ease the divide between the anonymous and those who feel safe to leave their names. Art is a product of the time it’s in, and right now everybody’s looking pretty scared.”

Two participants had suggestions for the selection process: one, that there be a blind read of proposals in the selection process, and one that the focus on diversity should come in the solicitation of proposals, rather than the explicit selection of the proposals themselves.

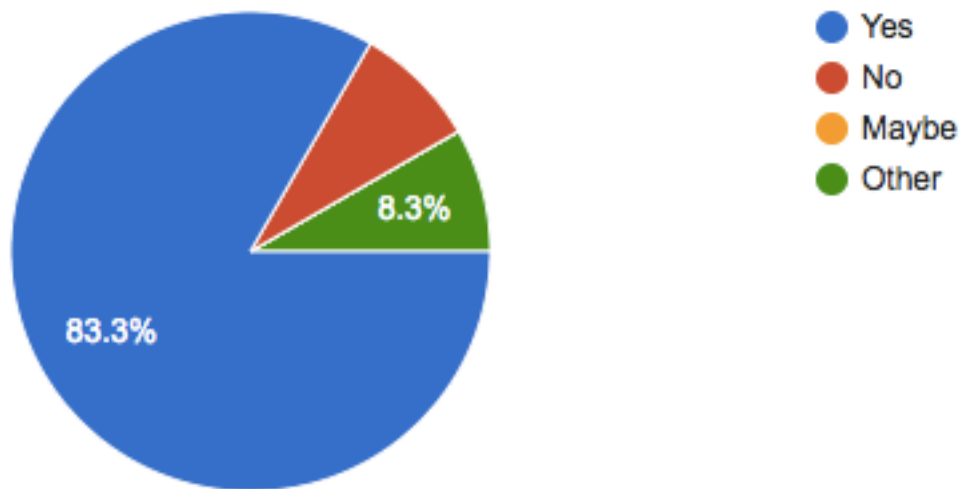
The tenth participant, in response to the question, answered simply: “ALL KINDS.”

In Response

Taking the feedback above into account, the production team of Fresh Meat is amending the application and selection processes to lessen barriers and increase representation from artists who are members of underrepresented communities by moving to an online survey-based platform. This allows for the selection committee to remove all identifying information, in order to move towards a more blind selection process. Applicants will also be asked to self-identify as members of underrepresented communities, if they so wish. They will not be asked to specify to which community they belong.

Question 4: Do you think diversity and inclusion should be part of the selection process in programming the Fresh Meat lineup?

Of 12, 12 participants responded:



Question 5: If you agree or disagree feel free to tell us why.

Of 12, 8 participants responded to this question.

6 out of 8 responded in the affirmative. Some provided short explanations, such as simply providing a link to a webpage with reviews of a weekend of performances of Fresh Meat, on which all the photos of the performers were white and able-bodied. Others provided longer explanations, with some select quotes below:

“It keeps art relevant.”

“It’s important to hear the voices of those who are under-represented in the mainstream. If you aren’t doing that, than [sic] what is the point? Why hear the same points of views over and over?”

“Honestly, it’s kind of obvious to me – diversity is good (for art, for audiences, for whatever change art can massage)... But it’s also important specifically for Fresh Meat, I think, because this conversation is happening everywhere in theatre/arts/etc. And THAT’S GREAT. I’m really glad a black dude finally played one of the Kings at Stratford but that’s not how this REALLY changes right?... Point is you’ve gotta get in on the ground floor. And Fresh Meat is all about making new shit – so diversity and inclusion [f*ck] yeah.”

One participant responded in the negative, stating:

“Diversity can, and frequently does, result in better artistic offerings. But there is a difference between recognizing this fact and mandating that diversity be reflected by mechanisms that do not arise naturally.”

One participant responded “Other,” providing the following context:

“Personally, I hate the idea that you must box yourself into a category in order to be considered, whether that means visible or invisible minorities.”

In Response

The producers of Fresh Meat agree that the festival is a great place to begin these conversations – from the ground floor, so to speak. We are taking action (such as this Town Hall, amending our selection process, etc) to specifically begin this work. One participant stated that they disagree with diversity that is manufactured by “mechanisms that do not arise naturally.” To stipulate that any arts organization, event, or cultural institution exists “naturally” is a falsehood. These are organizations, events, and cultural institutions that come about through specific and explicit construction: through action. It is therefore the responsibility of those organizations, events, and institutions to suit their actions to benefit the needs of the communities they serve. The Ottawa arts community has clamoured for more diversity and representation for a long time, and we are trying to take action. Diversity isn’t going to come about “naturally,” we have to make space. We, at Fresh Meat, are trying to make space.

Question 6: Would you like to see any changes to the physical space of Fresh Meat in order to make it more accessible?

Of 12, 8 participants responded to this question.

5 responded stating that the space had not presented any physical barriers to access in their own personal experience.

Two responded stating that Arts Court is not a very accessible building.

One asked how accessible the space would be for a performer with accessibility needs of their own, and inquired if any requests had ever been made for ASL interpretation and/or relaxed performances.

In Response

As Arts Court is the current home of Fresh Meat, we do everything in our power to make the space accessible, taking into account the difficulties that the building itself poses. Arts Court is currently undergoing significant renovations, which will in turn make the building more accessible, but in the meantime the producers will endeavour to ensure

the following measures of accessibility for Fresh Meat 6: easy wheelchair access to the space, accessible seating, and gender-neutral bathrooms.

We have not received any requests for ASL interpretations for performances. In terms of relaxed performances, going forward with Fresh Meat 6, we will provide relaxed performances, pending the approval of the featured artists. So far, Fresh Meat provides semi-relaxed performances, in the following ways: the house lights are never fully dimmed, patrons are welcome to move/walk around in the back of the performance area, patrons are welcome to leave the performance area at any time, patrons are welcome to make low levels of noise in the back of the performance area, and each performance is no longer than 20 minutes, after which there is always a 5 minute break, and each night of Fresh Meat contains an intermission.

Question 7: Fresh Meat would like to solicit more submissions from artists in underrepresented communities. What barriers, if any, do you see in the way of soliciting those submissions?

Of 12, 10 participants responded.

4 pointed to the insular nature of a small theatre community, like Ottawa's. Of those, participants also pointed to a desire to reach out to younger artists at training institutions (i.e. schools, universities, colleges), and to increase diversity and variety of form, in addition to of content and identity. For example:

“Even encouraging pieces that are not ‘theatre’ – like not assuming the euro-centric model of THE THEATRE on everything that appears because that’s already a barrier... Having other kinds of performance is cool in this way – even the little closet show and that live art and stuff like that.”

“I feel like changing the landscape starts with kids. [If] kids are engaged in theatre and the arts from a young age, you are cultivating passion early on in life... Therefore you are personally growing the next crop of fresh meat? Tough but necessary question, folks.”

4 responded in stating that they “did not know enough about the selection process,” to make concrete suggestions, but reiterated that “diversity” to them means more than simply diversity of race, but also of “age, education,” and “lower-income, sec, race, age, location, sexuality, [and] neurodivergence.”

2 responded otherwise, pointing simply to the already existing history of the festival as a predominantly white event, and the relatively small payout to artists as possible barriers.

In Response

In this year's solicitation of applications, we are moving to an online survey-based application. As mentioned earlier, there will be a question asking applications to self-identify as a member of an underrepresented community (without specifying which community), if they so choose. Applications will also be asked to describe the category/genre of their application in order to ensure diversity of form.

Question 8: How would you like to see those barriers overcome?

Of 12, 9 participants responded.

6 indicated a desire to specifically seek out artists from members of underrepresented communities, suggesting:

“Reaching out to BIPoC [Black, Indigenous, People of Colour] creators to receive their input how.”

Those participants also suggested that we reach out to specific organizations, such as: high schools, universities, Youth Infringement, The Hive (GCTC) and Kind Space. One of the 6 participants wrote the following answer, which we believed deserved inclusion in its entirety in this report:

“To overcome this, first I think members of the Fresh Meat community need an opportunity to talk about it openly – this town hall being an excellent start. Do others think this problem exists? Who's comfortable with this status, and its subsequent responsibilities? For whom is it unwanted?”

For those seeking to uphold that role, there would be added implications, but with them, the chance to realize it as a genuine gift. In committing to that greater diversity in the shows you see, in seeking out events and experiences where for a night you are the minority, you are the walking the talk. Anyone can throw a welcome mat on their doorstep – real change comes from knocking on the door.

So for more diversity, the best way, always, is to sincerely seek it out. Don't wait for these communities to trust you first. If the submissions aren't coming to you, then go looking for them... And don't find plays, look for music – why not? Diversity in curation suggests a sincere desire to showcase a culture, however it emerges. Look outside of the frame of theatre you received from the English and French and Russians and Germans and Americans. Call out for work that perplexes, confuses, complicates, blurs. Too often we think of diversity on our terms – in terms of exoticism, with an idea of exactly what

we're looking for – and communities know this. Ask sincerely, open up to unexpected answers, and within a year I swear there will be more dialogue than you imagined possible.”

3 participants responded pertaining to the organizational structure of Fresh Meat, suggesting PoC in positions of power, federal funding, and a blind selection process, respectively.

In Reponse

As mentioned earlier, the application process is being amended to allow for the blind selection of participants. To clarify, the producers of Fresh Meat are three women, one of whom is a Person of Colour. Moving forward for Fresh Meat 6, in order to solicit applications from diverse groups, the call for applications will be distributed through student associations for local Ottawa high schools, universities, and training institutions, as well as the organizations listed in the responses.

Question 9: Have the shows you have seen at Fresh Meat, or the experiences you have had at the festival made you feel excluded or unsafe in any way?

Of 12, 9 participants responded.

8 responded that they had not had experiences at Fresh Meat that made them feel excluded or unsafe, and one participant suggested that the event seemed “exclusive to a young demographic.”

In Response

The original intent of Fresh Meat was to support emerging theatre creators and patrons in a local arts ecology that traditionally supported more established theatre-goers, typically over the age of 30 and with higher disposable incomes. We think that the fact that the pendulum is now swinging the other way, and we need to do more to support patrons from an older demographic, is a great sign. We have accomplished our initial goal, and will now amend our focus to address the changing needs of the festival.

Fresh Meat will continue to cultivate its relationship with longer-established performance institutions in Ottawa (such as the GCTC, the Gladstone, and the NAC), whose audience bases tend to skew less towards an exclusively young audience.

Question 10: If so, tell us how we can improve for next time.

Of 12, 5 participants responded.

2 responded to the effect of “N/A.”

3 responded as follows:

“The Dream: Fill the room with enough newcomers to make the clique into the minority.”

“Have shows that are more representative of the real diversity present in our society.”

“Consider diversity of age.”

Question 11: Do you have any other thoughts on this topic you’d like to share with the Fresh Meat team?

Of 12, 9 participants responded.

6 finished their participation with a general recognition for the need for such a discussion in the Ottawa theatre community, for example:

“I hope this is a first baby-step towards something that could be really great for Ottawa.”

“I guess just that I think it’s important that we difference all kinds on stage/in art [sic]. Like that is essential to the whole thing... This is a messy conversation, but it sort of has to be and it’s important.”

“If we keep this conversation going we can more easily encourage radical change! #theatreisforeveryone.”

One participant articulated the sentiment “artistic quality over group identity.”

One participant articulated that they had nothing to add.

One participant noted that they find the name of the festival disagreeable.

In Response

To respond to the statement “artistic quality over group identity,” and to reiterate the sentiment contained earlier in this document (in response to the statement that diversity will “come about naturally”), the producers of Fresh Meat would like to clarify their position: the current theatre ecology in Ottawa suffers from the same institutional and systemic bias that create barriers to access for diverse artists. To stipulate that perceptions of “artistic quality” and “group identity” are mutually exclusive is another falsehood. Our value judgements on the quality of artistic products are informed by our training, our exposure, and our proclivity to traditionally white, euro-centric theatrical forms. To challenge the status quo by specifically mandating the inclusion of diverse works of art is to challenge the status quo of how we judge artistic quality – and that is a challenge worth making. While artistic merit is, of course, a consideration in the selection of applications, a pure meritocracy excludes and dismisses the inherent

barriers to access that artists of colour, LGBTQ artists, artists of different abilities, and all other marginalized groups face in participating in the existing artistic institutions.

Lastly, to address the name of the festival: "Fresh Meat." We intend on keeping the name of the festival, as it pays homage to the festival's humble roots as a small, independent theatre event, by and for emerging artists, on the fringes of the local arts scene. And TBH, two out of three of the Fresh Meat producers are vegetarians. And the third like, barely eats meat.

Where To Go From Here

To reiterate directly from the Fresh Meat mandate:

“Fresh Meat supports and showcases a diverse group of local artists each year by providing an accessible platform on which to create and perform new, innovative short works. The festival brings together artists of all backgrounds, theatrical practices, and levels of emergence, and makes space for the lived experience of all Canadians.”

We hope to honour our mandate by taking the observations and suggestions contained in this report, into account. We want to do right by you.

Below is a summary of the actionable items listed above as Fresh Meat’s response to the observations and suggestions of participants:

- Moving to an online, survey-based application process, in order to allow for 1) easier access to the application process, and 2) the blind reading and selection of applications.
- Asking applicants to self-identify as members of underrepresented communities (if they so choose), but not asking them to specify the community, in their application.
- In the application, asking applicants to specify the genre/category of their performance (to the best of their ability) to also ensure for diversity of form.
- Explicitly disseminating our call for applications through schools, training institutions, arts organizations, community organizations for BIPOC, and community ambassadors, in the hopes of explicitly soliciting applications from underrepresented communities.
- Renewing our dedication to physical accessibility to the performance venue.
- Ensuring accessible seating.
- Promoting awareness of the gender-neutral bathrooms on the first floor of Arts Court, and seeking permission from Arts Court to ensure that all bathrooms on the second floor of the building (the one on which Fresh Meat takes place) will also be gender-neutral for the duration of the festival.
- Asking, of each featured performer/company to have relaxed performances, and to continue our current practices of relaxed performances.

Lastly, as promised, and in compliance with the practices used in all casting calls sent out by the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association, Fresh Meat has written an ethno-cultural mandate:

Fresh Meat is committed to inclusive programming that reflects the breadth, depth, and intricacies of Ottawa’s unique cultural makeup. We encourage submissions from artists who identify as members of under-represented communities, a concept we leave open for those artists to self-define, as we strive to create a truly inclusive environment.

Our Thanks

In conclusion, we at Fresh Meat hope to do our part to question the status quo of the current arts ecology in the Ottawa theatre community. We seek to question the relationship between the perception of artistic quality, and the homogeneity of the artists participating in the local arts scene.

We want to change, we want to do better, and we want to shake it up. And we can't begin to do so without your valuable input.

So from the bottom of our hearts, to all who participated in our Town Hall, to all who talked about it, shared it online, or even gave it a moment's thought: thank you.

This is the beginning of a conversation. Please, take this dialogue into your hearts, into your homes, into your social circles, into your workplaces, into the post-show lobbies of theatres, into your news feeds, and everywhere else you go.

Let's keep asking questions, together.

With love (and thanks),
Fresh Meat

Appendix

Appendix One: “The Other Other White Meat,” published by Fresh Meat on September 16 2016.

Available electronically here: <http://www.freshmeatfest.com/blog/2016/9/16/the-other-other-white-meat>

Blog **The Other Other White Meat**

September 16, 2016

Wednesday morning, we launched our lineup for Fresh Meat 5. Scrolling through our lineup, I was struck by how amazing our local artists are, how proud I am to be a part of this festival, but I was struck by something else, too. Something really obvious:

This year’s festival is really fucking white. And I’m not just talking about the t-shirts.

And this matters. Representation, inclusivity, visibility, diversity, these aren’t just buzzwords. We’re putting together a festival to support local artists who tell stories, create worlds, and hold a mirror up to our own lives. And what we say in those stories, what we make in those worlds, who we see in those mirrors: they’re important. We’re not trying to shoot an ad for Swedish furniture where everyone can look the same and it’s no big deal. **It matters.**

Some of you have brought this to our attention (and I’m sure many more of you noticed it – it’s pretty hard to miss) and we want you to know that we hear you. We thank you. We’re listening.

So much of being a good ally is listening; so much of Not Being A Jerk is recognizing when something is amiss, and that hell – you might’ve had a hand in its amissness.

And we’re not going to placate you by getting defensive and cowering behind the fact that we do, in fact, have an (admittedly and pitifully small) number of artists of colour involved in the festival, myself as producer, included. I’m not going to hold up our LGBTQA+ artists, for whom we arguably offer up better representation, as bastions of visibility for all under-represented communities, without even beginning to mention the intersectional nature of the way that LGBTQA+ artists of colour might feel about the lineup.

I’m not going to hold these people up as straw men or tokens. I’m not going to do that to them, I’m not going to do that to myself, and I’m certainly not going to do that to you.

The percentage of artists of colour involved in this year's festival is congruous with the percentage of applications we received from artists of colour: small. But that's not a defense. It's a problem. It speaks to a larger issue within our regional arts community: we can't just say "we programmed fewer artists of colour because we received fewer applications from artists of colour." **We have to realize that we receive fewer applications from artists of colour because these artists face systematic and institutional barriers to accessing the arts at every step of the way.** Starting with high school drama class, to after-school theatre projects, to post-secondary training, to grant applications. On a larger scale with bigger festivals, regional theatres across the country, to the ever-present whiteness of Hollywood and other story-telling goliaths. **And finally to festivals like ours: we can do better. We need to do better.**

So with that in mind, we are renewing our resolve to conduct better outreach to under-represented communities, and building stronger relationships with artists of colour, and those from under-represented communities.

And we don't just want to pay lip service. So we're not going to put changing things off until next year's festival. The kind of inclusivity and representation we want to take part in starts now: **we're researching the kind of concrete steps we can take towards building a safe, and truly inclusive, space. We want actions, not empty labels. To start, we are going to take a leaf out of Equity's book: with every general call made through CAEA the company is required to state its ethno-cultural mandate or make an ethno-cultural casting statement. Fresh Meat is researching and working on a new ethno-cultural mandate, aimed at encouraging members of under-represented communities to apply to the Festival. We are also researching ways in which we can more effectively and efficiently reach out to those communities.**

We open-heartedly welcome community engagement, and want to move together towards building a safe space. **If you have insight to share, please contact us at info@freshmeatfest.com.** We'll listen and do our part to renew our zeal towards inclusivity, representation, and visibility.

Let's all Not Be Jerks together.

With love, as always,
Fresh Meat

Appendix Two: “The Noisy Guide to Not Being a Sh*thole and Making your Venue Inclusive,” by Jill Krajewski for Noisy on July 12 2016¹

Available electronically here: https://noisy.vice.com/en_ca/article/a-guide-for-making-your-venue-inclusive

The Noisy Guide to Not Being a Shithole and Making Your Venue Inclusive

- [Jill Krajewski](#)
Jul 12 2016, 10:29am

White men: not today, Satan.

Venues are sacred spaces where you can [escape the world](#). With music as that conduit, you can see a band you’ve been excitedly waiting for or hear a new song that nails what you’re going through. Venues have birthed all kinds of record labels, bands, and movements, microcosms of a progressive sea change about to flood the world outside. The drawback, however, is that venues can also be echo chambers; walling dominant cultures in and underrepresented communities out. When venues create barriers through action or inaction – racist, homophobic, sexist, transphobic, ableist, and so on – they allow senses of entitlement to fester in extremes from [racist band names](#) to [sexual harassment](#) and assault at shows. Go to any Facebook event page for a Swans show on their current tour and you’ll see [complaints](#) or [censorship](#) of rape survivors’ concerns. Michael Gira allegedly sexually assaulted artist [Larkin Grimm](#) but Gira head-scratchingly, though predictably, called it “an awkward mistake.” In Toronto, while the Danforth Music Hall, unfortunately, let Swans’ show go on, Double Double Land hosted [Noise Against Sexual Assault \(NASA\)](#) this past weekend to run as a counter event.

Venue owners and managers have a responsibility to continuously foster safe spaces. Save yourself the trouble of looking like a [backward dumpster fire](#) in hindsight for not having an inclusive space. I spoke with a number of venue operators, bands, and activists about what can be done going forward. It’s by no means an exhaustive checklist of how to be 100% inclusive—you have to actively listen to your communities, watch over your space, and update your policies. Now that we’ve got that sorted, here’s The Noisy Guide to Making Your Damn Venue Inclusive.

CALL SHIT OUT

After Toronto punk group PUP played San Diego on their latest tour, two female fans approached the band to share that they were sexually harassed in the crowd. PUP took

¹ For reasons of length, photos have been edited out of the article in appendix.

to [their social media](#) the next day to tell any and all assholes to back off. The band's drummer, Zack Mykula, says venues need to join in call-out culture as well. "More eyes means more awareness. More mouths mean more confrontation of such behavior," he says. "Advertising an inclusive in-house policy to actively and visibly promote more passive awareness should be a bare minimum in terms of venues acting preventatively. This gives people more courage to speak up. Not just when they personally are threatened, but when they witness any such horrible events."

The Vera Project, an all-ages venue in Seattle, took it a step further: Vera let their community create both their rules and signage themselves through a Safe Spaces Agreement. The mural was designed by their teen-heavy volunteer [steering committee](#). You can't take in a show at The Vera Project without seeing messages like "RIP sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, oppression!!!!" scrawled in [graffiti](#), a reflection of Vera's mission to elevate underrepresented voices in music – particularly youth, queer and trans people of colour, and women. "We value having a space where people can feel safe. Sometimes during shows, people forget this, and do things that violate what we stand for," says Jessica Schollmeyer, participation coordinator at The Vera Project. "It's important to have it be very clear what's okay and what's not. It stands as a visual reminder to show goers, artists, and volunteers of what this venue is about."

Chicago DIY venue The Dollhouse, an all-female run space that was created in response to sexism and assault in the music community, takes a similar approach. "People are extremely respectful of our space because we're so vocal about our mission," says co-founder Serena Fath. "We post our [safe space guidelines](#) on all of our event pages, have safe space posters, and a giant "Girls 2 The Front" sign hanging in our room. When you walk into The Dollhouse, you already know what we're all about."

BE ACCESSIBLE, BE DETAILED

Saying your venue is wheelchair accessible alone doesn't cut it for giving fans the confidence to judge how easy it'll be to enjoy a show. Sean Gray, owner of DC label Accidental Guest, created the venue database [Is This Venue Accessible](#) in 2014 after becoming frustrated with venues that didn't fully disclose how "[accessible](#)" they were. Gray, who was born with cerebral palsy and uses a walker to get around, found that many venues don't think of accessibility past their front door. Gray says the Is This Venue Accessible site data indicates many venues overlook what should be common sense: having accessible bathrooms. "A lot of venues are accessible for their actual show space, but the restroom may be upstairs or the restroom may not even be accessible even if it's on the same floor," says Gray. "You're taking a piece out of the show experience if you're not allowing people to drink. It could be a deal-breaker for you."

There is no excuse for venues to not get in the habit of providing details on how accessible your space is in terms of bathrooms, doors, stairs, [floor space](#), and even stages. List this kind of stuff on your site and Facebook event pages, and let promoters

and bands so they can communicate it to their fans as well. “If I don’t have accessibility information on a venue, I have to automatically default in my head that it’s probably not accessible and I have to miss that show,” says Gray. “If a venue was to provide information that was very honest and to-the-point, I can make a better-informed decision and say ‘Hey, I wanna go to this show, these are the steps I need to take to make sure I can.’”

GENDER IS OVER, GET WITH IT

Having accessible gender-neutral bathrooms tells your transgender and non-binary customers that your venue cares about their values. It can be as easy as covering or ditching your old guy-girl stick people signs. If your venue falls under a zoning law that mandates having separate men’s and women’s washrooms, make sure you have a talk with your staff so they know your customers can use whatever bathroom they choose to use.

Brooklyn punk duo PWR BTTM includes gender-neutral bathrooms for their shows on their rider, which puts pressure on some venues to change. Guitarist Ben Hopkins and drummer Liv Bruce decided to ask this of the spaces they played in after performing at a venue in Philadelphia last year where the men’s and women’s washrooms were labeled “balls” and “boobs.” “Reducing anyone’s gender identity down to a body part is violent, tacky, and oppressive,” says Bruce. On a positive note, one venue even went on to make their switch to gender-neutral bathrooms for PWR BTTM permanent. “If our project holds water as something that is interested in creating a more visible queer platform on a musical level, the space that we take up as a band should be equally as progressive,” says Hopkins. “We can’t talk about queerness and otherness without making a space for that music that benefits and caters to the needs of the other. We need to create a space that is safe for those people.”

Beyond bathrooms, Calgary-born singer-songwriter Rae Spoon emphasizes that trans and gender-identity inclusiveness is a security issue as well. “It can really make a difference in our lives and anxiety levels when we’re attending venues that have these policies,” says Spoon. “If someone’s official ID doesn’t seem to match the sex that you think that they should be, don’t jump on them right away and out them.”

DON’T SUPPORT PROBLEMATIC BANDS

Let’s define what is problematic: has a member of the band drop-kicked a female fan to make her fall off the stage like Parker Cannon from the Story So Far? Is a neo-Nazi rock festival looking to use your venue? Do not support them. April Alieramo of Toronto groups Hooded Fang and Phèdre says bookers need to read up on communities beyond their own to help screen for bands prior to bookings. “Start taking an anti-discriminatory perspective. It will definitely take a while for some of these ideas to be fully internalized but start learning about anti-racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and

ageism.” Aliermo contributed to the dialogue on Calgary post-punk band Preoccupations, who formerly went by Viet Cong until last year, through a [feature in *Exclaim!*](#) that powerfully summarized the problem: that naming your band after a group that killed innocent people during the Vietnam War is deeply insensitive to the Vietnamese community. “[Venues] have to consider who lives here,” says Aliermo. “Don’t make any assumptions, have an open mind and really think about the humans around you.”

House of Targ, a punk basement venue in Ottawa, made the mistake of booking Black Pussy last year. One year on and the Portland rock group are still perpetuating [misogynistic garbage](#) that’s as dated as their ‘70s sound. Paul “Yogi” Granger, the owner of House of Targ, says he found out a couple of weeks after the event how problematic the band was. The feedback from women of colour in particular who felt unwelcome to House of Targ – and some still do today – spoke volumes. Granger eventually went on to apologize and [outlined a plan of inclusiveness](#) at House of Targ to prevent that kind of booking from happening again. “I was not aware of the number of folks who regularly feel uncomfortable, threatened, and unsafe at venues and the details of their concerns – I was somewhat shocked,” says Granger. “Now we work with a wider range of promoters – all of whom we trust because they have knowledge about the acts they are bringing to our venue and can confidently vouch for them.”

TAKE COMPLAINTS SERIOUSLY AND HOLD SAFE SPACE TRAINING

If bands can set up ways for fans to report abusive behavior (like Modern Baseball and Speedy Ortiz’s respective [hotlines](#)) at shows and talk it out with someone who cares, so can venues. It’s important for venue operators at any level to value complaints as legitimate concern. “Venues and promoters should always be willing to accept criticism and allow for discourse to occur while also being prepared to moderate comments that are offensive,” says Corrina Chow of [Babely Shades](#), a collective of people of colour in art and music founded in Ottawa. “They should also be communicating with the community and be transparent on the steps that they are taking to ensure inclusivity.”

Set up a complaints space on your website with your phone number and email. Have a designated safe-space contact at your shows that victims or [witnesses](#) to discriminatory behavior can approach with the confidence that they’ll be heard. This doesn’t necessarily include a venue’s security team. Skyler Mallahan, co-founder of Chicago venue The Dollhouse, says its venue takes on the role of mediators to de-escalate a situation before resorting to kicking anyone out. “That can mean anything from getting the person or people to a quieter place, offering water, maybe they need someone to call them a cab, et cetera,” says Mallahan.

Your venue mission statement’s no good unless your staff learns how to develop, enforce, and update policies to protect your customers and prevent harm from occurring in your space. The Dollhouse staff went through safe-space training through resources from the [Feminist Action Support Network \(FASN\)](#), an activist group focused on

confronting sexual and gendered violence in Chicago's arts and culture communities. "They offer support liaison training during which they'll teach you about body language, de-escalation tactics, how to approach victim-offender dialogue, and reading workshops to discuss the models they're trying to implement like transformative justice," says Mallahan.

Bruce from PWR BTTM says security needs be included in safe-space training, especially if they're the ones enforcing your inclusivity plan. "I know a lot of people who have felt unsafe at a show and had their concerns laughed off by security, or just felt like security wasn't approachable," says Bruce. "A lot of venues can be better at training security personnel to be more sensitive to marginalized identities and generally a friendlier presence."

HAVE DIVERSE BANDS AND STAFF

Who you staff matters as much as who you put on your bill. When you fail to give underrepresented communities a platform at your venue, these communities' concerns—including racism, homophobia, and ableism—are also in danger of going unheard. "Having more representation also means that aspiring artists of those certain marginalized groups feel like there is a space for them where their art will be valued and supported," says Elsa Mirzaei of Babely Shades. "Access to these spaces as artists means that we have an outlet to cope with our experiences, and at the end of the day, it makes an uphill battle a little more bearable. For many people in our communities, art is a part surviving life."

Too many music genres are dominated by white cisgender men. As you're going through submissions, consider not just which band sounds awesome, but their makeup's impact on your audience as well. "It takes a real conscious mentality and subsequent conscious choices to create an inclusive environment but the outcomes far outweigh the small efforts," says Aliermo of Hooded Fang and Phèdre. "If you're going to put a band from Mars on a bill, you will attract Martians to your show. People will know they are welcome there and can feel like they're around others who have their back."

CREATE PWYC OPTIONS

Free shows rule but when they're not happening, cash-strapped fans can be left out of your community. Whenever you can, as long as everyone putting on a show in your venue gets paid fairly, pay-what-you-can options at your door are great. Extra customers paying a few bucks each is better than no extra customers paying you nothing. Setting a sliding scale for ticket prices, say \$10 - \$15 instead of \$15 straight up, can make all the difference for fans who are counting every dollar. Sure, you could have a PWYC jar, though setting a range will keep you on track to meet your ideal revenue

from a show. If you can help it, set a policy where nobody's turned away due to a lack of funds, and spell it out in your event information.

“It’s never easy to ask to come into a show for less money. People don’t do that for fun,” says singer-songwriter Spoon. If they can, Spoon sets aside several [PWYC tickets](#) through their Coax Records label for their shows and fans can email for those tickets. Spoon took the initiative after fans without credit cards commented that they didn’t have the same shot at getting advance tickets aka guaranteed entry to Spoon’s shows.

ALL-AGES EVENTS ARE FINE, REALLY

Don’t get overly cocky about how loyal your venue audience is if you don’t have entry options or programming for the underage fans in your community. All-ages events give the next generation the chance to absorb everything we’ve gone on about here and foster a culture of inclusion. “Giving younger fans a chance to share music spaces with older fans teaches them how to be respectful show-goers, expands awareness of artists and genres, and creates a plethora of possibilities for partnership, collaboration, and resource-sharing,” says Rachel Kramer, marketing and communications coordinator of The Vera Project. “Once I moved to Seattle at age 18, I found myself barred from most of the shows I wanted to see and missed out on what turned out to be the most important part of music for me: a safe and supportive community.”

The Vera Project started in Seattle in 2001 during a drought of all-ages shows that also saw the city’s then Orwellian-named [Teen Dance Ordinance](#) place unnecessary financial burden on venues trying to throw all-ages shows. With patience, room rentals, community support, and persistence, the Teen Dance Ordinance had its last waltz in 2002; The Vera Project had lift-off and eventually a permanent space in 2007; and Seattle had an [all-ages music industry](#). Ease in with the odd all-ages show at your venue. “Start working with promoters who have all-ages experience and audiences – [Take Warning Presents](#), [Reign City](#), [Wake Up Presents](#), and [Customs](#) deserve a shout out –and talk to other venues who do all-ages shows to hear about their experiences,” says Kramer. “Take that risk to put in the resources and effort to foster a more inclusive community.”

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