

Role of Institutional Actors in Development of Independent Live Music Scene in Shillong: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

The role of live music culture in a city's cultural identity and tourism development has been a recurrent theme in academic fields from subcultural to urban studies for decades. Shillong, a colonial hill station and the capital of Meghalaya, is renowned for a unique music culture often headlined as the "Rock Capital of India" since the 1960s. While the city's identity is rooted in this legacy, it has evolved into a diverse hub for genres ranging from blues and jazz to hip-hop, recently formalized through state initiatives like the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP). While the development of this scene is influenced by history, language, and social values, the role of specific institutional actors in nurturing these cultures during their nascent stages is often overlooked. Using archival research and critical analysis, this paper explores the transcendental effect of the Church, individual musical icons, academic institutions such as MLCU, and commercial venues. It argues that these actors function as a collective ecosystem, bridging the sacred and secular to shape the contemporary identity of the music scene in Shillong.

KEYWORDS: Institutional Actors, Live Music Scene Music in North East India, MGMP, Shillong

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities have rightly been described as "entities" because of their evolving temperamental collective identity, and Shillong has existed as a city characterised as the rock capital of India since at least the 1960s, although the legitimacy of this title is still questioned. Factors that have given a unique character to the city of Shillong are heavily influenced by its heritage as a colonial/missionary station and by its tribal/non-tribal identity discourse, both of which overlap, resulting in significant events, be it separate state demand or various ethnic riots. According to a news analysis in *The Shillong Times*, today's live music scene in Shillong is remarkably diverse, encompassing genres from rock, metal, and blues to jazz and beyond. A consensus among interviewed participants, corroborated by newspaper reports, indicates that the current music scene in Shillong continues to revolve around Western influences. As written on the Meghalaya Tourism website, "it is an array of musical stylings—from EDM and hip hop to metal and rock—illustrating the wide-ranging musical taste that is known to be found within the city" (Meghalaya Tourism, n.d.). Not even promotional advertisements from a tribal-focused department listed anything other than Western genres in Shillong.

The city's frequent live music events, ranging from small café performances to large-scale rock concerts, are as much about the music as an art form as they are about community engagement and collective identification (Mulder & Hitters, 2021). Conversely, music also acts as a space for dissent and to in extreme cases incite ethnic superiority and violence in a region known for its complex political landscape involving issues of ethnicity, autonomy, and the insider-outside divide. Shillong's geography and history operate not as passive

backdrops but as active agents shaping the city's singular musical ecosystem. The city's geographical isolation, compounded by a layered history and the city's cultural and demographic diversity, has produced a distinctive musical evolution, rooted in local traditions yet remarkably receptive to global currents.

This paper's chief purpose is to bring out a comprehensive account of the causes and momentum of the live music subculture of Shillong by reconstructing its historical institutional development and the plethora of reasons for its development through moments in time. Principal institutional initiators of the development of the music culture of Shillong shall be articulated, comprising relevant artists and organisations. This entails identifying the way in which local artists, educational establishments, and seminal venues occupy the role of cultural actors and promote the progress of the subculture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly engagement with urban music cultures has consistently foregrounded the interplay between space, identity, and institutional mediation. Early formulations within subcultural theory conceptualised music scenes as sites of resistance and identity formation, wherein youth collectivities negotiate dominant norms through stylistic expression (Hebdige, 1979). This perspective has since been refined by cultural sociology, which treats music scenes as relational formations embedded within networks of actors, infrastructures, and symbolic economies (Straw, 1991; Bennett & Peterson, 2004). Such approaches emphasise that scenes are neither isolated nor purely oppositional; rather, they are sustained through dynamic interactions between grassroots creativity and institutional frameworks. Scholarship on global cultural flows further demonstrates that Western musical genres—particularly rock, jazz, and blues—circulate transnationally and are recontextualised within local settings through processes of indigenisation and hybridisation (Appadurai, 1996; Connell & Gibson, 2003). These studies collectively establish that music cultures must be understood as products of both local specificity and global interconnectedness, mediated through historical trajectories and institutional support systems.

Within the Indian context, academic research on popular music has largely centred on metropolitan cultures, though a growing body of work has begun to address the distinctive musical trajectories of Northeast India. Scholars have traced the region's affinity for Western musical forms to colonial and missionary interventions that introduced new pedagogical structures, instruments, and systems of notation, thereby reshaping indigenous musical practices (Lalsangliani, 2013; Zama, 2017). In particular, church institutions have been identified as critical sites for the dissemination of musical knowledge, fostering choral traditions, music literacy, and performance opportunities that extend beyond strictly religious contexts (Lalrinawma, 2015). Parallel to this, the role of individual artists has been theorised through the lens of cultural mediation, wherein musicians act as translators of global genres into local idioms, thereby expanding both creative possibilities and audience reception (Negus, 1996). Institutional scholarship further highlights the significance of universities, performance venues, and state-supported initiatives in formalising and sustaining music cultures by providing infrastructure, legitimacy, and economic opportunities (Scott, 2012; Hracs et al., 2016). At the same time, critical perspectives caution that processes of institutionalisation may generate tensions, including commodification, cultural homogenisation, and the marginalisation of indigenous forms (Adorno, 1991). In the case of Shillong, the limited but emerging academic literature points to a complex convergence of these dynamics, where historical legacies, institutional actors, and individual agency collectively shape a vibrant yet contested musical ecosystem. By

situating Shillong within these broader theoretical and empirical debates, the present study contributes to a more grounded understanding of how institutional networks enable, regulate, and transform regional music scenes.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper's approach is centred on archival research and critical analysis of secondary sources, complemented by a comparative analytical framework. The arguments and connections established in this chapter draw extensively on primary archival materials, such as local newspapers, periodicals, documentaries, recordings, and photographs, alongside a review of secondary academic literature, including sources such as scholarly articles, books, and conference proceedings. The objective here is not merely to chart a chronological history but to offer a set of criteria and benchmarks against which field notes, ethnographic research, and contemporary evaluations can be measured and analysed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Institutions and Their Influence

An integral part of the musical tradition of Shillong originates from the sustained legacy of Christian missionary work during the 19th and 20th centuries which redefined religious and cultural topology of the region. Missionaries not only carried with them the tradition of a religious faith but also a musical tradition indistinguishable from their religious practice (Swier, 2021). Hymns and gospel songs became standard repertoire sung in church, while churches became important sites for musical learning.

Not only did many churches in Shillong establish choirs, but they also offered lessons in basic music education. Choirs provided structured music training and opportunities for many young people to perform in a supported setting. Many musicians had their first formal singing or instrumental experience in church choirs. Importantly, the church was not limited to the sacred: churches were not purely religious places; they often acted as community centres in rural areas, hosting various events with music as an important aspect (cultural programs, holiday pageants). These events provided opportunities for developing talent, as well as public opportunities for musicians, which contributed to the cultural options available to the community. Crucially, the church's endorsement of musical pursuits (even if Western-style music) lent them legitimacy in the eyes of society. This meant that even more conservative or traditional community members came to accept and support Western musical forms since they were often presented in a devotional or socially uplifting context. It is widely recognised that churches have historically functioned as patrons and incubators of musical talent in Shillong (Subba et al., 2009; Swier, 2021).

Church gatherings and Christian festivals regularly feature live music, and it is common for notable local singers and instrumentalists to have started in a church choir. The non-invasive nature of musical training, where anyone interested or motivated by their faith could participate and sing, dramatically shaped Shillong's people. Many bands and solo artists in Shillong have musical origins in a youth fellowship choir or a gospel group, and it is thus clear that there is a foundational link between the religious and the music community (Laskar, 2023). Importantly, the church's control over music in Shillong is not restricted to gospel music or hymns. By serving as a physical place to learn music, a church indirectly cultivated skills that many musicians would then use for secular music (like rock, blues, or jazz). In fact, Smith's (2019) New Orleans-centred argument that gospel music itself was a jumping-off point for many artists is relevant here; musicians learned vocal

techniques, harmonies, and performance experience through singing hymns that came to represent confidence and artistic proficiency in whatever musical style they performed later. The significance of the church's influence is also artistically represented in their community singing tradition, which further shows how churches have contributed to Shillong's participatory musical culture. Many of the city's numerous churches plan community sing-alongs or choral festivals. The songs performed do not need to be solely religious selections; the music may be folk songs, popular Western classics, or even patriotic local songs, all reflecting the eclectic culture of the city. These occasions highlight the church's roles as social centres for their communities and show how many religious institutions breathe life into wide-ranging community involvement through music. These churches in Shillong often have close ties with local schools (some churches run their own schools), which amplifies their influence. Through these educational links, Chatterjee (2020) explains that church music traditions and training filter into school curricula and extracurricular activities. Schools and colleges become extended platforms where church-supported musical traditions—choir singing, playing the organ or piano, reading Western notation—are propagated to new generations. This means each cohort of youth is continuously exposed to and educated in these forms. Therefore, the critical role played by religious institutions, specifically by the Christian churches, in the musical history of Shillong plays a pivotal factor in an interpretation of the unique cultural ecosystem of the metropolis. Massed missionary interventions seeded a presence of hymnodic and choral modes of singing which considerably refigured indigenous singing praxis. Christian hymns (usually translated into Khasi or other vernaculars) were assimilated and reinterpreted by indigenous inhabitants, synthesizing Western sacred melodies with indigenous vocal idiom and sensitivities (Chatterjee, 2020). Churches of Shillong thus function not merely as homes of worship but also sociocultural influencers which played a pivotal role in defining the musical identity of the metropolis. Their intervention oscillates back and forth on a continuum delineating the sacred and the secular, actively creating a musical culture which derives through its breadth of historical, geographical, and sociological contexts.

Individual Artists: Trend Setters or Breakers

Any examination of Shillong's music culture must recognise the pivotal role of its artists and institutions—the individual organisations that act as conduits for both local traditions and global influences. Foremost among the city's musical icons is Lou Majaw, often hailed as the catalyst of Shillong's rock scene. His annual Bob Dylan tribute concerts and tireless promotion of rock music have become emblematic of the city's musical spirit, earning him the nickname "the Bob Dylan of India." Yet Shillong's musical landscape is built by many diverse artists, each contributing in their own way to the city's sonic world. Take the blues band Soulmate, founded by guitarist Rudy Wallang and vocalist Tipriti Kharbangar, for example. Soulmate has achieved international recognition for its performances at blues festivals in Nashville and Memphis, giving Shillong a presence in the global scene and demonstrating how a global genre can be authentically localised. Wallang and Kharbangar function as cultural translators, taking the Mississippi Delta blues and infusing them with a Khasi hill sensibility. Through their original songs and stage presence, they situate the blues within Shillong's sociocultural context, singing about local experiences while using a global musical language.

Another significant and highly visible player on the music scene in Shillong is the Shillong Chamber Choir, founded by the late Neil Nongkynrih. Their success, which began after winning a reality television competition, has likely gained them considerable visibility. Since that point, they have represented India in international choral competitions and performed

concerts across India. The diverse repertoire of the Choir is worth noting, as Chatterjee (2020) suggests there is something unique about the Choir's repertoire: it draws upon works from Mozart, via Bollywood songs, to Khasi folk songs. In many ways, the choir can be viewed as a microcosm of the multiplicity of music being made in Shillong: they take the 'East' and the 'West' and combine them using both high culture and popular culture. This success has triggered not only interest in choral music but also a reinvigoration of voice coaching in schools and with youth (Laskar, 2023). A number of schools and colleges have reportedly begun choirs or music clubs influenced by the success of the choir. This opportunity has increased the national profile of Shillong, allowing a national audience to be exposed to the artistic wealth of talent in Shillong. This has the potential to create a larger cultural map for the music being made in Shillong.

The combined forces of these artists do more than just widen the lineups in Shillong; they establish cultural landmarks and place limits on creativity. With every recognised artist and band in Shillong going out into broader socio-cultural themes, they commonly challenge norms or experiment with newer modalities to keep the system evolving. Through this, Shillong is, through its artists, actively engaging with the worldwide music scene, adapting, and giving back through their creativity. An analytical approach to the music culture of Shillong without considering these artists would be incomplete, for they are the representative elements of the eclectic musical tastes of the city and fuel its continuing evolution. Their creative endeavours, however, very often transcend mere entertainment; they often intersect with social commentary, culture, identity, and even politics (for example, Majaw's Dylan tributes served as countercultural congregations that have become a lasting part of the city's heritage).

Institutional Contributions: Musical Magnifiers

Institutional sustenance and interventions have, at times, served as reinforcers and custodians for the music culture of Shillong. In this regard, Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) stands out as an excellent illustration: it has championed the formalisation of music education and research in the region. In legitimising music as an academic discipline, MLCU thus enabled scholarly interrogation of both Western and Indigenous music. Its curriculum integrates instruction in Western music, covering both classical and modern music with a specific focus on tribal folk music to encourage dialogue between global and local forms (Guenauer, 2016). MLCU teachers and students have been regular performers at local festivals and conferences, often presenting new fusions like combining a Khasi folk tune with jazz improvisation that exemplifies the type of cultural exchange the university promotes. The academic spotlight that MLCU and similar institutions provide has helped elevate the status of musicians in Shillong, framing them as culture bearers and professionals and not merely entertainers. Commercial venues in Shillong have equally been key institutional players. Iconic establishments like The Evening Club, Café Shillong, or Cloud 9 (a popular lounge) are more than mere places to listen to music; they are social microcosms where the convergence of various forms of musical expressions occurs. Many of these locations have historical antecedents dating all the way back to the inception of Shillong as a musical hub.

The Evening Club, for example, was one of the first venues to have rock 'n' roll acts on a regular basis in the late 50s. These venues have nurtured generations: a budding artist might be given a weekly slot at a café where they would hone their craft, grow their following, and graduate into larger festivals. Shillong's venues thus are democratising the music scene by giving all artists, both established and emerging, an equal opportunity to perform. It is, in fact, quite common for a big-name band to perform with college bands just starting out

at a small pub. This democratic spirit of openness has allowed live music to appeal to the general public and has kept new voices emerging. As more cafés, bars, and performance spaces continue to open in Shillong, they further diversify the scene and create additional opportunities for local musicians to perform, earn income, and collaborate.

Government and public institutions have not been completely absent either. The Meghalaya Department of Arts and Culture has actively organised state-sponsored music festivals, summer camps, and workshops, events like the Meghalaya Icon singing competition, or government-supported events like the Shillong Autumn Fest to create opportunities to showcase local talent and bring in artists from out of state. The subculture receives recognition and resources from the state. For instance, grants are given to public schools to buy musical instruments, or local bands might be sponsored to perform on national stages. Such support can help sustain the subculture during tough times (e.g., economic downturns or pandemics that hurt the entertainment industry). One noteworthy aspect is the constructive collaboration among institutions. MLCU's music department often collaborates with local cafés to host student recitals or with the Arts and Culture department to document Indigenous music traditions. Churches often partner with schools for Christmas concerts or with NGOs for charity gigs. These collaborations create a holistic ecosystem nurturing Shillong's music from multiple angles: education, performance, preservation, and innovation, all reinforcing each other. For example, an academically trained musician from MLCU might perform at a government festival, teach at a church music class, and jam at an open-mic café, all in the same month. This interconnected support network helps protect the subculture from isolated shocks (like if one venue closes, others step in) and allows it to thrive through shared resources and knowledge. In essence, established artists and institutions together serve as catalysts in Shillong's live music culture. Influential musicians inspire and push the scene forward creatively, while universities, venues, and governmental bodies provide structure, platforms, and validation. This interplay ensures that Shillong's music culture is both organic and sustained: it grows from the grassroots passions of artists and fans, yet it is upheld by educational, commercial, and policy frameworks that give it stability and reach.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the evolution of Shillong's independent live music scene cannot be reduced to a singular causal narrative; rather, it emerges from a layered and mutually reinforcing institutional ecosystem. Religious institutions, particularly churches, provided not only the earliest infrastructure for musical training but also conferred cultural legitimacy upon Western musical forms within a local context. Individual artists subsequently translated this foundation into creative innovation, embedding global genres within lived Khasi and urban experiences, thereby expanding both aesthetic boundaries and audience reception. Academic institutions and commercial venues further consolidated this trajectory by formalising knowledge systems, professionalising musical practice, and sustaining performance circuits. The result is a dynamic interplay between the sacred and the secular, the formal and the informal, and the local and the global, which collectively sustains Shillong's reputation as a distinctive musical hub. This study underscores that institutional actors in Shillong do not function in isolation but operate as an interconnected network, ensuring both continuity and adaptability of the music culture. Such a framework is significant not merely for understanding Shillong but also as a model for examining other subcultural formations where cultural production is deeply embedded in institutional histories and community practices.

At the same time, the study is constrained by its reliance on archival and secondary sources, which, while effective in reconstructing institutional trajectories, limit engagement with contemporary ethnographic realities and the rapidly transforming digital dimensions of music production and dissemination. The absence of extensive field-based validation may underrepresent emerging voices and informal networks that increasingly shape the present music economy. Nevertheless, the findings remain relevant for cultural policy, urban studies, and heritage discourse, particularly in demonstrating how sustained institutional collaboration can nurture creative industries in geographically and politically complex regions. Practically, the study suggests that future interventions should prioritise strengthening these inter-institutional linkages while also addressing gaps in infrastructure, funding equity, and digital access for emerging artists. There is also a clear need for policy frameworks that balance commercial expansion with the preservation of indigenous cultural expressions embedded within the music scene. Further research should extend into ethnographic inquiry and comparative regional analysis to evaluate how such institutional ecosystems respond to globalising pressures and technological change. In sum, Shillong's live music culture persists not as a static legacy but as an evolving institutional achievement, whose continued vitality depends on adaptive, inclusive, and context-sensitive cultural governance.

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