Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Live Coding (ICLC 2023)
April 19th - 23rd – Utrecht, Netherlands

# The Physical and Cultural Infrastructure Supporting LivecodeNYC: A Community Report

Sumanth Srinivasan
Independent Researcher
sumanth.srinivasan@gmail.com

**SUMMARY**

LivecodeNYC is New York City's community of nerds and artists writing software on stage to make music, visuals, games and other live art in front of audiences. This community report offers a look into the various factors that make up the ground reality of running a live coding community in New York City, and how it influences our ways of working, successes and challenges.

## 1 Introduction

LivecodeNYC is a New York City-based collective that gathers to discuss, promote, and explore real-time programming. We organize algoraves, frequently perform at various venues and collaborate with academic and art institutions on workshops, hackathons and other events in the city. Our members include artists, engineers, actors, designers, educators, musicians, game developers, and writers.

LivecodeNYC is over 6 years old, and has gone through several eras of members, organizational changes, performance styles and sensibilities. This has resulted in a concerted effort towards documenting our history (Sicchio 2022).

Livecode art practices are frequently viewed through the lens of digital existence, favoring an abstract and cerebral approach, and focusing on aesthetics and tooling. While LivecodeNYC has been a home for inventive tools (Scherer 2022, Lee 2018) and aesthetic experimentation (Loveless, Sicchio, and Groff Hennigh-Palermo, n.d., "Messica Arson," n.d.), this report focuses on the physical realities surrounding the live coding scene in New York City. It highlights the role played by institutions, infrastructure, venues, policies, economics, and global events as both enablers and hindrances to the way we organize, perform and hack.

## 2 Meetups

The first LivecodeNYC meetup was held in the apartment of Kate Sicchio, one of the founding members of the collective. In the years that followed, LivecodeNYC regularly met up at Kitchen Table Coders and at New York University's Brooklyn campus (NYU). Setting the date for the next meetup at the end of each session helped achieve regularity.

Our meetup locations have historically all been in the New York City borough of Brooklyn. While this is convenient to a significant portion of the NYC tech-art community that lives in lower Manhattan, central and north Brooklyn, it tends to be inaccessible to members based in Queens and The Bronx.

For most of these years, the collective used a mailing list for all communication – announcing meetup details, open calls for shows, event planning, invites, sharing of tools, and calls for conference submissions. This mailing list continues to be operational today and serves as a useful channel for a wider group of people associated with the collective.

In 2020, with the advent of COVID-19, a LivecodeNYC discord server was created. This enabled us to organize virtual meetups during the lockdown period as well as create room for ad-hoc planning of events as the pandemic showed signs of subsiding. We continue to rely on the discord server as our primary channel of communication.


**Figure 1**: *LivecodeNYC meetup locations between 2016-2022*

When COVID-19 vaccines were widely available and people felt comfortable meeting in person, several meetups occurred around park benches and picnic tables at Fort Greene park.

In 2022, we settled back into a cadence of fortnightly meetups. Every other meetup (i.e., one in every 4 weeks) takes place at the central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. The library offers us a dedicated room with access to tables, power outlets and projectors. Other meetup locations include Hex House, and Maria-Hernandez Park in Brooklyn. The decision to alternate between the library and other locations is with the aim of making it accessible to everyone in the city. The meetups are 3 hours long and usually 10-15 people attend it over the course of that duration.

## 3 Organizing

LivecodeNYC is strictly non-hierarchical, and so anybody can choose to organize a show as long as they make deliberate efforts to equitably curate a bill of artists. As a general heuristic, we have sought to ensure that historically underrepresented groups are given priority. The bills are also designed such that new live coders with little to no experience share the stage with more experienced performers. Some shows combine livecode and non livecode acts, though they also tend to deviate from the format of an algorave. Shows are predominantly how people in New York City discover live coding, or learn about LivecodeNYC.

Over the years of organizing algoraves, we have recognized good patterns and attempted formalizing them to reduce friction while organizing subsequent shows. We have found that it is a lot more beneficial to have designated roles and responsibilities within the context of a show (Pasquarello 2021):

- Producer – They talk with venue staff to arrange the show. They recruit and manage performers who will play. They are responsible for the money made from the show. They are also in charge of setting an aesthetic vision and direction for the show – via the curation of artists, or in the graphic design of flyers and other promotional material.
- Stage Manager – They are responsible for the overall technical success of the show. They are responsible for run of show, keeping the tech check on time, and shuffling acts on and off stage at the right times
- Audio Tech – They work with the venue sound techs; acts as an in-between for performers and the venue staff.

These roles are sometimes supplemented with roles like Video Tech, Stream Manager and Stage Hand. The document was put together in an aspirational sense to guide distribution of responsibility. Usually several of the duties are handled by 1 or 2 co-organizers. This is increasingly the case with recurring shows at specific venues, where we have a relationship with the staff and backline, and can operate with higher levels of certainty.

**Figure 2:** *Ulysses Popple teaching a workshop at Live Code Lab in 2019*

## 4 Adjacent Scenes and Integration

Many members of LivecodeNYC are also affiliated with other art communities and institutions in NYC. This overlap allows us to organize events that encourage cross-pollination.

At NYU, we organized the Source Festival in 2016 and 2017, largely focusing on SuperCollider and tangential art, performances and code. It included audio, visual and dance performances. These festivals also featured middle-school students performing with Sonic Pi. Subsequently in 2019 we collaborated with Music Community Lab to host Live Code Lab at NYU, featuring a day full of workshops, talks and performances.

Similarly, Flux Factory ("Flux Factory," n.d.) and LivecodeNYC have had frequent collaborations – the most prominent being the Pink Flamingo / Clubs in Flux project, which featured installations and an "Algoclub" algorave at Nancy Manocherian's Cell Theatre. We have also done several collaborations with other scenes and collectives in the city (NY DigiAna Group, Warper Party) as well as the rest of the United States (Synchrony, AV Club SF, LivecodeRVA). There is currently very limited exchange between LivecodeNYC and collectives outside the US, though it is likely to improve as the pandemic subsides and international travel once again becomes safe and accessible.

## 5 Documentation

LivecodeNYC does not have an established method of documentation yet. In several recent shows, we have attempted to gather a combination of soundboard audio recording, camera footage of the stage and a screen capture of audio code.

We do not have a reliable workflow here; the editing is often taken up on a voluntary basis by whoever has the time and resources in the days/weeks following a show. On a few occasions we have hired local photographers and videographers.

Some shows were live-streamed via Twitch or Youtube, and subsequently archived online. This is taken care of by a volunteer Stream Manager that coordinates with the venue. Sometimes, the stream archives are further composed with footage from the audience or the performers' own documentation to create more cohesive and engaging videos. They are published on the LivecodeNYC Youtube channel.

## 6 The Influence of Venues and Economics

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we organized shows at a variety of venues including Alphaville, Sunnyvale, H0l0, Babycastles and PS 122. Most of these venues have either permanently shut down during the lockdown, or have significantly changed policies.

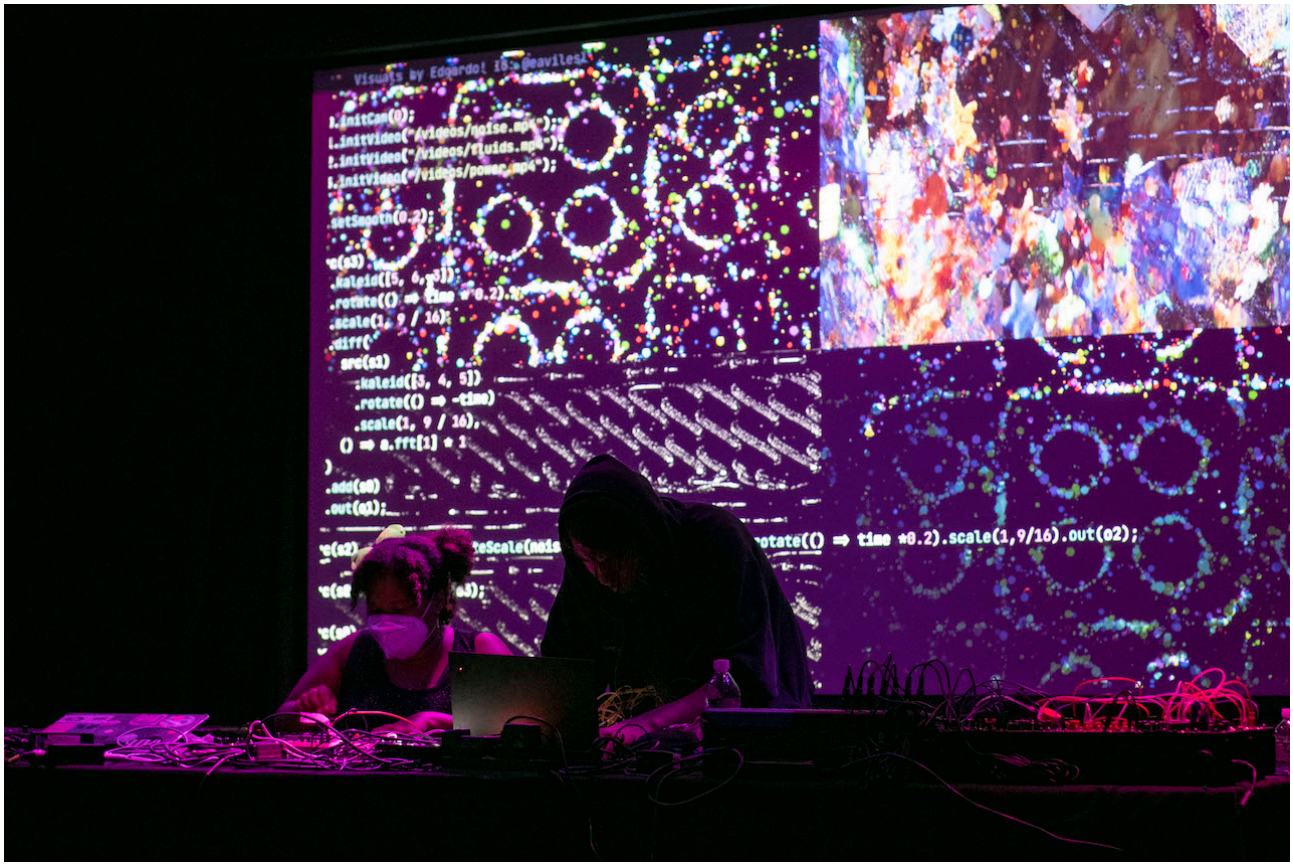


**Figure 3**: *Starlybri and Luciform at the "noise/function" Algorave (Littlefield, Brooklyn, NY – September 9, 2022)*

Wonderville ("Wonderville," n.d.), an arcade bar and independent music venue in Brooklyn, has hosted several LivecodeNYC shows over the last few years, resulting in an amicable working relationship between the two. Besides checking off several of the items in David Byrne's list of conditions favorable to the formation of a scene (Byrne 2017), it also subtly influences the resulting art: Wonderville's stage with a white backdrop is excellent for visual artists to experiment, and makes performances photogenic. However, the small stage restricts the kind of arrangements that musicians and visual artists can set up for a performance. This results in a minimalist/puritan approach to livecoding, where performers get on stage with a laptop and plug in an aux cable/HDMI for their set.

Venues like Hex House and Littlefield offer significantly larger stages. The venue policy at Littlefield also restricts stacking bills, resulting in longer set times for performers. This combination allows room for more experimental technology and outboard gear as well as the time for an extensive soundcheck.

LivecodeNYC shows are usually priced between $10-$20 USD a ticket. They are sold online via Eventbrite or Dice and at the door. The latter sometimes accounts for a significant portion of income from shows.

The two charts offer a high-level view of the economics of organizing Algoraves in New York City. Vibration Check was hosted at Wonderville, which operates on the "playing for the door" model. The venue takes a fixed percentage of door sales. A volunteer often handles the sale and checking of tickets at the door, and is paid a portion of the gross sales.

Venue policies and the economics can be an invisible constraint that influences shows. Hosting "noise / function" at Littlefield required an upfront monetary commitment commensurate with a certain number of tickets being sold. While normal in the show business, this sort of arrangement can apply pressure on organizers to craft bills in a way that increases the likelihood of attracting a bigger audience. In case of noise / function, we were committed to organizing a noise-centric algorave at a non-DIY venue and diligently promoted it.

Hex House similarly offers more space as a DIY venue enabling improvisation and a chaotic "punk" approach to performances. The economics of organizing a show at Hex House are flexible, since some of the administrators of the venue are a part of LivecodeNYC. However, as an atypical venue it lacks some of the backline to host a show and often relies on the organizers and performers sharing their gear to make shows happen. Hex House also doubles as an art studio, making it a frequent contender for LivecodeNYC meetups.

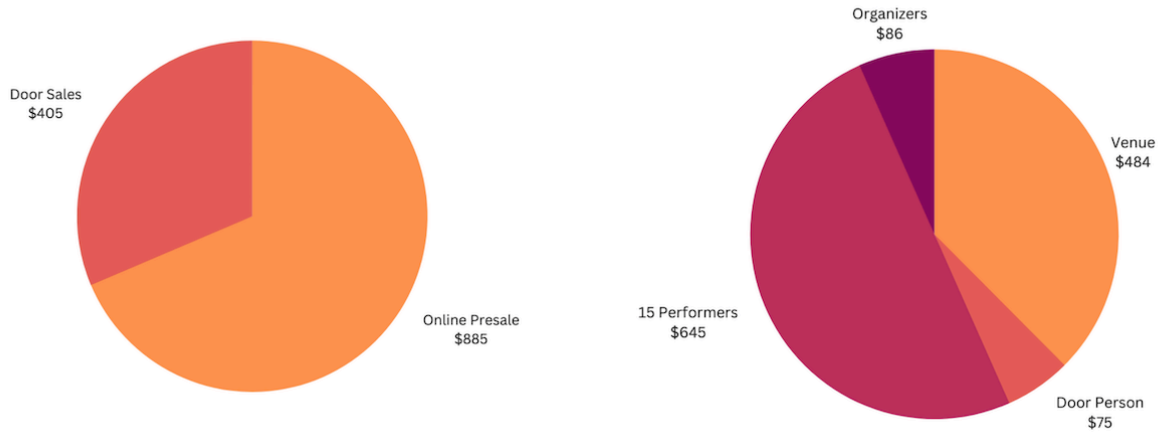


**Figure 4**: *Sales and Payout for "Vibration Check" Algorave (Wonderville, Brooklyn, NY – September 16, 2022). Gross Income: $1290*

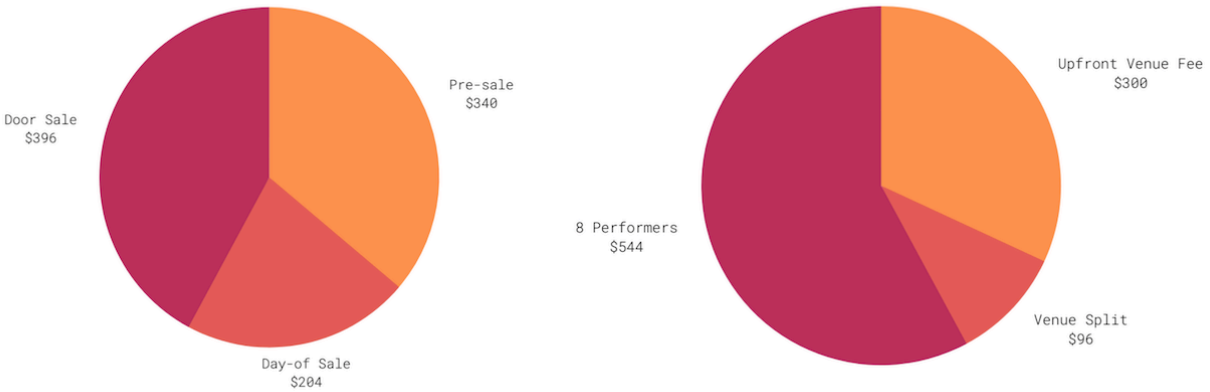


**Figure 5**: *Sales and Payout for "noise/function" Algorave (Littlefield, Brooklyn, NY – September 9, 2022). Gross Income: $940*

When venues make beyond a threshold of income via ticket sales in the US, they need to account for it within the taxation framework in collaboration with the organizers of the show. While this is straightforward for individual artists, bands and corporate entities, it can be a challenge to legally represent the nature of LivecodeNYC in an accurate manner as it involves complex bureaucratic procedures including the creation of a bank account associated with a physical location and address. This can be too big of a responsibility to be placed on any individual member.

On the occasions where this challenge was presented, it was handled on an ad-hoc basis by the organizer. We are yet to find a sustainable solution, and this is one of the factors constraining us from attempting to book more established venues, or apply to grants from academic or government institutions.

## 7 Future

LivecodeNYC has served as a great space for artists and coders in the city to connect and support each other as we weathered through the pandemic. To foster an inclusive but distributed community that is resilient to most pitfalls that have historically plagued creative and hacker groups (such as information asymmetry, unsustainable power structures, poor handover practices between cohorts) is something we continue to strive for.

2022 was an arguably prolific year for LivecodeNYC and we hope to keep this up. We have already booked five dates with Wonderville in 2023. We are an art scene and strive for the opportunity to play at culturally and historically prominent venues in NYC. We are in the process of organizing a series of events with Harvestworks and continue to be on the lookout for opportunities to experiment with the algorave format.

## 8 Conclusion

This report serves as a snapshot of LivecodeNYC in 2022 and its development over the last few years. In doing so, it presents our history, methods of organizing, preferred tools and processes and the challenges. The report also explores the various factors that influence the functioning of a live code art community, such as surrounding institutions, geography, venue policies and the economics of organizing algoraves.

In many ways, LivecodeNYC is conducive to the growth of a scenius (Kelly 2008), enabling mutual appreciation, rapid exchange of tools and techniques, network effects of success, and local tolerance for the mavericks and renegades.

## References


Byrne, David. 2017. *How Music Works*. First Three Rivers Press edition.

"Flux Factory." n.d. https://www.fluxfactory.org/.

Kelly, Kevin. 2008. "Scenius, or Communal Genius." https://kk.org/thetechnium/scenius-or-comm/.

Lee, Sean. 2018. "Gallium." https://github.com/sleexyz/gallium.

Loveless, Melody, Kate Sicchio, and Sarah Groff Hennigh-Palermo. n.d. "Codie." https://codie.live/.

"Messica Arson." n.d. https://messicaarson.bandcamp.com/.

Pasquarello, Gwen. 2021. "Critical Roles." https://livecodewiki.s4y.us/hypha/running_crew.

Scherer, Jason. 2022. "Vodka." http://vodka.church/.

Sicchio, Kate. 2022. "The History of LiveCode.NYC." https://gist.github.com/sicchio/2e540e24d96627c1d68d59bcc6d37d6b.

"Wonderville." n.d. https://www.wonderville.nyc/.