

OPEN LETTER: PUTTING THE SPARK BACK INTO THE NIGHTLIFE SECTOR

Singapore Nightlife Business Association rallies for industry to stand united in responsible development and to taking positive steps forward in uncertain times

From the world-renowned music club where the best revelry memories of your youth were made, to the casual live music bar where you and your friends have been patronizing since your university rock-band days. From the swank cocktail bar that has been named one of the best in the region to your friendly neighbourhood craft beer joint.

These venues are all part and parcel of our everyday life, a part of our collective memories as Singaporeans. Yet, in trying times, we have seen this industry become all but erased from our social landscape as a non-essential sector.

But life isn't just about the bare essentials, and our nightlife sector is a reflection of the country's progress, and the changing, cosmopolitan tastes of Singaporeans. It is an evolved industry with raised standards and increased vibrancy, with passionate artisans and dedicated professionals. More than just a business sector, it is an avenue of relaxation and entertainment for patrons, a channel for artistic expression for industry specialists, and the livelihood of legions of nightlife professionals.

Thus Singapore Nightlife Business Association (SNBA) has made preserving, promoting and developing this sector in a responsible manner its mission. A civilian-led non-profit organisation representing the various nightlife business stakeholders, SNBA was established in 2013 to serve as the voice of the industry, facilitating dialogues between the industry and the government, as a leader in reshaping the standards for good, *bona fide*, operators.

Today, our 300 members span award-winning institutions such as the iconic Zouk and Tanjong Beach Club, and home-grown chain Harry's Bar, to quirky thematic retro bar NINETEEN80 and hip, Instagram-friendly karaoke concept HaveFun. Rooted in the belief that we are all better together, we work together as a collective to tap into one another's insights and tap into new potentials. This is especially critical in navigating uncertain times, and SNBA has been tireless in helping peers within the industry move forward.

SNBA has a deep understanding of the struggles of nightlife establishments that were the first venues to be shut down in March even before the 2020 Circuit Breaker, it tirelessly appealed to the government, leading to the launch of the government's Nightlife Support Measures last November, allowing nightlife establishments to pivot or exit the industry after a near eight-month closure. While SNBA have neither power nor authority to grant any licence, SNBA assisted and continues to assist the agencies in guiding and facilitating nightlife establishments — both members and non-members — in their pivoting and exit journey, which has proven crucial for many.

NIGHTLIFE IS MULTI-TEXTURED AND DIVERSE

It is imperative to recall that our nightlife is multi-textured and diverse. A lot of different types of businesses make up the fabric of our nightlife scene. We have clubs, bars, pubs, live-band venues, gastro-bars, cocktail bars, and karaokes. In the past few weeks, the broad spectrum of nightlife has unfairly suffered for the wrongdoings of a handful of errant operators who run unlawful KTVs with unlicensed social hostesses. These unlawful operators were breaking the rules of public entertainment and the regulations under the Covid-19 Control Order. Based on our records and what is reported, at last count, 16 obtained temporary SFA F&B licence to operate whilst the other 20 operators either already possessed a prior licence to conduct F&B granted by SFA or were without an

F&B licence. Whether the unlawful KTVs bothered to obtain an F&B licence through SFA application prior to Covid-19 or through a pivot, does not separate them from those unlawful KTVs who did not have an F&B licence at all. Ultimately, **all** these KTVs were flouting the law.

In clear juxtaposition, another 400 nightlife establishments had pivoted and have been consistently compliant with the law. These establishments were forced to suspend operations because of the unlawful operators, most of who, were **not** pivoted KTVs. The confusing classification of the KTV Cluster as a sub-set of pivoted businesses has resulted in the suspension of venues like Quaich Bar at Waterfront Plaza, The Other Room at Marriot, Nineteen80 at Tanjong Pagar, Stickies Bar and family karaokes like Have Fun and Partyworld. It has also mistakenly and unfairly placed the problem on the pivot scheme.

Just like KTVs were expected to comply with public entertainment licence conditions and SFA regulations pre-Covid, KTVs allowed to pivot were also expected to comply with the pivoting rules and all other relevant laws in place. It is unfortunate that whereas most nightlife operators display a strong sense of social and individual responsibility, there is this minority who require more frequent policing and harsher enforcement. SNBA takes a firm stance against the KTV Cluster, and any unlawful nightlife operator, and we strongly advocate severe penalties to be imposed on them. We do not and will not tolerate any kind of breaches and will work with authorities to identify such establishments for necessary enforcement action. SNBA will also continue to proactively remind the industry to constantly adhere to the prevailing COVID-19 guidelines, safe management measures and all our obligations to preserve the integrity and legitimacy of nightlife.

SNBA appeals to the sensibilities of nightlife patrons and the rest of the public to show support for our *bona fide* nightlife operators through these tough times. We call only for an understanding that the KTV Cluster is not representative of nightlife, not even close. The pivot scheme has given a lot of hope to our legitimate nightlife establishments, and without it, the industry will stand even less of a chance to survive.

SUSTAINING BUSINESSES AND LIVELIHOODS

“Since the start of the pandemic, Zouk has been able to continue operating only because of the various pivots we have done with our venue,” shares Andrew Li, CEO of Zouk Group. The group had converted Capital its sophisticated club to a restaurant during the start of the pandemic last year, while expanding the capacity of the existing bistro kitchen to cater to the expanded menu and needs, and retraining staff to take on food production roles and even Safety Distancing Officers. “Being able to pivot has truly helped keep the Zouk team intact, while saving livelihoods and making sure this 30-year-old Singaporean nightlife brand keeps going while ensuring our patrons dine in a safe and responsible way.”

“The Singapore Recreation Club’s F&B team is grateful to SNBA in helping us to pivot our previous bar business (Padang Sports Bar) to B@Campo, a Mexican-Spanish themed café. This has given our members a new dining experience and an alternative dining space within the Club, and benefitted our employees greatly,” recalls Ms Caroline de Guzman, Interim Acting General Manager for Singapore Recreation Club. “Our long-serving employees who were affected by the closure of our other F&B outlets in the Club were redeployed to the newly created outlet. This included a 75 year-old Singaporean and seven other local staff,” shares de Guzman, who also shares that the pivot has given the club an opportunity to introduce new technology and train its staff to adapt and acquire new skills which in turn increased productivity.

For Singapore Cricket Club, pivoting their license to F&B operations has similarly allowed them to welcome members back to the private sports clubhouse with an enhanced range of F&B services, shares SCC Head of Marketing & Communications Trina Tan. “Apart from that, the pivot has allowed us to keep more than 100 F&B staff employed, and enabling us to continue working with our many suppliers,” she shares, highlighting the ripple effect of the pivot. “We hope the government will recognise that there are different types of nightlife businesses that need to be regulated differently. Those with robust screening procedures in place and good tracing capabilities are low-risk and ideal for pilots introducing greater relaxation of safe measures.”

MOVING FORWARD WITH EXEMPLARS OF RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT

SNBA continues to reach out and work with relevant agencies to look into supporting the pivoted nightlife establishments, as the industry navigates the emerging challenges of the times.

SNBA developed a **3-Ring Approach** (please see Annex A attached) that SNBA has charted out to take the industry out of its current challenges. This includes instituting a whistle blower system, working with suppliers to pledge their support and to report such activities if uncovered and taking positive action to support the **400 affected nightlife businesses that have pivoted** to prove their legitimacy through regular audits and a re-categorisation to ensure compliance under the supervision of the Singapore Police Force. Such clarity would allow the industry to **Rebuild, Revitalise and Restart the Singapore nightlife sector** with responsible operators forging forward.

Beyond pivoted operations, to prevent further incidences, the industry and SNBA will also be pushing for pilots for clubs, pubs and bars, including that for longer hours, live entertainment and screenings — all which add vibrancy to the industry. A long term plan in the form of a three-year Endemic Vision will further position Singapore as the destination for clean and safe clubbing, and the number one go-to lifestyle destination.

There will be challenges ahead. But by being vigilant, keeping safe and responsible practices, and staying together, our industry will emerge stronger through the united effort and collective commitment of all players in the ecosystem. Join us in our collective efforts towards keeping nightlife in Singapore alive.

Annex A: 3-RING APPROACH

SNBA was asked to chart out a course that would help the industry to overcome its current challenges. A 3-ring approach, with coordination and support from various ministries, is proposed by SNBA for the industry to get back quickly.

1. Ring One: Eliminating the KTV Cluster Swiftly

(i) Review hotspot areas

SNBA notes that many of the issues arise within the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Change of Use (COU) list of 25 hotspots that was later reduced to 4 for the Simplified Pivot launched last November during the pandemic. The Association intends to work with the agencies to review and reinstate hotspot areas.

(ii) Imposing heavier penalties

Imposing heavier penalties including longer suspension period and ineligibility to reopen on future operators who flout rules.

(iii) Whistle blowing platform

To prevent further unlicensed activities and breaches to SMMs, SNBA will set up a whistle blowing platform via the SNBA website for the public to share any cases of such establishments, which will then be directed immediately to the authorities for their enforcement. SNBA will also work with industry players and suppliers, as well as landlords, to get their support to report any of such activities.

2. Ring Two: Helping the Affected 400 Pivoters – 2 Weeks and Onwards

(i) New statutory declaration for pivoted nightlife operators

Together with the agencies, SNBA will look into getting the pivoted nightlife operators to undertake a new statutory declaration stating that the nightlife establishment had pivoted and are indeed operating as an F&B establishment. Formal periodic audit is also suggested to be conducted to further ensure the legitimacy of these pivoted establishments.

(ii) Financial support

SNBA will reach out to relevant agencies to consider extending the temporary bridging loans for the industry as repayments are coming up. Open letters will be sent to landlords for support on rental waivers during the suspension period.

(iii) Recategorisation of pivoted nightlife establishments

SNBA recommends for a recategorisation of pivoted nightlife establishments so that they come under the supervision of the police once again, instead of the Ministry of Sustainability and Environment (MSE), where historically has been the case for nightlife establishments. The police has the surveillance capacity through officers dedicated compliance, powers of arrest and warrants to raid premises, to ensure compliance of these pivoted nightlife establishments.

(iv) Mandatory new controls

Installation of CCTV surveillance, which may be supported by government grants, to be implemented to allow immediate entry access by authorities.

(v) Industry pledge

Under the lead of SNBA, major alcohol suppliers will develop an industry pledge which promotes compliance, transparency and social responsibility towards a better nightlife community.

3. Ring Three: Rebuild, Revitalise and Restart, the Singapore Nightlife

(i) Nightlife pilots

SNBA will continue to push for pilots for clubs, pubs and bars, which are necessary for the industry to restart. For instance, pilots with live entertainment, tv screening and longer hours.

(ii) Framework for nightlife operators

After restrictions are fully lifted in the long run, there is a need to develop a framework for the nightlife operators and have clearer definition on hostess licences and other licences to prevent underground behaviour. Surveillance of nightlife establishments should also be reinforced or stepped up with mandatory CCTV placements.

(iii) 3-year Endemic Vision

A 3-year Endemic Vision to position Singapore as a clean and safe clubbing environment and the number one go-to lifestyle destination will be put forward for the agencies' consideration. This includes powering up the branding for the industry, mandatory training and certification on business operations, regulations and safety, raising the bar through the nightlife entertainment awards and collaboration with various stakeholders such as precinct partners to manage better and synergise efforts.