

New Orleans, Louisiana

Tune-Up Grant Program

2025 PILOT REVIEW

Stabilizing small music venues through sound management, workforce development, and neighborhood conflict prevention.



**New Orleans Office of
Nighttime Economy**

In partnership with

Loyola University New Orleans
Music Industry Studies Program

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Program Partners and Contributors

The 2025 Tune-Up Grant Program was developed and managed by Julia Heath, Policy & Outreach Manager for the Mayor's Office of Nighttime Economy, in collaboration with Loyola University New Orleans and the New Orleans Tourism and Cultural Fund.

Loyola University New Orleans' participation was supported by Kate Duncan, Director of the School of Music and Theatre Professions and Conrad Hilton Endowed Chair in Music Industry Studies, and Professor Chuck Keith, who led the venue assessment process with student involvement.

Michael Ince, Director of the Mayor's Office of Nighttime Economy, provided office leadership and support for the pilot. Support from the New Orleans Tourism and Cultural Fund helped make the 2025 program possible.

Program Overview

New Orleans' live music ecosystem is built on small and mid-sized independent venues. These venues operate in historic buildings, in mixed-use districts, and often adjacent to residential properties. They are culturally vital and economically fragile.

Over the past several years, the City has seen:

- Increased residential development in historic mixed-use neighborhoods.
- Rising sound complaints tied to low-frequency bass music.
- Aging venue infrastructure.
- Inconsistent production staffing and limited technical training.
- Rapidly escalating operational costs for small businesses.

The Tune-Up Grant Program provides New Orleans music venues with professional sound assessments conducted by faculty and students from Loyola University's Music Industry Studies program as well as \$5,000 for each venue to make some of the recommended upgrades. The initiative is advisory, non-punitive, and designed to strengthen venue sustainability through improved sound clarity, operational consistency, and neighborhood compatibility, while creating direct workforce pathways from the University's program into local music venues.

Across the 2025 cohort, assessments revealed consistent themes:

- Aging or inefficiently deployed sound systems.
- Limited in-house production management capacity and expertise.
- Acoustic challenges in historic buildings.
- Residential adjacency risks in mixed-use districts.
- Lack of standardized sound documentation and training.

The recommended improvements are targeted, achievable, and aligned with the City's priorities around small business stabilization, workforce development, and quality-of-life conflict prevention.

Background

New Orleans is home to one of the most historically significant and culturally productive live music ecosystems in the United States. The city's small and mid-sized independent venues serve as the primary infrastructure for this ecosystem — they are where artists develop, where audiences gather, and where the city's musical identity is actively maintained.

According to the 2024 New Orleans Music Census, the city's music economy generates over \$3 billion annually and supports tens of thousands of jobs. Yet the venues that anchor this economy operate on thin margins, in aging buildings, and with limited access to capital or technical support.

Key systemic challenges include:

- Rising property values and residential encroachment in historically mixed-use corridors.
- Increased sound complaints driven by new residential development near longstanding venues.
- Aging sound infrastructure that has not been updated in decades.
- Limited access to trained live sound professionals.
- Escalating operational costs with no corresponding increase in revenue.
- Lack of municipal investment in venue-level infrastructure.

These challenges are interconnected. A venue operating with outdated sound equipment is more likely to generate complaints, less likely to attract consistent bookings, and more vulnerable to enforcement actions. Without intervention, the result is a slow erosion of the city's cultural infrastructure.

The Tune-Up Grant Program was developed to address these challenges directly — not through enforcement, but through investment. By pairing professional acoustic assessments with modest capital grants, the program creates a pathway for venues to stabilize operations, reduce neighborhood friction, and build internal capacity.

The partnership with Loyola University's Music Industry Studies program adds a workforce development dimension: students participate in real-world venue assessments, gaining practical experience while contributing to the city's cultural sustainability. This model connects academic training directly to industry need, creating a pipeline of skilled professionals who understand the specific demands of New Orleans' live music environment.

Technical Review & Strategic Analysis

As part of the 2025 Tune-Up Grant Program, the Office of Nighttime Economy partnered with Loyola University New Orleans' Music Industry Studies program to conduct professional sound assessments of participating venues.

Each assessment was conducted by Professor Chuck Keith with a small class of students and evaluated:

- Room acoustics and building materials
- Sound system quality and deployment
- Operational practices and staffing
- Neighborhood adjacency and sound spill vulnerability
- Short-, medium-, and long-term improvement strategies

The assessments were advisory and non-punitive. Their purpose was not enforcement, but stabilization: identifying practical interventions that improve clarity, reduce excessive volume, minimize complaint risk, and strengthen operational consistency.

The table below synthesizes the technical findings into a strategic framework aligned with small business stabilization, workforce development, and quality-of-life priorities.

2025 Venue Assessment Findings

The table below synthesizes the technical findings into a strategic framework aligned with small business stabilization, workforce development, and quality-of-life priorities.

Venue	Core Issue Type	Primary Risk	Stabilization Focus
Cafe Negril	Aging system + reflective room	Sound quality degradation	PA alignment + acoustic treatment
Chickie Wah Wah	System optimization	Phase / low-end imbalance	Sub consolidation + time alignment
d.b.a.	Production governance gap	Operational inconsistency	Production management framework
Neutral Ground Coffeehouse	Legacy infrastructure	Intelligibility + reverb	System modernization
The Original Nite Cap	Consumer-grade equipment	Performance limitation	Full audio overhaul (scaled)
Allways Lounge	Dual-room aging systems	Internal spill + clarity	System replacement + alignment
Anna's	Residential adjacency + no controls	Neighborhood complaints	Abatement + monitoring + training
Banks Street Bar	Extreme proximity to neighbor	Low-frequency transmission	Aggressive absorption + refocus

Cafe Negril

Frenchmen Street Anchor Venue

Preexisting Structural Conditions

Café Negril's assessment identified a recessed, narrow stage facing a reflective wall, with hard stucco and brick surfaces contributing to high-frequency harshness. The venue's aging PA system included partial subwoofer failure, and phase alignment varied across listening zones. These conditions contributed to uneven tonal balance between the dance floor, VIP area, and bar.

Strategic Risks

- Listener fatigue from harsh upper frequencies
- Musicians increasing stage volume to compensate for clarity issues
- Reduced intelligibility in key audience areas
- Long-term equipment degradation

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Re-mount and time-align PA
- Introduce acoustic softgoods on reflective surfaces
- Extend stage footprint for improved coverage
- Document preferred system settings
- Plan phased system replacement

Intended Outcome

The recommended improvements were intended to create a clearer, more balanced mix at lower overall sound levels, improve the performer and audience experience, and strengthen the venue's long-term stability as a Frenchmen Street music anchor.

Chickie Wah Wah

Optimization Case Study

Preexisting Structural Conditions

Chickie Wah Wah had a high-quality L-Acoustics system, but the assessment found that subwoofers had been deployed across multiple locations and that stage geometry limited coherent coverage. The existing infrastructure appeared to have been arranged primarily for convenience rather than full system optimization.

Strategic Risks

- Uneven low-frequency distribution
- Phase incoherence across audience
- Underutilized high-quality infrastructure

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Consolidate subs into cardioid configuration
- Full system time alignment
- Expand stage width and remove thrust
- Re-center band relative to PA
- Improve backstage storage and cable routing

Intended Outcome

The recommendations were intended to improve frequency consistency across the room, create a more touring-ready production environment, and help the venue realize greater value from its existing sound-system investment.

Production Governance Stabilization

Preexisting Structural Conditions

d.b.a. had an adequate PA system, but its deployment created low-frequency imbalance, including a “power alley” effect in parts of the room. The assessment also identified inconsistent sound personnel and the absence of a formalized production workflow, creating operational variability from night to night.

Strategic Risks

- Night-to-night inconsistency
- Reputational risk with musicians
- Lack of production accountability

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Re-hang and optimize main PA
- Codify production routine
- Establish in-house sound management framework
- Provide structured technical training
- Add curtains/softgoods

Intended Outcome

The proposed work was intended to support more stable and predictable production quality, create clearer technical expectations for staff and performers, and strengthen artist confidence in the venue’s operations.

Neutral Ground Coffeehouse

Adaptive Reuse Stabilization

Preexisting Structural Conditions

Neutral Ground Coffeehouse operates in a historic church structure with significant reverberation and ceiling reflections. The venue's legacy sound system was rudimentary and lacked output processing, creating challenges for vocal intelligibility and consistent sound quality.

Strategic Risks

- Reduced vocal intelligibility
- Performance quality limitations
- Cost escalation if untreated

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Install flown mains and sub
- Add fabric proscenium
- Upgrade microphones and wedges
- Develop operational guide

Intended Outcome

The recommendations were intended to substantially improve clarity and intelligibility while preserving the character of a legacy cultural venue and reducing the need for more costly future interventions.

The Original Nite Cap

Micro-Venue Modernization

Preexisting Structural Conditions

The Original Nite Cap was operating with a consumer-grade PA tower, a four-channel analog mixer, and hard reflective surfaces. Artists frequently mixed themselves, limiting consistency, performer mobility, and the venue's ability to manage sound as programming needs evolved.

Strategic Risks

- Speech intelligibility issues
- Limited performer mobility
- Production ceiling limiting growth

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Install professional powered PA and sub
- Replace console with modern digital mixer
- Add wireless headset and lav mics
- Install sound level meter
- Provide staff audio training

Intended Outcome

The work was intended to create a more professional and flexible sound environment, expand creative and programming possibilities, and support more sustainable operations for a small-format venue.

Allways Lounge & Cabaret

Dual-Room Modernization

Preexisting Structural Conditions

AllWays Lounge & Cabaret operates as a two-room performance venue with aging speaker systems, internal sound spill between rooms, and uneven vocal clarity. The dual-room setup created unique operational and acoustic challenges that could affect both audience experience and production consistency.

Strategic Risks

- Patron experience inconsistency
- Cross-room acoustic interference
- Infrastructure degradation

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Replace aging PA systems
- Phase alignment and calibration
- Cross-room spill mitigation
- Documentation standards
- Ongoing staff training

Intended Outcome

The recommendations were intended to improve frequency balance and vocal clarity across both rooms, reduce internal interference, and support more reliable long-term dual-room operations.

Anna's

Residential Conflict Mitigation Model

Preexisting Structural Conditions

Anna's operated without dedicated acoustic treatment and relied in part on DJ-provided subwoofers, creating inconsistent sound control. Window and door gaps, reflective interior conditions, and limited trained sound oversight increased the potential for sound leakage into the surrounding area. The implementation process later refined the original full-room drapery concept toward a more targeted approach using fabric-based acoustic panels, selective curtains, and window-focused mitigation intended to preserve the venue's visual character while improving sound absorption.

Strategic Risks

- Neighbor complaints
- Enforcement escalation
- Permit vulnerability

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Install heavy drapes and weather-sealing
- Permanent isolated subwoofer
- Upgrade console
- Install sound level monitoring
- Train or hire sound-capable staff

Intended Outcome

The proposed work was intended to reduce avoidable sound leakage, give operators greater control over bass and overall volume, and support more stable mixed-use operations while preserving the venue's character and programming flexibility.

Banks Street Bar

Extreme Proximity Case

Preexisting Structural Conditions

Banks Street Bar is located approximately five feet from an adjacent structure, creating a high level of vulnerability to low-frequency transmission. Reflective interior surfaces and suboptimal speaker focus added to the difficulty of managing sound within such close proximity to neighboring uses.

Strategic Risks

- High enforcement exposure
- Escalating neighborhood conflict

Tune-Up Recommendations

- Aggressive curtain absorption strategy
- Ceiling and wall acoustic treatment
- Speaker refocusing
- Console modernization
- Staff training

Intended Outcome

The recommendations were intended to reduce sound spill, improve tonal balance inside the venue, protect nearby neighbors from avoidable disruption, and strengthen the venue's long-term viability.

Application & Scoring Process

The 2025 Tune-Up Grant Program was designed to prioritize independent New Orleans venues that play a meaningful role in the local music ecosystem and were well positioned to benefit from technical support, operational guidance, and targeted improvements. Twenty-two New Orleans venues submitted applications for the 2025 pilot.

Applicants were evaluated through a 100-point scoring process that considered each venue's relationship to live music, history and community impact, size and independence, support for original and local artists, readiness to participate in the program, and overall contribution to New Orleans' music ecosystem.

The review process was intended to balance cultural impact with program readiness. Selected venues represented a range of neighborhood contexts, building types, operational models, and technical needs, while sharing a demonstrated commitment to live music and constructive participation in the assessment and improvement process.

Below are the application questions and scoring criteria used to guide the 2025 selection process.

Application Questions

Venue Information

Venue Name:

Venue Address:

Contact Name:

Contact's Role at Venue:

Contact Email:

Contact Phone:

How long has this venue been in operation?

Describe the cultural significance of your venue and its role in the New Orleans music ecosystem.

How often do you host live music performances?

What genres of music are typically hosted at your venue?

Do you currently employ a sound engineer? (Yes / No)

Grant Request Details

Why are you seeking a consultation grant? What sound-related challenges are you experiencing?

Have you received any noise complaints from neighbors or city officials? (Yes / No) If yes, please provide details.

What are your goals for sound management improvements?

Application Scoring Rubric

1. Primary Purpose as a Music Venue (0–20 points)

20 points – Venue is a dedicated music venue whose primary purpose is presenting live music. Music is central to operations and identity.

10–15 points – Venue regularly hosts live music but music is not the core business (e.g., restaurants, bars, breweries, hotels, or multipurpose spaces where food, beverage, or other activities are the main revenue drivers).

0–5 points – Venue only occasionally hosts music, or live performance is clearly secondary/ancillary to the main business.

2. Longevity & Commitment to the Local Scene (0–15 points)

15 points – Venue has operated 20+ years with a clear, long-standing impact on the music community.

10–12 points – Venue has operated 10–19 years with consistent contributions to local music.

5–9 points – Venue has operated 5–9 years with growing community role.

0–4 points – Newly opened or <5 years in operation.

3. Size & Scale of Venue (Independent / Small Venue Priority) (0–15 points)

15 points – Small, independently owned venue (<250 capacity); strong focus on live music.

10–12 points – Mid-size, independently owned venue (250–500 capacity).

5–9 points – Large, independently owned venue (>500 capacity).

0 points – Corporate-owned venue; part of a broader hospitality or entertainment group.

4. Support for Original, Innovative, and Local Music (0–25 points)

21–25 points – Consistently programs original music, nurtures new talent, and provides a platform for local artists.

15–20 points – Mix of original and cover/tourist-oriented music; some local support but not central.

0–14 points – Primarily cover bands, tribute acts, or non-local programming.

5. Enthusiasm & Willingness to Participate as a Good Operator (0–15 points)

15 points – Strong interest in program participation; clear commitment to good business practices, compliance, and being a constructive community partner.

8–12 points – Generally positive participation potential; some examples of good operations but less consistent.

0–7 points – Limited interest in program engagement or unclear commitment to responsible operations.

6. Overall Contribution to the Local Music Ecosystem (0–10 points)

10 points – Venue is deeply connected to community; collaborates with musicians, other venues, schools, or nonprofits; actively strengthens New Orleans' music ecosystem.

5–9 points – Venue contributes in meaningful ways but not consistently.

0–4 points – Limited community engagement or ecosystem role.

Conclusion and Future Considerations

The 2025 Tune-Up Grant Program showed the value of treating small and mid-sized live music venues as essential cultural infrastructure. The pilot demonstrated that many venue challenges are not simply issues of volume or compliance. They involve aging equipment, historic-building acoustics, inconsistent production capacity, limited access to technical expertise, and the realities of operating near residential properties.

The partnership with Loyola University New Orleans was central to the program's value. Students gained supervised, real-world experience in live sound, acoustics, venue operations, and technical problem-solving, while participating venues received tailored assessments and practical recommendations.

As the program is considered for future continuation, a two-semester model could strengthen that workforce-development component. The first semester could focus on classroom instruction in live-sound fundamentals, acoustics, speaker deployment, low-frequency management, and venue operations. The second semester could place students in supervised venue-assessment and technical-support work.

This approach would create a clearer bridge between education and employment while helping local venues access emerging technical talent and practical support.

Tune-Up also reinforced that venue stability and neighborhood compatibility are not competing goals. Better tools, stronger practices, and more technical support can help venues operate responsibly while continuing to provide space for artists, workers, audiences, and communities across New Orleans.

Additional Resources

The Tune-Up Grant Program is part of the Mayor's Office of Nighttime Economy's broader work to support New Orleans' live music, nightlife, hospitality, and cultural-business ecosystem.

The following resources may be useful for venue operators, musicians, production staff, and community partners seeking additional guidance or support.

New Orleans Office of Nighttime Economy

Visit the Office of Nighttime Economy website for business resources, safety tools, current programs, nightlife guidance, and updates on work supporting New Orleans' music and nightlife ecosystem.

www.nola.gov/night

New Orleans Music Census

Explore findings from the City's first comprehensive study of the local music ecosystem, including data on venues, musicians, workforce needs, business pressures, and opportunities for growth.

www.nolamusiccensus.org

Sound Management Best Practices Guide & Checklists

Practical guidance for live music venues and other nightlife businesses on reducing avoidable sound spill, improving communication with neighbors, and operating responsibly in mixed-use environments.

www.nola.gov/next/nighttime-economy/resources/music-industry-resources/

How to Open a Live Entertainment Venue in New Orleans

Guidance for prospective and existing venue operators navigating City processes related to live entertainment, including licensing, inspections, permits, and operational planning.

www.nola.gov/nola/media/Nighttime-Economy/ONE-LVEN-How-To-Guide.pdf