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# Toronto hits wrong notes in quest to be Music City

*Paul McCaughey*

I purchased the Matador building in March of 2010 and over the subsequent nine years I renovated it back to its 1916 glory, raising it from the ashes of its ignominious late night past, to the nobility it has today, a Music City Icon with a future.

Its roots as a public hall can be traced back to its inaugural year 1916, when the women's auxiliary held a charitable ball to fund the Ontario's last First World War battalion, the 182nd, commanded by Lt.-Col. Angus Colburn.

This small volunteer force numbering slightly more than 200 brave souls, deployed in France in May of 1917. I have often thought that for many of those young people, who served during the ordeal of the Great War, that that evening would have been their last dance and best memory of home.

The Matador was a live music venue as early as 1920, when the Paul Whiteman Orchestra played its raised stage, while Toronto's working people danced upon its maple sprung floor below. The Matador's place in Toronto's music history was cemented in 1993, when Leonard Cohen wrote "Closing Time" about the Matador, shooting the music video there and then winning Juno awards in the best male vocalist and best music video categories.

The likes of Joni Mitchell, Johnny Cash,

k.d. lang, Randy Bachman, Loretta Lynn, Jeff Healey, Stompin' Tom and Blue Rodeo, graced the Matador stage, which, credit due to Ann Dunn, emerged many iconic artists well known to the world today.

The Robbie Robertson's documentary Band of Brothers to be released in late 2019, was in large part shot in the Matador in the fall of 2017. Robbie's signature, like so many, is on the backstage wall, right next to Joni's. To say that owning the Matador was an honour would be an understatement.

Why did I sell?

I needed new investment, which could not be found.

What changed?

It took too long to settle zoning issues that should never have occurred.

What is the problem?

City hall, its politicians in fear of NIM-BY community activists and bureaucrats taking their cue from the political class, are conflating live music venues with night clubs because many double dip, playing electronic dance music and drawing a second dance crowd in the later part of Friday and Saturday nights.

Exclusive music venues like the Danforth Music Hall, in this case zoned as

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a theatre, now has removable seats so patrons can stand for live music performances. An elegant work around.

The Great Hall is a public hall, not technically allowed to be a live music venue either, but no fuss is made. In the end, the Matador received a zoning certificate as a public hall, but it was too late.

Toronto had 60 per cent fewer live music venues during the Canadian Music Awards two years ago than it had had two years prior, and the situation has only gotten worse. The El Macombo is still not open after five years.

The political class blames market forces and the city's Music Office is toothless, though I have worked with both and there are capable people there, like you and I, who would like nothing more than fulfilling our mandate as a Music City.

Let us not be distracted by our successes, which are primarily artist driven. Without music venues, the lifeblood of emerging art and a stable performance economy, we are a dying Music City, not a living one.

We need an immediate study of what happened with the Matador. The city will never do this for fear of liability. I, for one, would be very happy to sign away my right to recover unnecessary and considerable losses from the city, if anyone was willing to take a serious stab at seeing this never happens again. That, or give me the job of Music City officer and some real clout and believe me, things will change. Sometimes clout is just having a voice and a committed outside perspective.

I shall be ever grateful for the past nine years and all those who dreamed the Matador could rise from its ashes and

take its place once again as Toronto's most iconic music venue and a flagship for investment in our Music City.

Paul McCaughey recently sold the Matador building after owning it for nine years.